

President's comment

The Minister's invitation - use it or lose it

The following news item appeared recently on the web site of NZ Logger.

"Keen to help forestry in New Zealand reach its full potential, new Minister of Forestry David Carter is prepared to work with the industry to devise a strategy to get it back on track and flourish in the future.

But he has two conditions:

He is not interested in a talkfest that promises much but delivers little, and

- Forestry needs to make the first move and it should nominate a small group of leaders to head its negotiations rather than include 'every man and his dog'.
- The sooner forestry makes that first move the sooner work can start on devising a strategy that will drag the industry out of the doldrums.

The straight shooting Minister agrees with many pundits who say forestry has lost its focus in this country, become too fragmented, with participants working to their own agendas, and it is no longer a master of its own destiny. A need for leadership was indentified at the Forestry Industry Conference in Rotorua last July, though few actions resulted from it. Is the Minister up for the job?

Mr Carter has already met with a number of organisations who represent various aspects of the forestry industry and says that with so many people involved it "makes it relatively hard to see any coordination within the industry".

He goes on to say: "Leadership is required across the board in this sector and as Minister I have a fundamental and primary role in providing that leadership."

I can't help but agree with the Minister's analysis. I like to think that the recommendation in NZIF's November 2008 briefing paper to Government that "the government initiate and lead the development of a comprehensive, cohesive and long term forest policy that recognises the unique nature of forestry and the very significant contributions that forests and forestry can and do make to New Zealand's economy, society and environment" had some influence on the Minister's thinking.

In recent years forestry has become adept at finding scapegoats for poor performance. For a while it was high exchange, interest and freight rates. Well those have all been solved but with little improvement. So now it is poor markets - but these are inextricably linked with the fall in exchange, interest and freight rates. We have calls for a compulsory forestry levy to solve our problems, but that has come to nought and in my view will never work

in New Zealand forestry under the current legislation. Never mind, perhaps it is the uncertainty over the future of the ETS - forestry can't pay unless it is gifted a whole lot of carbon credits. But hang on, trees were being planted long before carbon credits came on the scene. Were those earlier forest owners misguided enough to think they could make a profit?

The NZIF submission to Parliament's Select Committee reviewing the ETS effectively suggests two options:

- Leave forestry in the ETS and it will benefit traders and speculators but will do little for forestry and little, if anything for the climate;
- Show a concern for the climate, take forestry out of the ETS and develop policies that will actually realise the potential for forests to benefit New Zealand's economy, society and environment - including assisting in climate change mitigation and control.

Have we got too many organisations and special interest groups running around in forestry using resources and attending meetings? Consider the plethora of acronyms for forestry entities (e.g. NZIF, NZFOA, NZFFA, WPA, Woodco, NZTIF, PMA, FTMA, FICA, FIEA, KFA, DFA, RPBC, WQI, FITEC, FFR, TTT, FHRC, FBRC, SWI, NZWood, STIMBR, FIDA, DCC - with apologies to anyone left out), and understand the Minister's dilemma about who to talk to.

We must not ignore the Minister's invitation or the conditions he has put on it. Now is the time for the few leaders with significant mandates from within the wider forestry sector to come together with the Minister to sort out the real issues in forestry - how to get more trees in the ground for both production and other purposes, how to process and use more of the available production within New Zealand, how to build and develop markets for products that cannot be used locally and how to train and retain a stable workforce.

We must not lose this opportunity and risk facing yet another political cycle in the wilderness.

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