

Reflections on the conference

Jonathan Dash

As has been a tradition since all the way back to 2016, the Chair of the NZIF conference committee is given the undoubted honour of writing 'The last word' following it. Unaccustomed to this type of writing, I thought it would be appropriate to use this opportunity to reflect on some of the insights I learned from the speakers and delegates at this year's conference. I am delighted to say that the 2017 conference was a resounding success. This event was the culmination of a substantial effort by a wide range of people and having it behind us feels like a significant weight off our collective shoulders. The speakers were excellent, the field trip ran smoothly, and the beers were served cold. In my opinion, the diversity of the conference programme was its most appealing feature.

This year's programme was intended to glimpse into the future, to contemplate what it might be like and what we can do to ensure we have a sector we are all proud to be a part of in the coming rotations. Unbeknownst to the organising committee, Peter Clark was able to access PF Olsen's patented time machine to interview the 2050 president of the NZIF during his opening address. Unlike Peter, we have no such evidence-based insight from foresters of the future. Hopefully, we learned a few things from the conference speakers that might offer some insight to help guide us in an advantageous direction.

In recent years, I have been regularly impressed by the emphasis placed on the future, while acknowledging the past, by some Māori forestry groups and Charlotte Severne's keynote address underlined this for me. The intergenerational vision she presented with its focus on utilising resources to improve the lives of their people is an aspirational philosophy. This evokes the characteristics of long-term sustainable forest management from other parts of the world. In those systems, the rotation lengths may be considerably longer, but the broader values of forestry to society are recognised and valued. Reconciling these benefits with the requirements of some of our existing investment models is a significant challenge, but I believe they have an important part to play in the future.

The conference session on the public perceptions of forestry seemed to resonate most strongly with many

people I have chatted to since. It is very clear that we are not doing a great job of communicating the good news stories about forestry to those outside the sector. Economic prosperity, climate change mitigation, erosion prevention, freshwater protection, recreation opportunities, rural employment and rewarding careers should all be at the forefront of the general public's mind when they think about forestry. Unfortunately, serious harm to forestry workers, the undesirable impact of logging trucks, and harvest slash washing into rivers and onto beaches are more prominently reported. We have a great story to tell and we need to make a concerted effort to ensure that the message is spread.

It was great to see the politicians at the conference and to have them so engaged with the sector a few weeks prior to the general election. One of our well-travelled international guests remarked that he could think of few countries in the world where he would expect to see politicians at a primary sector conference so close to an election. I am hopeful that this indicates that they recognise the special position that forestry holds and has to play in the future of this nation. I hope the political session at the conference provided some useful information to help decide where to place your vote. At the time of writing, the special votes are being tallied and we are awaiting the outcome of negotiations to find out who will form the next government.

Finally, the conference highlighted the importance of the NZIF as an apolitical and independent body at the heart of the sector and with the interests of the sector at its heart. The detailed work presented by Andrew McEwan on the Real Estate Act exemption, and by Garth Cumberland on the Forest Policy Project, was a credit to the NZIF and its dedicated and professional members.

I don't know what the future is going to look like for New Zealand forestry, but I do know that I am excited to be a part of it.

Jonathan Dash was Chair of the 2017 NZIF Annual Conference Organising Committee. He is a forester and remote sensing scientist at Scion (NZ Forest Research Institute). All opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily the views of Scion. Email: jonathan.dash@scionresearch.com.

