

President's Comments

NZIF acts over "leaky building" crisis



New Zealand-based readers of this Journal will be aware of the leaky building crisis that continues to hit headlines in the media. Estimates for the cost of repairing the damage caused by water leaks into newly erected buildings run as high as \$250 million, not to mention the frustration and anxiety that will be affecting many homeowners. The causes of the problem are several fold, including poor building practices, inadequate supervision by building inspectors, changes in building materials, and poor design. Most attention, however, seems to be focusing on a change in the Building Code in 1996 that allowed kiln dried timber, in addition to treated timber, to be used for framing in building construction. A lack of action by the Building Industry Authority (BIA) once problems started to occur has also given rise to concern.

The development of building standards in New Zealand is undertaken by Standards New Zealand (SNZ). Prior to 1996 framing timber required treatment to prevent decay and insect attack. However lobbying by some forestry companies was successful in obtaining a change in the relevant building standard (NZS 3602) to enable the use of kiln dried timber for framing. The argument put forward by these companies was that kiln dried timber was suitable for framing as long as leaks did not occur which could establish conditions for decay. It was not anticipated at the time how widespread the use of kiln dried timber would become.

Since 1996 strong evidence has mounted of increasing problems of decay in timber framing in buildings. However, attempts to reverse the 1996 decision, through SNZ, were stalled by some of the same forestry companies who lobbied on this issue in this first instance. In August 2002 the BIA made its own judgements in this area and effectively overrode the SNZ process to ensure that the problem could be rectified.

There is no doubt that both SNZ and BIA find the forest industry a frustrating sector to deal with, because of the entrenched viewpoints that are held within the sector. This does not just apply to treated timber framing. A SNZ committee has been working for some time now to align radiata pine strength and stiffness properties with timber grades to take account of the reduced and variable properties of "new crop" radiata pine. Once again, this has met strong resistance from some in the sector who argue, amongst other things, that New Zealand houses are over designed and current standards are more than adequate to meet conditions in use.

There is no doubt in my mind that, once again, the BIA will act if the SNZ committee cannot resolve this issue. The report of the Overview Group on the Weathertightness of Buildings makes several recommendations about this including: "Are there issues regarding structural strength and durability with respect to the maturity of timber?" and "How accurate is stress grading? What might stress grading signify with respect to weathertightness, if anything?"

The NZIF has not traditionally commented on wood processing or properties issues. However, the Council has taken the view that issues such as leaky buildings and wood stiffness/strength are too important to ignore and have made a submission to the Ministerial *Inquiry into the Weathertightness of Buildings in New Zealand* with comments about both decay and strength and stiffness issues. The NZIF is in a position of having no vested interest in the outcomes apart from a concern for the overall good of the sector. The Council believes that such a viewpoint will be appreciated alongside the narrower self-interest focus that can otherwise be portrayed by representatives of the sector.

On a separate note this issue of the Journal carries obituaries of a number of former members, notable amongst these Priestley Thomson a former Director-General of the NZ Forest Service. I attended Priestley's funeral in Wellington, as did a number of his former forestry colleagues, and was approached several times over issues to do with the NZIF. I would like firstly to acknowledge the contribution that Priestley made to forestry in New Zealand and also thank those who approached me about the NZIF. It is good to see such strong interest in the NZIF and I encourage all members to put forward their views on issues where they arise.

Tim Thorpe

NZIF recommendations to Government on "leaky buildings"

The NZIF submission to the Government Administration Committee was drawn up by a number of our members, co-ordinated by Dr Angus McPherson. Recommendations are reproduced here. The full submission can be viewed at www.nzif.org.nz.

The NZIF made the following recommendations:

1. Re-introduction of compulsory treated timber framing for house construction where wetness is possible, with the level dependent on the assessed risk of primary moisture defence failure, and using building paper and battens between monolithic claddings and framing to give confidence to homeowners.
2. Undertake a review of building and associated standards. Any review arising from this select committee must be comprehensive in addressing all building and associated standards, raw material fitness for purpose, design, construction, inspection, skills, certification and liability, and take a holistic perspective.
3. Such review should be extended to include changes in strength, stiffness and stability in "new crop" radiata pine, and procedures necessary to ensure fitness for purpose.

Included within this should be consideration of adopting quality assurance standards to confirm the performance of structural timber that has been visually and/or machine stress graded.