

Current relevance of the New Zealand Forestry League

By Hamish Levack

New information about the development of sand dune forestry reveals the past importance of a little-known organization, the New Zealand Forestry League.

Recently a technical pamphlet, dated 1922, and entitled *'The Reclamation of Sand Dunes ...Personal Observations by a New Zealander'* by the late Mr K.W. Dalrymple came into my possession. It contains a competent study of the development of sand dune forestry in France and its applicability to New Zealand. In his introduction Dalrymple says he gathered the information while on leave from active service during the Great War and access to the places he needed to visit was only possible with the help of the Prime Minister, Bill Massey. This pamphlet fills a gap in the history of New Zealand sand dune forestry that is otherwise well recorded in Peter McKelvey's book *'Sand Forests – a historical perspective of the stabilisation and afforestation of coastal sands in New Zealand'*.

Although unaware of Dalrymple's contribution, McKelvey acknowledges that, even before the 1900s, influential New Zealanders knew that French forester-engineers led the world in sand dune reclamation technology. It was because of this that the Lands Department sent their superintending nurseryman, R G Robinson, to Gascony in 1914 to find out more about French methods. Robinson was completing this study when war was declared. Unfortunately, in the chaos of the general mobilization, Robinson's travel plans were disrupted and his luggage was lost. The unfortunate Robinson returned to New Zealand without the vital notes that he had painstakingly accumulated.

Besides being a territorial officer, Dalrymple was also a gentleman farmer who had been involved in trial sand dune fixation at the mouth of the Rangitikei River.¹ Massey, who was known for his interest in all rural matters, charged Dalrymple with the task of finishing off Robinson's work. The outcome was that over the next 60 to 70 years the New Zealand Government established about 52,000 hectares of sand dune forests, mostly on the West Coast of the North Island.

Why had Professor McKelvey missed this interesting piece of history? Well Dalrymple's article had been published by the New Zealand Forestry League Incorporated (NZL), an organization that McKelvey was not familiar with. This is completely understandable; I had not heard of the NZL

before seeing Dalrymple's article myself, and I bet that most of you readers have never heard of the NZL either.

Nevertheless the NZL was of great significance to New Zealand Forestry.

With the help of Archives New Zealand, the Turnbull Library, and Professor Michael Roche, the following interesting facts about the NZL have emerged.

The NZL existed before the NZIF and the NZFFA and was concerned with many of the things that these organizations claim to champion. Accordingly it can be considered an antecedent to both.

Sir David Hutchins is credited with being the original promoter of the League.

The Council of the NZL in 1918 included luminaries such as Sir James Wilson (founding president of New Zealand Farmers' Union (now Federated Farmers of New Zealand), T F Cheeseman, A H Cockayne, E Phillips Turner, and Sir Apirana Ngata. Important early NZIF identities like Mackintosh Ellis and Mary Sutherland were later to become members, as was the outstanding early farm forestry pioneer, James Deans.

Aims and objects of the New Zealand Forestry league included:

1. To impress upon the public the absolute necessity for the Government to institute a separate Forestry Department, under a trained forester, in order:-
 - (a) To conserve the remnant of our native bush, so that by scientific treatment with natural regeneration, partial planting or other forestry methods, our magnificent bush will provide a continuous supply of timber.
 - (b) To continue, in the light of experience gained, the present planting of waste lands.
 - (c) To encourage private land-owners, to plant in odd corners, steep slopes or other areas not well fitted for ordinary farming operations, trees suitable for timber and firewood or such as produce nuts or fruit, without the necessity for much attention.
 - (d) To secure for distribution at cost price seeds of trees suitable for planting in various districts, and to ensure that these shall be true to name and of high germinating power.
 - (e) To encourage Local Bodies and private individuals to plant, by selling surplus young trees from the Government nurseries
 - (f) To give advice as to best trees to plant for different purposes required in the particular locality where the planting is to be done.

¹ Incidentally K W Dalrymple was an ancestor of the owners of the large farm-forest near the mouth of the Rangitikei River that was included in the NZIF's field itinerary during last year's conference.)

- (g) To form Government arboretums in the various climatic districts so as to give practical demonstration of the value of the various trees in each locality.
- (h) To assist Local Bodies and private individuals by demonstration and otherwise to plant and care for trees.
- (i) To publish from time to time, reports, bulletins, instructions to planters, or practical information for public use.

To disseminate information regarding the forest policy and practice of other countries, either through the press or by means of leaflets, pamphlets, lectures, and by visits to the arboretums, plantations and forests throughout the country.

Thanks to its efforts, the NZL obtained a pledge from Prime Minister Massey to set up a separate Forestry Service. Established in 1921, and the Forest Service achieved much, but of course over the last couple of decades everything has unravelled.

By 1997 Government forestry policy and management was again buried deep inside another organization, (the Ministry of Agriculture), this time with no independent identity, which is arguably even less appropriate than having forestry looked after by an independent branch of the pre-1921 Lands Department. Government forestry facilitation is probably also less effective now than it was before 1921.

Efforts to supply of native timber sustainably was, for all practical purposes, killed-off in 1999 when the Labour coalition Government did away with sustainable management of Indigenous Forest by Timberlands West Coast.

The NZIF response to Government's restructuring of forestry agencies.

The inability of urban-dwelling politicians to understand forestry as well as we, who have made a profession of it, is understandable if depressing, but it is hard to stomach our current NZIF council's wishy-washy criticism of the Government's advocacy for forestry (refer to Section 5.10 of the NZIF's post election brief). The NZIF has failed to emphasize that MAF is an unsuitable agency for developing and advising the Government on forest policy because farming and forestry compete for land, are respectively short and long-term investments, and provide respectively poor and excellent off-site environmental benefits. With these internal conflicts, and MAF's inappropriate structure (there is no forestry policy division), officials in an agriculturally dominated organisation can not be expected to resolve and recommend good forest policy before it reaches Ministers.

The NZIF has also shied away from pointing out that New Zealand's indigenous forests continue to degrade but the magnitude of this damage is unknown because the Conservation Act 1987 has not required DOC to manage

its 5 million hectares sustainably, nor does it require DOC to monitor what is happening to them.

Why are our elected NZIF leaders not actively advocating for the re-establishment of a well-resourced, stand-alone forest agency that includes most of the forestry functions now carried out by MAF and all the functions carried out by DOC and which reports directly to the Minister of Forests? Why are they not also arguing that such an agency be well enough funded to raise public awareness about the holistic nature and importance of forestry, and to facilitate forest development, including the devising of appropriate government interventions to correct for market failure?

One response is that if the NZIF's stated views are too asynchronous with expected Government policy, and too critical of MAF, the Institute will be ignored in its attempts to influence any forest policy issues. I do not agree.

Conclusion

Unlike that of our founding fathers, our current leadership is intimidated and myopic.

It is short-sighted because the idea of a separate Government forestry agency is logical and will eventually gather support. As a heartening indication of this, Stuart Nash, the new Labour Party spokesman on forestry said publicly on 9 March this year that he thought that a separate forestry agency would be a good idea. He has a good forestry degree and is smart enough to one day become Prime Minister like his grand father.

Is it time to resurrect the Forestry League? The NZL withered away after the Forest Service was established, but now we no longer have a Forest Service an organization like the NZL is badly needed again.

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