

# A sustainable future for indigenous forests?

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The Primary Production Select Committee released its report into Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) of New Zealand's Indigenous Forests in June 2002. The Report can be viewed on the web at

<http://www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz/cgi-bin/search-select?cat=33>.

The aims of the Inquiry were to examine sustainable management of privately owned indigenous forests looking particularly at the current prescriptions and procedures for SFM Plans and Permits required under the Forests Act, how the Forests Act and the RMA can be better harmonised to streamline approval processes for harvesting indigenous forests and to review the current export ban on certain indigenous forest products. The Committee also looked at the international credibility of SFM in New Zealand and to what extent SFM as applied to private forests should/could also be applied to protect and enhance the biodiversity of the Crown forests managed by DOC.

## What does Sustainable Forestry Management mean and what restrictions apply to indigenous forests under the Forests Act?

- Under the Forests Act, SFM provides for the rights of owners of indigenous forest to obtain an economic return from a privately-owned asset while at the same time requires that the forest is maintained in perpetuity as a healthy, near natural, forest ecosystem.
- Currently harvesting other than for private use requires either a SFM Plan or a SFM Permit. A SFM Permit is a limited approval instrument that restricts production to a maximum of 500 m<sup>3</sup> for beech and 250 m<sup>3</sup> for podocarps and kauri over 10 years. Information requirements to support the application are minimal and these are reasonably inexpensive to process. A Permit is seen as a stepping-stone to a SFM Plan that is designed for long-term sustainable management. A Plan is much more demanding in its approval requirements. A detailed inventory is required along with a management plan. To date Permits have been far more popular than Plans with some 324 Permits approved compared to 28 Plans<sup>2</sup>. The cost and complexity of preparing a Plan is reported to be a major concern for many forest owners.
- SFM (under the Forests Act) does not apply to Crown-Owned forests nor to the Maori – owned SILNA forests.

## Key Findings of the Inquiry

- The existing Forests Act is working reasonably well as a legislative tool for controlling the sustainable management of timber from private forests.
- However the actual production of logs from private SFM forests is very low – currently less than 10,000



<sup>1</sup> Rob Miller was an independent advisor to the Committee.

m<sup>3</sup> per annum. This is insufficient to support a viable processing industry based on indigenous timbers. According to MAF, the potential supply from SFM forests could reach 166,000 m<sup>3</sup> per year by 2010.

- Declining sources of indigenous timbers like rimu are being substituted by imports – often sourced from forests that allegedly are not sustainably managed.
- A number of measures need to be undertaken to encourage greater confidence in the future of an indigenous timber industry including improvements to the Forests Act and greater harmonisation between the Forests Act and RMA approval processes to remove unnecessary duplication of effort and reduce delays and costs to the landowner.
- The concept of SFM is not well understood nor accepted.
- There is an overlap in SFM requirements and a need for consistent treatment between the DOC estate and neighbouring private forests – particularly with regard to pest control.
- The Committee was rather non-committal in its findings on New Zealand's international treaty obligations other than to point out that the issues relate mainly to management of Crown-owned forests.

## The Committee's Recommendations

### Definitions and Scope of SFM

- No significant structural changes to the Forests Act but amend the definition of SFM to include a greater emphasis on ecologically based management principles.
- Review the role of agencies involved in the approval process for Plans and Permits (mainly MAF and DOC) to streamline processes, reduce time delays and (hopefully) reduce costs to the landowner.

### Plans and Permits

- Retain both Plans and Permits.
- Strengthen the SFM requirements for Permits (more inventory and protection).
- Reduce the prescriptive nature of the current rules applied to Plans to allow greater silvicultural flexibility when managing indigenous forests.

### Forests Act/RMA Overlap

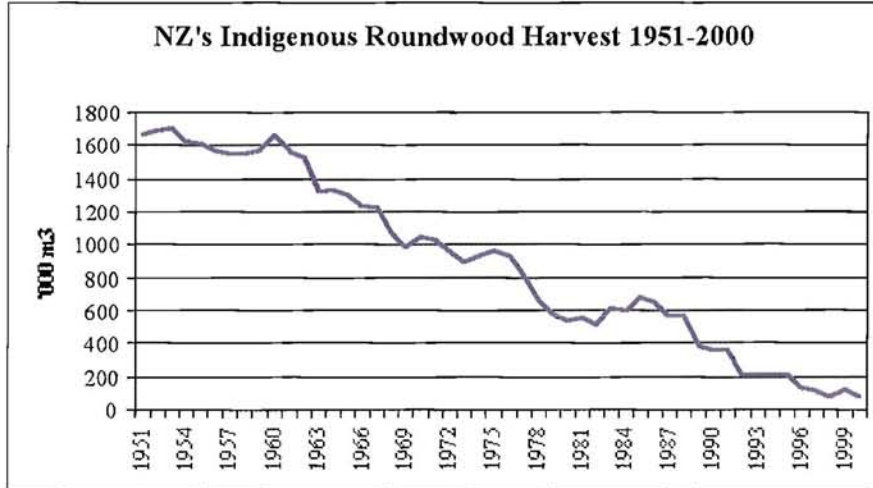
- Develop a National Application and Consent System for the sustainable management of indigenous forests including a single "one stop shop" approach to gaining consent approvals under the Forests Act and RMA.

### Trade

- Retain the ban on the export of logs and chips but free up restrictions on exporting semi-processed products and sawn timber from species other than beech or rimu.
- No restrictions on imports. The regulation of imports of timber from unsustainably managed sources is seen to be market driven.
- No exemptions for SILNA forests.

<sup>2</sup> As at 31 August 2001 - MAF





**Government's Role**

- The Government should acknowledge the "public good" in SFM by providing a support package made up of incentives, better advisory services, funding support, education, research, and better monitoring of SFM practices.
- Increased funding for the Indigenous Forestry Unit of MAF, which administers SFM, plans and permits.
- Assist the development of markets and new processing.
- Restore the advocacy role of MAF in providing information and advice.
- More input into improving forest health in the Conservation estate - to be consistent with privately-owned forests.

**Comments on the Inquiry's Findings and Recommendations**

The inquiry's findings do not recommend any significant shift from the status quo. The Committee believes that the existing Forest Act is still the best vehicle for regulating the SFM of private indigenous

forests. Two important adjustments are however recommended:

- Changing the focus of SFM to ecological management principles as opposed to regulating timber yield; and
- A desire to make the Act less prescriptive and easier for forest owners seeking a sustainable management plan or permit to process.

The Committee's thinking on the first adjustment has been strongly influenced by the NZIF's own Indigenous Forest Policy which seeks to have indigenous forests managed according to ecological principles. However, if implemented, this will not simplify SFM Plans or Permits. To the contrary it will make processes more complex and probably more

expensive. Applicants will be required to provide a far more detailed description of the ecology of their forests and the effects of harvesting on a wide variety of ecological variables. Similarly monitoring requirements will increase.

To offset this increase in complexity and cost the Committee has recommended that the duplication of effort commonly required in meeting the requirements of both the Forests Act and the RMA be replaced with a single approval process for most forest situations. The Committee accepted the principle that where sustainable resource management requirements have been met through the Forests Act it should not then also be necessary to obtain a Resource Consent under the RMA. Quite how this "one stop shop" process is to be implemented has still to be worked out. A "National Application and Consent Process" has been mooted – again as recommended in the Institute's policy.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the Inquiry is the endorsement by a Parliamentary Committee representing all of the main parties, of SFM principles which can apply to ALL indigenous forests and that a continuation of an indigenous timber industry based

on these principles should be supported and encouraged.

The timing of the release of the report could not have been worse, however, coming as it did on the day the present parliament was dissolved and elections called and politicians and the media turned their attention to juicier subjects. One can only hope that the incoming Primary Production Select Committee will pick up the threads of this report and push some of the recommendations into future changes of both the Forests Act and the RMA.

