

President's Comment:

Timberlands move leaves RMA test hanging

Peter Berg

Many of the Institutes members will have read of the termination of the Timberland West Coast application for resource consent before Christmas. The decision/direction to withdraw was clearly driven by the new Government's election promise to halt harvesting in Crown-owned West Coast beech forest if it was elected.

While the NZIF would have preferred that this decision had not been made on political grounds, we also have to acknowledge that it has been passed through a formal electoral process.

There is little doubt that the RMA process would have created the best opportunity for the merits/demerits



Are these forests just for viewing?

of the project to be considered, and the sustainability rationale would have been fully exposed to others who are likely to be preparing proposals and making decisions about these in the future. The contribution to both the forestry sector and communities' knowledge base in this respect is not lost, however it now remains to be tested and there

is no other organisation within New Zealand as able as Timberlands to ensure this is done. The NZIF provided comment on Timberlands' application using experienced researchers and practitioners amongst its membership. The NZIF had concluded that while it was not fully satisfied with all aspects of Timberlands' proposals, it felt that with good adherence to the safeguards and monitoring practices built in it met any reasonable sustainability objectives. Equally as important, it was consistent with the Institute's own Indigenous Forest Policy.


Since Government halted the RMA process there has been extensive debate about the decision, particularly amongst the scientific, technical and academically based forestry community. The concern has related to the loss of leadership Timberlands was providing to the international forestry community on sustainability matters, the missed chance to fully test Timberlands approach through New Zealand's most effectual and proven process (the RMA), and lessening of the opportunity to see Timberlands experience/ information properly communicated. Concern as overwhelmingly one-sided as this is most unusual and raises real fears about the quality of the decision to halt the hearing.

There has also been criticism of the process that led

to electors being asked to make a decision without any knowledge or understanding of Timberlands' proposals or their implications. Governments have well understood responsibilities regarding their leadership and representation of the people in this respect, and a more provocative approach, resulting in alienation of resources on such a grand scale, without proper consideration and consultation, is hard to imagine.

Perhaps as perplexing as this decision is the lack of any certainty about what comes next, by whom and how are the West Coast beech forests now to be administered. What are the implications for other indigenous forest areas in either Crown or private ownership? How does this decision translate to other non-indigenous forest areas? Does the Government have wider sustainability and forestry agendas, and if so how do indigenous forests fit in and what is our opportunity to contribute?

For some time the NZIF has been active in providing forestry leadership in many areas of importance to the community (valuation, investment statements, indigenous forest policy, etc), and other professional associations have been quick to acknowledge our capability and contribution. We are equally well placed to assist the Government with its forestry programme and associated issues, and have offered to do so. Hopefully a pause to reflect now will ensure that in future the right forestry decisions are made for the right reasons.




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