
Preparing for the 21st century

A personal view of the ANZIF 1997 Conference

Attending an overseas conference provides many benefits to the individual. There are the technical papers, which are, without doubt, assimilated the better for hearing and seeing them presented – ideally with the interactive audience dialogue that follows. There are the contacts made, and re-established; the faces put to names; the arguments had; the odd ale and the laughter (on top of that, the weather was better than Dunedin's summer – so you'll appreciate how good it was).

In this regard the conference was as good as many I have attended, though the diversity of delegates was better. You do tend to come away from these conferences thinking that forestry people are the salt of the earth, from whatever part of the planet they come. This conference was no exception.

In terms of interactive dialogue, it was not so hyper as Invercargill; but then, in Invergumboot we needed the exercise to keep ourselves warm. There is always a fine line between presenting enough information to attract delegates and stimulating the "conferring" that is the lifeblood of a conference. Too much of one restricts the other. I remain convinced that papers less than 25 minutes in length should be avoided like the ebola virus – with the ideal being 35 minutes, with a further 10 minutes for delegates to throw well-constructed brickbats and bouquets. Short theses can be covered in poster sessions.

To maintain order, the ideal chairperson is something of a cross between Attila the Hun, and the Great Khan himself. Given this ideal, I found it odd that Peter Olsen was not used more often, though Tony Grayburn made up for his absence to some extent. Peter's task was to sum up the conference. In so doing his great potential as an exemplary chairperson became evident to all.

Enough of traditional benefits. For me as a New Zealand forester, the Canberra ANZIF Conference will be remembered most for the perspective gained on the Australian industry and profession, and the mirror that perspective provided for New Zealand's virtues and vices – industry and profession.

That perspective is best summarised in the title (and chorus) of Fred Dagg's epic ballad "We don't know how lucky we are, mate." Rather than being negative about some aspects of the Australian experience, it would be more constructive to dwell on the positives in New Zealand (diplomacy has always been my strong suite).

So far as the respective industries go,

we ought to be thankful for the diversity of forest estate ownership, particularly the diversity of markets which provides options to the forest growers. This particularly includes the availability of an export log market – with internal transport distances that are minor by comparison to our trans-Tasman cousins – ensuring something near to an international price for logs. Price information is readily available, due to the existence of independent small and medium-sized sawmills all competing for the log resource in any one region. The comparison with Australia is stark, where a small number of large players dominate locally, and getting price information is marginally easier to obtain than hens' teeth. This constraint on information is, of course, more in the interests of the large companies than of the independent players, whether growers or millers, new or existing.

New Zealand is benefiting from our diverse competitiveness in a number of ways. Forestry as an investment is attractive to individuals, with prices readily available. Log prices find their own level without too many constraints by public policy or monopoly. The result of better prices is efficiencies in the mill (there is no greater spur to sawmill efficiency and their latent marketing ability than a narrow profit margin) and in the bush (low prices emphasise low-cost, high-production methods at the potential expense of the environment and safety, while also requiring large scale).

Rejoice that we have only one Government to deal with, and that we still have some members of the voting public who understand some aspects of the primary sector (shrinking though that number is as New Zealand rushes to join the designer-labelled valley girls in Auckland). Public perception of forestry and foresters may be a problem in New Zealand, but not to the same extent as in Australia. This is no excuse for resting on any imaginary laurels: it better represents a warning, particularly with the wood flow increases to come.

The final observation relates to the profession itself. In New Zealand it is going forward with relative confidence. NZIF has a strong council and highly-active working groups, which help to raise our profile, give access to public policy making, and build relationships with other interest groups, including the environmental movement. We produce things – a third handbook, guidelines, a journal, and policies. We make demands of some members, to which they respond, some even with thanks (only afterwards!). Debate is facilitated, inclusive, and bloody frank.

Before we all lie back with any self-satisfied port and cigar, it would pay to ask some questions of ourselves. There are reasons why the two industries are different. We should understand those reasons to ensure there is no domino effect. That will take effort.

Chris Perley

The Resource Management Act: six years on

John Novis

Ministry of Forestry, PO Box 25-022, Christchurch

Background

In January 1988, the Minister for the Environment, the Rt Hon Geoffrey Palmer, announced the Government's decision to undertake a comprehensive review of the major laws that governed New Zealand's natural and physical resources. Sound environmental planning in New Zealand was considered to have been hampered by resource management laws that had grown up over the years in an ad hoc manner, that were fragmented, uncoordinated, overlapping, and expensive to administer.

The so-called Resource Management Law Reform (RMLR) involved an inte-

grated review of the Town and Country Planning Act 1977, the water and soil legislation, the minerals legislation, and environmental assessment procedures. The emphasis existing law placed on the process of resource management, rather than the effects, or outcomes, of a course of action, were said to sometimes work against the best interests of the environment. "In some ways, it put the cart before the horse. What was really required was law which looked harder at the end results" and addressed "all the issues in an integrated way". (Ministry for the Environment, 1988).