

# We need a national forest policy

Julian Bateson



A hundred years ago this month the Royal Commission on Forestry presented its report. In this issue of the *Journal of Forestry* we look at this Royal Commission report, viewed from 1913 as well as from the present day.

The report has had many comments made about it. These include 'far-sighted and comprehensive', 'the first independent review of the state's role in plantation forestry', 'a quite remarkable document' as well as 'on the whole not an impressive document'.

Chris Goulding presents a comprehensive analysis and summary and Michael Roche looks at the report from today's perspective. Peter Berg describes some of the events from around 1987 when the major restructuring of the Forest Service occurred. Finally in this feature on the Royal Commission, Andrew McEwen outlines why he thinks New Zealand has a greater need now for a national forest policy than at any time since the Royal Commission report was published in 1913.

Andrew concludes that a national forest policy would need to be based on good science and practical knowledge, and supported by politicians as well as those involved in forestry and the public. He hopes that such a policy could be produced, but that it will not be easy.

In the article on 'the last word' Chris Goulding points out what many of us are aware of which is that there is seems to be a hands-off attitude by the government to production forestry. We do not expect to have endless subsidies, but without suitable backing and encouragement, it is difficult to see how our third largest export industry could become bigger and better.

The recent referendum for a levy on forest products has produced a majority 'yes' vote although the best estimates suggest that no more than 15 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballot. We now need to wait and see if the Ministry for Primary Industries will give the levy its full approval. If it does, the levy will at least give some semblance of unity, with an expected six million dollars available annually to fund research and other benefits to the industry. The first few years will be crucial because after six years there will need to be another vote. If the levy

does not work and is voted out, there would be little chance of another one for a very long time.

Also crucial to the success of forestry are the people who carry out the work. At the moment far too many of them are being injured or killed at work, despite the efforts which have been put into forest safety over the past few years. This year so far has been a disaster for forest safety. Since the beginning of 2013 four forestry workers have been killed at work in less than four months. This number is the average annual death toll in forestry over the past few years, a figure which was already four a year too many.

A concern of ACC and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment is that many woodlot owners planted trees in the 1990s and there will be a harvest spike in the 2020s. The accident rate at the moment is far too high, but more harvesting will inevitably mean more risks. If the general perception is that forestry is a dangerous occupation, we will see more people leave the industry and fewer want to start a career in forestry.

I recently had a haircut and the hairdresser explained that her previous boyfriend used to work in forestry. Over a relatively short period one of his forestry gang was killed and one in a neighbouring work gang was also killed. She admitted that none of her hairdressing colleagues had been killed at work during that same or longer period. Her current boyfriend was in a much safer industry – as a hairdresser.

I do not suggest we all become hairdressers instead of foresters, but if you are discussing careers with a young person, what would you recommend? A currently dangerous but valuable role in an expanding forestry industry, or a relatively safe, but perhaps not very productive role as perhaps a design account executive?

There is a long way to go before we can say with certainty that forestry is an industry which will offer a safe career path. We definitely need a national forestry policy but we need to know that it will also develop an industry which our children can work in safely. There is a lot still to be done on both policy and safety.



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