



Editorial

A tough act to follow

When the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) was first introduced, the reaction of the forest sector was one of restrained liberation. Finally, the twisted, at least to foresters, objectives of the Town and Country Planning Act were removed. There was at last some planning legislation which would at least be neutral and perhaps be encouraging for forestry. No longer would growers of tree fibre be a statutory second best to the growers of textile fibre and food.

The application of the RMA though has been tougher than expected, and has left many wondering what happened to the objective of managing effects. To many, it appears as though the RMA has been subjugated by a plethora of prescriptions and zoning which at times seem to have lost the point about managing effects. There is a growing litany of forestry experiences under the RMA, some presented in this issue of NZ Forestry, which suggest a sense of *déjà vu* of days gone by. In some ways it is as if we fooled ourselves into believing that things would really change when the new paradigm represented by the RMA was layered on to the existing system of planners and planning practices. What else could be expected from a system where intervention and regulation are the standard tools?

To be fair, the application of the RMA requires a lot of work, since every case is in effect unique. In addition, the RMA really requires a responsibility for self-policing to make it work and that land-

owners respond without prompting to any negative changes they create. From the perspective of the public agencies which have been designated the task of administering the RMA, the old tools of zoning, prescriptive rules and a reliance on outside enforcement must look like simpler and easier ways to control effects. That being said though, it still begs the question of whether the objective is to try to make the job of regulators easy or live up to the spirit of the RMA.

What galls me in this whole process is the almost implicit opinion of the planning process that in forestry there is no pre-existing understanding of the meaning of sustainability, nor any type of 'land ethic' in which we would naturally incorporate sustainability and environmental responsibility into our decisions. In many of the district plans, as long as we keep forests down to 'veggie patch' sizes no one is too worried, but as soon as some serious forestry starts to happen (often defined only as greater than 50 ha) then we step afoot of the local interpretation of the RMA. Despite the many attempts by foresters and the forest sector to present 'green credentials' and to demonstrate that self-policing codes of practice are not only possible but functioning, professional forestry seems to have not found a place in the process.

What is important is that before the activities of regional and district councils have the chance to turn themselves into a 'de facto' code of practice, we return to the spirit of the RMA as an effects-based

piece of legislation. Is there in fact a role for forestry as a profession to provide leadership and return forestry back to an appropriate part of the land-use mosaic? I see a few ways in which changes might come about.

One area is in education. This involves educating planners about "forestry" beforehand so that the RMA process does not become the planner's classroom, and at the forest sector's expense. Perhaps we need to develop a "Planner's Guide to Forestry" to sell to the planning community.

Another component of education is for the forestry profession itself. I would argue that the social context of how forestry is practised is going to have to have a much greater profile under the RMA. As such, it is important that foresters not only understand the scientific processes involved, but the social processes in which that science is applied. The experience of many with the RMA is that technical competence will not be entirely sufficient to gain the acceptance of planners and the wider community.

This leads to a second area of change. We must ensure that as a profession, foresters show a desire to respond to the social environment in which the science of forestry is practised. It is not sufficient to simply wave a flag or claim some type of 'objective' scientific credentials, without a desire to become part of a process. This is not to say that foresters or the NZIF have been passive, but the evidence, such as is coming from experiences with the RMA, is perhaps that collectively these efforts have less impact than we would like.

An important step in making a collective response to our social environment is the decision of the NZIF to adopt a Maori version of the Institute's name, Te Putahi Ngaherehere o Aotearoa. Much of what providing a role for foresters in the RMA is about is establishing credibility and trust with the wider community. The move by the NZIF to adopt a Maori version of its name is not tokenism or something done to be trendy, but is rather done in the same spirit of showing a willingness to develop relationships. Our experiences to date with the RMA are simply small reminders that trust is built out of working with and for a community, and that perhaps we have a way to go before that trust is there.

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New Zealand Forestry

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