Not more bloody radiata!

Piers Maclaren

The figures speak for themselves. Radiata pine – 89.4%; Douglas-fir – 5.7%; Everything else – less than 5%. You couldn't describe this as a "balanced diet"!

If the industry "vision" of 4 million hectares is ever to be achieved, we'll have to do better than this. The general public – and in particular the investing public – is sick of dank, gloomy pines from horizon-to-horizon. Interesting that the historic low for radiata new-land planting coincides with a historic high for Douglas-fir: are investors trying to tell us something?

Other than Douglas-fir, there are at least three genera or types of tree that have the potential to seriously challenge radiata's monopoly: cypresses, eucalypts and redwoods. Let's discuss each one separately.

We have experienced several rotations of cypresses. We know how to process and use the wood. The marketplace loves it. What's the problem? In one word: canker. This is the weak link in the anchor-chain of our flagship cypress – macrocarpa – and it threatens the moorings of the others. Some Leylands may be fairly resistant and *xC. ovensii* (not a true Leyland) seems almost immune, so there is hope. The Leylands were random natural hybrids between two genera, and have shown great potential. What further developments might there be if and when we deliberately create an armada of hundreds of synthetic Leyland clones?

Next, we have the eucalypts. New Zealand may, or may not be, a good place to grow trees (I tend to think not, in view of our windiness, out-of-season frosts, shallow soils, and periodic droughts) but it is certainly at a disadvantage in being downwind of Australia. We seem to cop all their bugs and diseases, often without their natural checks and balances. For sawlog regimes rotation lengths are still on the high side, processing is difficult, and prices are not impressive. Of the hundreds of potential eucalypt species, the stringybarks seem to hold the most promise for warmer areas, and of the cold-tolerant ash-group, only *E. fastigata* seems to have the support of both growers and processors.

And then there is coastal redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*). This is currently very fashionable, with active new planting and a mood of optimism in the air. We older, more cynical, types have lived through booms in cherimoyas and chestnuts, ostriches and olives, pepinos and Paulownias. Which is not to say that *this time*, we haven't struck paydirt! In selected locations redwood has good volume production and a relatively short rotation age, but I wonder about the restricted market (California). Unless we are certain that our clones are as naturally durable as the material currently fetching high prices for outdoor furniture and decking, the glitter may turn out to be fool's gold. In any case, I haven't been able to understand why Wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), which is so much easier to grow in the cooler parts of New Zealand and apparently sells for similar prices, has been overlooked.

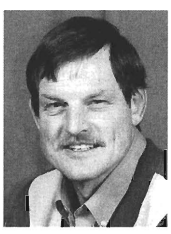
Foresters, whether professional or amateur, have pet species and are as protective of them as they are of their dogs. They become quite abusive if you cast slurs on their favourites. But let's be realistic. Can you see hundreds of thousands of hectares of blackwoods, black walnuts, poplars, oaks, or commercial indigenous plantations? Neither can I.

Even with the aforementioned alternatives, the problems in establishing a new timber industry beggar the imagination. Who in their right mind would pay tens of millions of dollars to buy land and plant a species for which there is no yield table – like the cypresses? Who would gamble on a sawlog regime for *E. fastigata* – for which we have only a single research plot in New Zealand? Who could be confident that short-rotation New Zealand redwoods will be sufficiently durable to provide ongoing satisfaction to customers wanting untreated exterior wood?

The New Zealand forest industry has been its own worst enemy. It colluded with government funding agencies to cut funds for research into the growing of radiata pine – just when we were about to develop a working national growth model that could deal with a full rotation and with ex-farm sites. Worse, it shafted the Special Purpose Species group, leaving a demoralised and insufficient residue.

The equations are simple: no forestry expansion unless we develop alternative species. No alternative species unless we do the research groundwork. No research into industries that do not yet exist unless they receive long-term seed money from government. No government funding while the industry bickers and slags off at existing researchers.

Why government? New Zealand needs more trees to bind our unstable hillslopes, to protect our water quality, to support indigenous biodiversity and to underpin our future carbon budgets. If soil, water, ecosystems and air are not critically important, tell me what is... ?



* *Piers Maclaren is a Registered Forestry Consultant and a former Forest Research scientist. His column appears regularly in the Journal.*