

Plus ça change...nah, it isn't going to be the same

Human-induced global warming requires that we change, but we are stumbling badly as we grope for solutions. It seems timely in this issue to ask some philosophers to provide perspectives on environmental ethics, and their articles make interesting reading. You may find some of their writing unwelcome, but it is important to consider a wide range of views. Moreover, philosophers value clear thinking and they can hardly be accused of self-interest in debates about forestry. They do not always agree with each other either, but their writings may broaden our horizons, and that is good. A couple of them focus on climate change, while another reminds us of our distinct New Zealand heritage, and how that might subtly alter our ethical considerations.

In addition to the philosophers, the Hon. Jim Anderton has outlined his views on New Zealand's response to climate change for this issue. I invited a highly placed member of the forest industry to contribute as well, and I hope that contribution may arrive in time for a future issue.

The government faces a labyrinth of booby traps as it negotiates its way through this important problem. I use the word "negotiate" advisedly, because one important requirement is that it obtains buy-in from New Zealanders for a national policy. I attended a climate change consultation meeting hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) a few days ago, and was appalled at the mob mentality fostered by one or two people who should know better. MAF officials were stoic as they weathered a storm of often ill-informed and sometimes downright abusive comment from the audience. Stage-managed resolutions were put and passed, and the consultation process was thwarted by a childish display of political posturing. The NZ Institute of Forestry should remain aloof from that sort of behaviour.

That is not to say all is well with some of the policies proposed in the government's consultation document. It seems clear, for instance, that the suggestion that deforestation might attract a tax has accelerated rates of deforestation in New Zealand. Some of those who are deforesting have been very open in declaring that this is so. Accelerated deforestation is a perverse impact, but it is ephemeral. Stan Godlovitch (in this issue) has a very interesting, and for forest owners probably unwelcome, view of this proposal. He concludes that it is in line with other cases where financial disincentives have been placed on business in response to newly identified public values. This begs the question, of course, of whether the public has correctly identified both the impacts of the regulation and their values. Accelerated deforestation aside, I think a greater negative impact is apparent from a more holistic examination of the proposals. Foresters cannot easily be persuaded that taxing emissions of carbon dioxide they sequestered from the atmosphere is fair, especially when the government's, and the opposition's, proposed response to agricultural methane emissions is to "increase agricultural

research". Excuse me? Plantation forest growers store carbon, and its return to the atmosphere can at worst be judged carbon-neutral. Farmers take carbon dioxide from the air and return the carbon as methane, which is 23 times worse as a greenhouse gas than is carbon dioxide. Forest growers get taxed and farmers are granted more publicly-funded research? I know those who deforest are becoming farmers, but for foresters a loss of land use flexibility is a direct loss of land value, whether or not they deforest. This perception of unfairness will sabotage the government's attempts to get buy-in from forest owners. Both Labour and National claim that farmers would go bankrupt if they were made to bear the cost of their pollution and that they "have no viable alternatives". Listen (whispers): they are not farmers, they are land users and their viable alternative is to plant some trees. If their plantations attracted carbon credits, then the incentives would be all in the right direction and no-one need be rendered bankrupt by them.

The question of devolution of credits to forest growers has promoted heated debate. Despite inflated claims from some lobbyists, if all credits during the first commitment period were devolved to forest growers then at currently projected credit values they would receive about \$1.2 billion. At first glance it seems right that those providing a service should be rewarded so that others will be encouraged to provide more of the service. I agree with this general principle, but as a wild, plaintive plea (and it has been pretty wild and plaintive in the media lately) it ignores two important questions:

- 1) Who should pay the \$1.2 billion?
- 2) How rapidly should this change in the land-use investment environment be made?

The answer to question 1, in my view, is that polluters should pay, not taxpayers. So long as farmers, oil-based motor vehicle drivers, and fossil fuel-based power generators do not pay, taxpayers will wear both the bill and the unrestrained pollution, and that is not fair.

So, polluters should pay, carbon sequesterers should be paid, it seems fair, but how many casualties would our society endure if we instituted this on April 1st 2007? Far too many, I suspect. We need time to adapt. Both of the two largest political parties have suggested a gradual devolution of carbon credits might be made to forest growers, and "gradual" is an important key word. Good so far. Sadly, neither party is courageous enough to navigate the political risk of devolving carbon liabilities to both farmers and fossil fuel users. The result of this inconsistency will be a gradual increase in flows of tax dollars to forest growers, a continuing foul smell of unfairness, an unreasonably slower adaptation to the realities of climate change, and a whole new set of environmental and regulatory problems for us and our children.

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