



Editorial

Are planted forests crops?

Are planted forests 'crops'? Can they be directly compared with an arable crop? Is positioning our planted forests as 'crops', and in isolation from indigenous forests, a solution to forestry being treated inequitably by planners and the public?

A number of forestry commentators have answered all these above questions with an affirmative. A number of others have expressed strong reservations. Unanimous agreement is unlikely, but laying out the issues will assist the debate. A key issue, and an end to which all commentators aspire, is equity.

Equity

At the risk of appearing paranoid, I believe forests, particularly planted forests, are treated inequitably in comparison with other land uses by the public, which inevitably includes policy makers.

The public's 'perceptions' are a pole apart from foresters' sense of 'reality'. Examples are commonplace. Forestry harvesting is lambasted as representing irreparable destruction causing massive erosion, only comparable to the detonation of a small nuclear device, while ploughing and grazing are generally considered benign and almost natural. The spraying of chemicals within our forests is accused of causing foetal malformations, while apple and nectarine orchards are driven past without a qualm. Planting forests are admonished for causing serious reductions in water yields, which are perceived to threaten our very existence as a community, while there is no conscious association between the higher flows under other land uses and either increasing soil erosion, decreasing water quality or increasing natural flood hazards. Forestry processing plants are all considered polluters, almost by definition, while the urban and rural communities around it do not appear to have any major problems. We witness the absurdity of dairy farmers complaining about the water-polluting effects of MDF plants. I could go on. The principles of NIMBY and "thinking locally – acting locally" are the predominant creeds.

Why the inequity exists

The problem is one of perception. Information and understanding are lacking

(perfect information only exists in economists' models), and people naturally form impressions based on their prior beliefs. Many of these beliefs are cultural, as has been argued often by John Purey-Cust. The cultural ideal becomes the benchmark against which planted forests are compared. Any change is subject to suspicion and prejudice. A decrease in water yield is different from that which currently exists, and is therefore 'bad'. Forests look different, they employ different people, harbour wildlife (mostly pests, in the eyes of the public), change the soil chemistry and block the views; the simplest reaction is to condemn such changes.

Ironically the preservationists (who are too often referred to as conservationists) have a different benchmark. Their's is the pre-human environment, often from a European context. In their eyes management disturbance is worse than no management disturbance, and is therefore to be condemned. Planted forests are not perceived to be as biodiverse as natural forests, have different species composition, and look different. The simplest reaction is once again to criticise, even though many of the forest attributes about which they complain are an improvement upon agriculture.

What is particularly galling for New Zealand foresters is when preservationists show themselves ignorant of the attributes of New Zealand's indigenous forests, of which they claim themselves champions. Like the general public, they also condemn plantations for decreasing water yields and increasing soil acidity, ignorant that this modified state is closer to the natural state that existed prior to the conversion to pasture!

It would often appear as though the plantation forester cannot win.

Real or perceived problems?

To accept there is an inequity is not to accept that planted forests represent a perfect land use. This is an essential point, and one of which the protagonists of the 'crop' solution need to take heed.

If we remain arrogant and defensive about our potential influences on either the environment or societies, then we risk a backlash. And any backlash will be motivated and determined by society's per-

ception of our problems, not the reality.

We do have problems. We ought to accept that fact, and be open about it.

My own view, which I know is not shared by all, is that New Zealand's plantation forest management tradition represents the biggest problem of all. It is primarily a production-driven paradigm. It is rationalised by the overuse of financial criteria, without a comprehensive assessment of the risks to the integrated 'whole', which leads us like a Judas sheep down a more intensive track, following intensive agriculture somewhere out in front. We "talk the talk" of making decisions from an environmental or marketing perspective (which traditional financial criteria cannot do on their own) but most of the people "out on a stroll" seem to be those companies with an overseas influence (sweet irony, given the recent political debate).

Options

How do we position ourselves in the public eye to overcome the inequity problem? There are three options. The first is to batten down the hatches, say nothing, and hope that the storm will blow over as the public "see the light". Fat chance! There is nothing to indicate that will happen; quite the reverse. As an option it is not worth considering.

The other two options at least attempt a solution. The first is to position our planted forests as 'crops', comparable to agriculture, based on the premise that, since crops are perceived in a better light than planted forests, that position is an improvement, and will improve the equity.

The last option is to tackle the issues themselves. That would involve acknowledging the forests, irrespective of whether 'man-made' or 'natural' (contexts that have become increasingly blurred over the centuries), provide multiple outputs. One of those outputs is timber for commercial gain; the others relate to such things as biodiversity, soil and water values, and other social, economic and environmental values. Commercially extractable timber may be considered a crop from within a forest, but it is only one output. The *raison d'être* for a forest might as easily be for recreation, for soil and water protection or for edible fungi. (In this context, the

Department of Conservation is in the business of forestry – as pointed out by Dave Field in his letter in this issue.)

Jumping out of the Lifeboat

Farmers are becoming more and more aware that land needs to be considered in a broader concept than just the producer of commercial crops. Dr Morgan Williams reported on an international study tour to examine sustainable agricultural initiatives last year. In his report he mentioned the growing international concept that farmers have to view their land as being part of a wider environment, by which it is influenced, and which it, in turn, influences.

Farms produce multiple outputs, some good, some bad. They too must eventually embrace concepts of multiple use. The indications are that NZ farmers are part of a trend, a paradigm shift, that is embodied by such initiatives as the Resource Management Act and the Ministry of Agriculture's sustainable agriculture focus.

Currently, foresters may feel themselves subject to closer, and, relative to the environmental effects forests produce, unfair criticism when compared to our

land-use cousins. But that won't last. It may not be that the public completely turns its eyes away from forestry, but it is inevitable that it will increase its focus on agriculture.

To position our planted forests as 'crops' is to attempt to stake the ground on which agriculture is already leaving. It is like jumping from a rocking boat to swim with the white pointers.

Conclusion

The forestry industry has two options.

On the one hand, it can try to convince the public that its planted forests are crops, more analogous to a paddock of arable wheat than to an indigenous forest stand.

Alternatively, it can explain that planted forests represent an ecological whole, albeit usually, but not in every case, with the prime objective of producing a commercial timber harvest.

In the latter case, the timber, or fungi, or culled deer, may be viewed as a crop, but that remains a part of the integrated whole, and cannot be managed in isolation from that whole.

The former 'crop' option provides a

solution that is an overly simplistic, defensive, reactionary response, with potential only in the short term. It doesn't acknowledge that we may have problems, and as such represents the arrogant self-belief that we were, sometimes justifiably, accused of in the past. It doesn't provide an easy mechanism for identifying potential problems, or their solutions.

The industry needs a solution that is positive, proactive, and has integrity in the long term. The latter option of recognising our planted forests as integrated systems producing multiple, generally beneficial outputs provides such a solution. It allows foresters to manage with an openness to any problems we may have, and to continue to find workable management solutions to those problems.

Forests, whether 'planted' or 'natural', are systems. They may produce 'crops' but cannot be conceptualised as 'crops'. These are positive statements. They are proactive. They represent a long-term solution. They are the truth.

Chris Perley

The privatisation of State forests

The campaign of Lindsay Poole, Mick O'Neill and myself against the selling of Central North Island State Forests has continued for some months, though not with any great success. We have written several times to the Minister of Finance, Mr Birch, and got delayed replies to each letter. He has not accepted our repeated offers to talk. His replies have been bland and at first relatively uninformative, mainly just repeating his originally published reasons for selling.

He has, however, apparently accepted one of our major points – that there would be no need for the Forestry Corporation to raise money from the Government if it itself went into more local processing. And he has given us a few more facts. He has not told us, though, how much wood is for sale, and neither when it would become available, nor what terms and conditions the sales would have. We have not been told what specific arrangements have been made to guarantee the continuing sales to local sawmills or to guarantee some restriction on the massive log export trade. We do not know the terms and conditions of the revised Corporation – Tasman sale, although we assume they must be more favourable than they were. Finally, we do not know how the Maori claims for part ownership of the land have been resolved.

Our discussions have been mainly with

Mr Birch's adviser on this matter, Mr Paul Carpinter, Assistant Secretary of Treasury. He has had with him Dr John Valentine of the Ministry of Forestry and other officers either of Treasury or the Minister's office. We have been listened to courteously and at some length but we never felt we were making much progress. Mr Carpinter was adamant that he was putting a Government and not a Treasury view, but we were left with the impression that Treasury was, philosophically, completely against State ownership of production forests on the grounds that the private sector could manage them much better.

We also had statements published in *The Dominion* (in part already published in the February 1996 NZ Forestry and in *The Evening Post*). Some of these articles were repeated in other national dailies. We spoke to Radio NZ a couple of times and appeared on Capital City TV. Although there have been few letters to the editors, we feel that we have been successful in opening up the subject quite a bit and in forcing Mr Birch and his advisers to give out more information than they otherwise would have.

In April we were approached by Mr Con Devitt of the Trades Union Federation and asked to join him in talking with all the major political parties. This we did. We met Jim Sutton of Labour (a second time), Mr Winston Peters of NZ First, and

Mr Jim Anderton of the NZ Alliance.

At our earlier meeting Jim Sutton had accepted our plan for a fact-finding committee of enquiry and wrote to the appropriate Minister accordingly, but there was no reaction from the Labour Party. Winston Peters gave us a very good hearing. His spokesman on State Assets, Terry Hefernan, had already put out a press release demanding an enquiry into the sale and stating that NZ First would not be bound by any sale agreement, if the enquiry showed that the sale was a bad one.

Jim Anderton was even more emphatic and condemned the Government's plan strongly. He said that the NZ Alliance would press for a national referendum on the sales. He claimed that "our forests are not for the Government to sell because it has no political mandate from the people to do so". He said "we will lose opportunities for new jobs, we will lose the opportunity to lead the world markets, ... we will lose a steady flow of dividends to the Government and we will lose yet more of New Zealand's control of our own economy".

A Permanent Authority

In the earlier statements and discussions we stressed the importance of having permanent Government forest authority and we claimed that almost every country in the world growing pro-