Progress on an updated set of national log grades?

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In April of 2004 at the NZIF Gisborne Conference I presented a paper suggesting it was time to update our National Log Grades (see NZ Journal of Forestry Vol 49/1). In the same Journal that the presentation was published in, Bruce Manley reported in the editorial that the Institute agreed with my sentiment and MAF were contacted seeking support in facilitating a review.

Since that time I have been contacted by quite a number of industry personnel backing the suggestion and asking how the proposal was being progressed. Apart from a lot of discussion one might think the answer was "not far" but the fact that people are talking about this, at least in the Central North Island is definitely progress and the two accompanying articles also indicate that some are doing more than just thinking!

There have also been some changes that make the review more urgent. In his accompanying paper Craig Treloar lays out how the new proposed changes to our NZ Standards for Building might be catered for in log grades. Craig has been actively working in the area of 'structural' log grades, from both a resource description and a log segregation approach, for 10 years, so his suggestions are based firmly in a practical background of applicability of measurement and suitability for use.

For pruned logs, my experience of the last 10 years is that there has been a trend of general reduction in variability of PLI with a gentle increase in overall levels, but an increase in the incidence of 'resinous defects' and of course the development of intra-ring checking as a significant contributor to log value (or loss of value). Jim Park of Interface Forest & Mill has outlined his thoughts on how all of these features might be incorporated into log grades and his methodology might almost be a template for the review of all grades.

The national descriptions need to be applied in a wide range of situations with appropriate levels of descriptive detail depending on use. For example when MAF carry out their quarterly production of roundwood they are only interested in summaries at the broadest levels whereas the Agrifax monthly price summaries need more detail. Using the pruned log proposal, perhaps MAF could record all pruned logs, and Agrifax simply use groupings by PLI (if only 2 groups then P4 to P6 and P7 and better might suffice).

For resource description or log sales the full descriptions might be more appropriate enabling much of the guess-work and hedging being eliminated from many price tenders. The descriptions shouldn't hinder individual companies from setting their own specifications within these general quality criteria.

On the skid site, some of the tools required to carry out the log segregations described are available now. This applies particularly to identification of structural logs. Other tools are currently under development via private companies or by the forestry industry's wood quality research company WQI Ltd. but unfortunately others exist only in theory and are some way off being realised but that shouldn't hinder a log grade update.

But there is urgency for the log grade update from a different source. STANDPAK, the old DOS-based software that we have all learned to love and hate, but which is the best tool for modelling the effects of silvicultural regimes or future stand value or production in our resource, is going to be replaced. One of the issues with STANDPAK was that it was never designed to incorporate the range of wood quality issues that confront the industry in terms of realising value. All agree that the 'son-of-STANDPAK' under development by the ATLAS team needs to incorporate some of the properties of concern. But these wood properties will need to be summarised into Standard National Log Grades that all can relate to, that represent general usage and that can have sensible prices applied to carry out financial and economic analyses.

As I noted above, it is almost a year since that Gisborne conference. In today's forestry industry a year is a very long time and there have been a lot of changes. By this time next year I would hope this particular issue is one change that has been fully resolved.