

A Forestry Sector Study

MAF 2009

(Reviewed by the Editor)

What does MAF stand for? Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries - according to common opinion cited in the recently released Forestry Sector Study? Or perhaps Ministry of Agriculture and Farming - as some forestry critics cheekily suggest - implying that forestry has been totally browsed down by New Zealand's pastoral bias?

Well, the impressive 221-page document should refute the latter position. Forestry officialdom is alive and well, and deserves considerable respect. Five of the six chapter leaders are well-known names to this author, and together they have assembled a worthy collection of forestry facts, trends and attitudes. Newcomers to forestry could do worse than to spend a week carefully absorbing it all, while old hands should acquire a copy as a handy reference.

The Study is in three major parts: an overview of the sector, including its institutional frameworks; a comprehensive description of the forestry sector's inputs and outputs, with a highlight of the non-market, environmental benefits; and lastly a provocative section on "current and future influences". A list of "future drivers" is also included and was distributed to all participants at the recent NZIF Conference in Nelson.

It is strange to realise that this Study is an official document. Absent are the usual bland generalities and meaningless feel-good phrases. Instead, there are hard, meaty facts and arguments - and solid, balanced expert opinion. The report is well-written (albeit in a "bullet" style) and easy to read. There are numerous excellent passages, very few poor sections and a surprising number of provocative statements. I will provide a few examples.

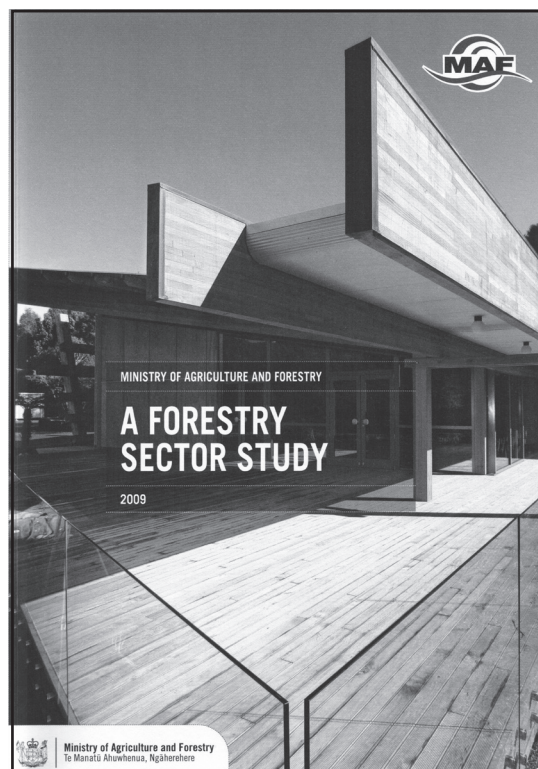
Among the "good" is the statement on page 17 that

Growing global and domestic concerns about environmental sustainability mean that attention is increasingly focusing on the "environmental services" provided by New Zealand's forests. These are wide ranging and largely unvalued, but probably far exceed the commercial values.

Also on page 82, I was intrigued to discover that "The second most important energy source for the manufacturing sector is wood and wood waste", behind electricity but ahead of natural gas and coal.

Among the "bad" was the bald statement on page 100 that "Forests have a large capacity to absorb and retain rainfall". Although the public overwhelmingly believe this to be true, it is not - and the environmental benefits of forestry are so great that mythology is not needed.

And the provocative?



P. 84: *Forest owners consider differential rates or targeted rates on land used for forestry to be unjustified and inequitable.*

P. 196 (in a quote from Chris Perley): *We witness the absurdity of dairy farmers complaining about the water-polluting effects of MDF plants.*

P. 202 lists the negative news articles that have appeared on forestry and concludes: *It is difficult to recall positive coverage of the forest industries, yet forests and forestry contribute so much to society's well-being.*

P. 204: *The New Zealand Institute of Forestry has always been restricted in its ability to connect beyond the forestry profession.... There is a fundamental dilemma over the lack of a recognised, convincing and resourced body that can "put" the forestry case to New Zealand society and build understanding and trust.*

What reservations do I have about the Study, and about its authors? The worst feature of the Study is its length. My intuition is that increasingly few people have the concentration span to tackle a 221-page tome, however well presented. The most damning criticism of the main authors is to say that they must be getting close to retirement. What are the MAF plans for recruitment and training of younger people? Will there be a huge policy void when this wise and venerable body of experts finally departs for (so to speak) greener pastures?