

A view on public perceptions of forestry in New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper is based on a presentation made at the conference in Napier in July 2014. It reviews the media headlines and articles that arose from the fatalities in the forest sector that occurred in 2013 and asks how widespread those opinions are among the workers in the sector and the public in general. It examines the need for maintaining public support for the forest sector using a brief comparison to what has happened to native forest logging in Tasmania as a result of lack of public support. Finally, the paper outlines some steps that the New Zealand forest sector can undertake to maintain and improve the level of understanding and support within the wider community.

Introduction

In 2013 the forest-growing sector came under intense public scrutiny as a result of a significant and unacceptable number of fatalities, with the sector being deemed ‘... the most dangerous industry in New Zealand ...’ (One News, May 2013). While the sector has and continues to respond to the health and safety risks, the wider issue these media campaigns raise is how to maintain public confidence and support across the range of activities the sector undertakes. This paper outlines some background to the health and safety issues, how the industry has responded, how the media and public have perceived the issues, provides a brief comparison to the forest sector’s response to environmental issues in Tasmania, and finally gives some commentary on ways the sector might continue to maintain public support.

As a precautionary note, before embarking on considering the public perception of forestry we should reflect on Winston Churchill’s observation that ‘There is no such thing as public opinion. There is only published opinion’ (as quoted in *Time*, Vol. 123 (1984), p. 155). This paper uses published opinion and some simple survey data which may not truly represent public opinion or perception. However we can say this information at least forms the basis for what the general public may know about the forest sector.

Health and safety issues from 2013

The year 2013 brought the forest sector under the most scrutiny since native forest logging ceased on public land in 2002 due to the number of fatalities in the sector. The data in Table 1 compiled from

WorkSafe NZ shows that in 2013 there were 10 fatal forestry accidents, which was well above the average for the preceding five-year period of approximately four fatalities per year. While the media focused exclusively on the fatalities it should be noted that the number of serious harm notifications for 2013, i.e. not just fatalities but a whole range of injuries that need to be notified to WorkSafe NZ, of 162 was actually lower than the preceding five-year average of 178.

Table 1: Safety statistics for forestry 2008–2014 inclusive (WorkSafe NZ data)

Calendar year	Fatal notifications	Serious harm notifications (including fatal)
2008	4	179
2009	5	161
2010	4	175
2011	3	184
2012	6	192
2013	10	162
2014	1	107
Total	33	1,160
Average (2008–2012)	4	178
Overall average (2008–2014)	5	166

Media coverage

Not surprisingly though the media – written, television and radio – focused on the fatal accidents. The phrases common to many of the free-to-air news items presented were:

- ‘... the deadliest industry in the country ...’ (3 News)
- ‘... the most dangerous job in the country by six times ...’ (One News)
- ‘... over the last five years equivalent to another Pike River ...’ (One News)
- ‘... profits ahead of people ...’ (Radio Live)
- ‘... nine big forest owners have ... walked away from their responsibilities ...’ (Maori Television).

Similar headlines appeared in the print media illustrated by the following examples:

The screenshot shows the NZ Herald website header with the logo and navigation menu. The article title is 'Alarming' number of forestry industry fatalities – coroner'. The author is Jamie Morton, identified as the NZ Herald's science reporter. The article text discusses statistics on forestry deaths in New Zealand compared to Australia and Canada, noting a significantly higher death rate in New Zealand.

Figure 1: Coroner's media statement (May 2014)

Helen Kelly @helenkellyCTU – May 12

Time for industry standard employment agents in forestry. Safe working conditions are essential

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If it were someone you loved

Jones hits out at 'arrogant' forest owners

LABOUR CALLS FOR END TO FORESTRY 'CARNAGE'

Helen Kelly @helenkellyCTU – April 30

8 Forestry workers injured. 2 critical. Forest road. end of day. Van and logging truck collide in Hawkes Bay [nzh t/112464331](#)

Expand [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favourite](#) ... More

Forestry deaths inspire Helen Kelly's conference speech

Helen Kelly @helenkellyCTU – May 23

As at April 9 this year, another 36 forestry workers have been seriously injured. 12 per month. And still the Minister sleeps!

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Death

stalks the forests

New Zealand forestry is facing up to a health and safety crisis

Figure 2: General media comments (April–May 2014)

While there can be a debate as to whether the statements made in the media were in fact true, they underline the fact that the 10 fatalities in 2013 were horrific and simply unacceptable to many commentators. It had become a very emotive issue where facts or reasons were either ignored and every week seemed to bring another bad news story.

Forest sector response

The initial response to the criticism of the forest sector levelled in the media was to try and defend what was essentially an indefensible set of facts, i.e. too many people were being killed in the forest sector. However it soon became clear that the sector needed to show the public, the politicians and the regulators that it accepted responsibility for what was happening and was open to change. The NZ Forest Owners Association, the NZ Farm Forestry Association and the Forest Industry Contractors Association agreed to commission an independent review of the sector's safety standards and protocols. In preparing for this review the terms of reference were prepared by not just the initiating group, but also by the regulators and the unions to ensure there was agreement on what were the important issues to be reviewed. One of the main outcomes of this review has resulted in the creation of the Forest Industry Safety Council, which will work systematically through the recommendations across a range of topics identified in the initial review. This process highlighted a number of important points:

- An emotive issue requires a response that embraces that issue, accepts responsibility, and does not try to defend what may be seen as indefensible
- Any response needs to include as many of the affected stakeholders in the debate as possible
- Formal processes, reviews of the facts, and reasoned responses come later in the timeline once the emotion has been addressed.

Pilot survey

In order to see if a cross-section of people in New Zealand might hold the views expressed in these media statements a simple survey was undertaken in May 2014. This initial survey was never intended to be a statistically representative sample of the New Zealand population, but rather an insight as to how a more comprehensive survey of public perceptions of forestry in this country may be designed. For the pilot survey three groups were selected as follows:

- Group 1 – comprised eight forestry workers working in the South Auckland region
- Group 2 – comprised nine people who chose to respond to a camera interview near the Downtown Mall in Queen Street in Auckland
- Group 3 – comprised eight people who chose to respond to a camera interview in Commerce Street in Kaitiaki in the Far North.

The individuals responded to all questions but there were no cross-checks built into the survey questions to check the validity of the answers. As stated above, the aim of the pilot study was to see where a more comprehensive study might focus, but nevertheless it was also a useful insight into opinions in its own right.

Group 1 – forestry workers

The forest workers interviewed all expressed belief in the long-term outlook of the forest sector, the fulfilment working in the outdoors gave them, and the sense of pride in working in a competitive industry. Safety was seen as important and not negotiable, but accidents when they did occur happened to someone else.

Interestingly, WorkSafe NZ have recently released a survey conducted around the same time (March 2014) that came from 18 forest workers interviewed in the Nelson, Central North Island, Northland and Christchurch regions, and their conclusions were very similar:

- 'Many of those working in Forestry talk about the exhilaration and sense of freedom that comes from working outdoors. Some also talk of the "adrenalin buzz" that comes from working with power tools and the inherent risks involved in Forestry. There is also a strong competitive element to Forestry work' (Nielsen, 2015).
- 'In Forestry, health and safety is a number one driver in many of the businesses because the physical risk is the business risk. For many, debt loads are so high that loss of income due to shut down is unthinkable and loss of life – of their friends, their mates – is unbearable' (Nielsen, 2015).

Groups 2 and 3 – members of the public in Auckland and Kaitiaki

Despite the geographical and economic separation of the Auckland and Kaitiaki groups, there was no easily discernible difference in the views expressed in this survey. Those interviewed were generally supportive of the forestry sector, and knew some details on the sector, but that knowledge tended to be based on anecdotal or second-hand information. When asked to name some of the companies involved and contribution to the economy most respondents were unable to provide any factually correct information. On the issue of safety, the respondents seemed to be aware of the recent spate of fatalities, but while concerned they did not express the outrage that some of the more extreme headlines in Figure 2 might suggest. In fact a general theme was that the outdoors, largely manual nature of forestry was more likely to result in injuries than other occupations.

From the pilot survey it appears that the public perception of forestry is supportive, although there was some concern expressed over the number of fatalities. Other than the safety issue, there was a general lack of understanding of who the forest sector is, what it does,

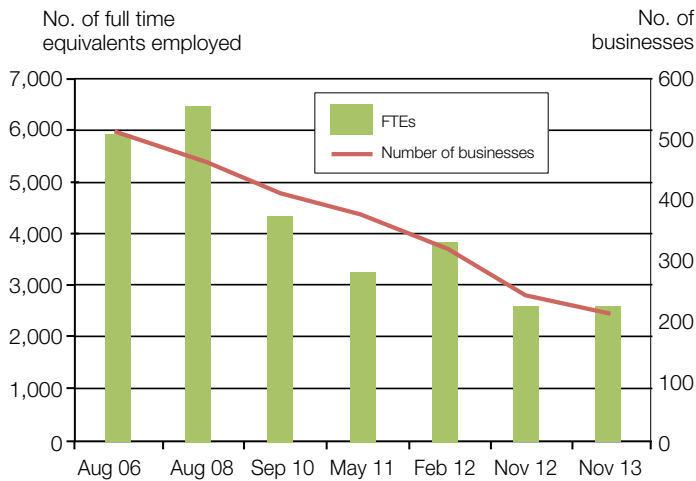


Figure 3: Tasmanian Forest Industry Employment & Business Trends 2006–2013 (Source: J. Schirmer et al. 2014)

how it does it and what it should do better. This may seem to be a state of affairs that should be left alone, i.e. we should ‘stay under the radar’, and just get on with the business of growing and harvesting trees. However to do so would be a major mistake as the following brief section of what happened to the forest sector in Tasmania illustrates.

Tasmanian forestry – a brief history

Tasmania, sitting at the same latitude as Nelson to Christchurch, is well-endowed with native eucalypt forests (and since World War II both radiata pine and eucalypt plantations, although they sit at the periphery of this history). The following is a brief history of how these native forests were managed:

- From 1945–1970 the eucalypt native forest, mainly the original forest that existed before European settlement, was selectively harvested for sawlogs to supply the post-war building boom. The nature of the native eucalypt forests is that sawlog trees often only comprise between 5%–20% of any stand.
- As a result, many stands were left in a commercially and ecologically poor state with a preponderance of pulpwood trees. Starting in 1970, a group of enterprising sawmillers saw an opportunity to develop an export woodchip industry. This industry was supported by research that had shown that to regenerate the wetter eucalypt forests an area should be clear-felled and burnt with a hot fire similar to natural wild bushfires.
- Despite the scientific support for these techniques, they were visually and emotionally confronting for many people. Opposition mounted, and the headlines looked like those shown in Figure 2, but with an environmental content instead of health and safety.
- Local environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) started large-scale and continuous protests.

The forest industry at first ignored these protests, then labelled them as being from a vocal minority, ignorant of the science and motivated by ‘Not In My Back Yard’ (NIMBY) politics.

- In fact, the Tasmanian forest sector went in exactly the opposite direction to that described above for the response to the health and safety issues confronting the New Zealand sector. In particular:
 - There was no embracing of the problem, real or perceived
 - There was no inclusiveness of all the affected stakeholders
 - As a result, the many reviews of the Tasmanian forest sector since 1980 became combative and even more emotionally charged with no lasting solution found.

Figure 3 shows the outcome over the last 10 years as the public support, mismanagement and economic issues combined to undermine the native forest sector in Tasmania. Sales of native forest woodchips plummeted as plantation eucalypts came on-stream and ENGOS targeted Japanese end-buyers to stop buying woodchips sourced from native forests. Several large firms in Tasmania went into receivership for a variety of reasons, including poor management, but also in part because they failed to engage with and change their practices once it became clear that there was lack of public support for native forest logging. The end result of a complex story is that by 2013 employment in the Tasmanian forest industry halved.

Lessons for our New Zealand industry

The Tasmanian story is, of course, more complex and entangled than presented here but I believe it illustrates that ignoring the warning signs and losing public support may result in our sector being severely compromised in the future. Overall, the forest sector in New Zealand has responded well to the health and safety issues that have occurred, especially in 2013, which was the closest this country has got to a Tasmanian scenario. Fortunately, the response has widespread support from all stakeholders.

However as a sector we are still faced with a general lack of understanding of what forestry does for the economy and the environment, so there is a significant opportunity for the forest sector to improve that understanding. There are other issues the sector will have to face going forward including:

- Slash movement from recently harvested areas in storm events
- Landscape management of steep visually-sensitive sites
- Introduction of new breeding technology, including genetically-modified plants

- Use of chemicals to assist in plantation establishment
- Growing monocultures of imported species.

No doubt others will identify issues of significance that we as a sector will face in the years to come. We are in the envious position of already having community support, albeit based on limited knowledge; this has been generated by many years of foresters promoting the sector and that clearly has to continue. However as New Zealand becomes more urbanised with more immigrants we cannot rely on the generations previously connected to the land to spread the message that forestry enhances the land and adds to the economic diversification of this country. Therefore as a sector we need to develop a more coordinated approach to promoting our sector to ensure we do not end up going down the Tasmanian route. We cannot take for granted the support we think we have among the general public.

NZ Wood revitalised

Over the last 50 years there have been many programmes to promote the New Zealand forest sector many of which have been successful. In 2006, NZ Wood was initiated as a branding campaign to promote the use of New Zealand-grown and processed timber in the domestic market. Initially supported by the government, in the last four years the funding was entirely undertaken by the broader forest growing and processing sector. Unfortunately funding became an issue and the programme was substantially scaled back in 2013. However with the successful implementation of the Forest Growers Levy in 2014, the opportunity has now arisen to revitalise the NZ Wood brand concentrating initially on the forest-growing sector.

The aim of a rebranded NZ Wood campaign is to gather public support and understanding of our sector, which we may need in the future. To accomplish this, it needs to be based on what the public actually knows and what is the best way to inform the various audiences we may wish to influence. Therefore the first step already started by NZ Wood is to commission a survey of community attitudes. This survey will, unlike the surveys described above, be statistically sound and be used to determine attitudes to the forest sector for a range of target audiences. Using this data will form the basis for developing material for promoting the forest sector. Initially this survey and resulting material will be aimed at promoting the forest-growing sector

but will later include the forest products, which make growing trees so important for our future.

As part of the ongoing campaign development, the issues of the future outlined above will also start to be addressed. As a sector we may have to change some of our practices, but also as a sector we have already shown our willingness to adapt and change – the formation of the Forest Industry Safety Council is a prime example. Where we are confronted with seemingly intractable issues (like in Tasmania) we need to work with the affected stakeholders to find ways to address their concerns while still achieving the desired outcomes (unlike in Tasmania).

Finally, we should not despair if we don't seem to be making headway. Every branding and educational campaign has a limit to how many people it can reach, but in the end the public may be more supportive of our sector than perhaps we have so far believed.

Conclusion

New Zealand is much better placed than Tasmania to maintain public support for our industry. As a sector we have responded well (so far) to the health and safety concerns arising from the unacceptable fatalities in 2013. However we will have other issues in the future where we will require public support. Therefore we need to renew our commitment to getting our messages on the economic and environmental benefits of trees and wood products to our communities. It is part of our job to ensure that this message gets out to the public.

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