

Julie Collins, Deputy Director-General Te Uru Rākau – her story

Julie Collins

Fronting a renewed forestry focus

In February 2018, I was asked to step into a temporary role to establish a new government forestry agency in order to implement the Government's One Billion Trees programme. At the time, I was Director of Biosecurity and Animal Welfare Policy, and having spent six years in that role was beginning to cast around for my next challenge.

What followed has been an exciting and, at times, rollercoaster of a ride. Since the Minister of Forestry, the Hon Shane Jones, launched Te Uru Rākau (Forestry New Zealand), a branded business unit within the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI), in May 2018 the team focusing on forestry has grown to more than 130 people.

The Government has invested \$481 million in forestry, including introducing a new grants and partnership scheme, and a new investment programme by Crown Forestry to establish new commercial forests. We have worked with the forestry sector on forestry labour and seedling requirements to support the largest new forest planting season since the 1990s with an estimated 80 million trees planted.

We are now beginning to cast our attention to the rest of the forest products supply chain. However, most importantly, for what is New Zealand's third largest merchantable exporter sector at \$6.8 billion, there is now a strong voice for forestry in government that is genuinely interested in the opportunities and challenges facing the sector.



Julie Collins

What has been surprising to me over this time is how many times as a senior female public servant/forester I have been asked to talk about my career path. Here is my story.

Why forestry?

Forestry wasn't my first choice. As a young girl growing up on a dairy farm I wanted to be a vet. However, a couple of stints of work experience in a vet clinic soon cured me of that idea. So equipped with a full suite of science subjects I approached the careers advisor to test my options. Meteorology, medicine, veterinary science and forestry were her suggestions. After medicine and veterinary science, forestry had the best employment prospects, especially as the New Zealand Forest Service employed the majority of forestry graduates. Little was I to know that it would be disestablished the year I graduated.

Forestry school was fun, nicely tucked away in the South Island and on the doorstep to the Southern Alps, so unannounced visits from family were unlikely. I developed many new friendships with like-minded people. There were six girls in our class of 30. Two of us have stayed in forestry, two are employed in the broader primary industries and the other two have pursued different life paths. The requirement for work experience as part of the degree was one of my student highlights.

At the time the New Zealand Forest Service was the main employer. My first summer was spent in a silviculture gang in Tairoa. There were three female students assigned to what was fondly known as the 'surfie' gang, due to the high rate of absenteeism when the surf was up. After initial politeness the lads were

out to shock; fortunately I had an older brother so I just rolled my eyes or ignored the bragging and banter. That was followed by two summers down on the West Coast based at Haast and Harihari working on the South Westland Evaluation Management Programme and indigenous forest surveying.

Moving from idealist to realist

My first real job after finishing my forestry degree was as a forestry technician for the New Zealand Forest Service at Harihari doing regeneration surveys of cutover indigenous forest. That lasted four months before the Forest Service was disestablished and I was made redundant. My next role was at the Ministry of Forestry as a policy analyst. Even though I only spent three years at the Ministry, I worked on many of the key policy issues that are still reverberating today, including the National Exotic Forest Description, the case for planting *Acacia melanoxylon* on the West Coast, Cyclone Bola recovery, privatisation of the Forestry Corporation assets and protection of indigenous forest on private land. However, my main claim to fame at the time was to convince the Hon Peter Tapsell (who was both Forestry Minister and Sports Minister) to do a tandem skydive with me to open the 1990 National Skydiving Championships.

It's the protection of indigenous forest I want to dwell on. At that stage there were no protections on indigenous forest on private land and forests were still being clearfelled. Māori were significant owners and, as part of developing the policy framework, John Valentine (Head of Policy) and I undertook a series of hui and consultation meetings around the country to discuss the issue and possible solutions.

It was my first experience at representing the Crown as a Treaty partner and I was completely unprepared for the anger, grievances and tales of injustice, dating back to 1840, that were raised at the hui. Then amazed at the complete switch once the formalities were done as we good-humouredly shared kai. Maybe if they had taught New Zealand History in school I would have been less surprised. One of my proudest moments was when at the end of a particularly gruelling hui in Southland the kamatua called John and I 'tangata whenua' in acknowledgement of our mahi and our kaupapa to protect our remaining indigenous forests.

I was deeply moved by the stories we heard as we travelled around the country, and I thought the policy framework we came up with was both practical and fair to those still with indigenous forest on their land. However, it didn't meet the political drivers of the day and Cabinet turned it down and told us to go back to the drawing board. I was devastated that all that hard work and what I thought had resulted in such solid solutions that would make a difference on the ground could so easily be kicked into touch. The need to pay attention to the authorising environment was a salutary lesson – one that is even more relevant today.



One Billion Trees programme launch (left to right): the Hon Shane Jones (Minister of Forestry), Julie Collins, Ray Smith (Director General: MPI)

Trees as a mechanism for other things

After three years with the Ministry, my now husband and I set off for our great OE. After eight months travelling through Asia and the Middle East we arrived in the UK where we stayed for 15 years. There, I worked for a range of organisations including the Countryside Agency, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Forestry Commission. There was a key theme to all these roles. Forestry as an industry was less than 1% of GDP. Therefore, interest in forestry related more to how it could help the Government achieve other objectives than to the trees themselves. This included retiring land from agriculture to reduce the 'commodity mountains', renewable energy as early climate change initiatives, forests for health, recreation and tourism, managing forests as a conservation measure and timber for sustainable housing.

The role that probably best epitomises this was my first job in the UK with the Countryside Agency, a small government agency of around 200 people charged with an innovative agenda to protect the beauty of and access to the English countryside. I was part of a small team charged with establishing 12 community forests around urban areas in England, including London, Bristol, Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle. The UK at the time had an issue with urban sprawl, with developers buying land zoned 'rural' on the urban fringe and letting it go derelict to justify zone changes. The programme, in partnership with the local authorities, aimed to create a green belt on the urban edge through increasing tree cover to 33% and improving public access to the surrounding countryside.

It was really an early version of a 'Wellbeing initiative' because by improving the landscape, providing walking paths, events and other facilities, the programme had an important impact on the health and wellbeing of marginalised communities found on the outer edges of these cities. The programme was hugely successful and most of these forests are still going strong some 29 years on.

My subsequent roles in the UK would all follow a similar theme with a focus on forestry as the mechanism by which to achieve other government objectives.

Climate change and creating a new property right

After 15 years in the UK we decided to come home, our parents were getting older, and it was either stay over there until retirement or come back mid-career. We took a year off and did a diploma in viticulture and winemaking in Gisborne, which was such a contrast to the UK and a great way to ease back into the Kiwi way of life.

However, reality called and I ended up working for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry on climate change, initially as a Principal Advisor and then as a manager setting up the Climate Change team. The team's focus was on what New Zealand's primary industries needed to do to mitigate and adapt to climate change. It was a very exciting time and my focus on delivery and collaboration with others held me in good stead when nine months into the job I was part of the broader team designing the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS).

My focus was agriculture, while Bryan Smith (Principal Advisor: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) focused on forestry. We were given three months to come up with the initial design. Sometimes having a small focused team and tight deadlines can be helpful. The initial architecture was simple but durable. From the start I created a small industry advisory group as the ETS would only work if it was implementable on the

ground. At the time, with limited mitigation options and a farming community that had not yet gotten its head around climate change, the decision was made that agriculture would have a reporting requirement at the processor level with an option to come fully into the ETS in 2012.

After a very successful campaign run by the forestry sector, forestry was fully recognised in the ETS with all forests planted from 1990 onwards. It's not often you get an opportunity to create a new property right and it is only with hindsight that you understand how pivotal some things are.

After three Select Committees and policy reviews of the ETS over two years, I felt I could no longer bring a fresh perspective and it was someone else's turn. I moved on to the role of Director of Biosecurity, Animal Welfare and Food Policy. This is where I really learned to be a leader of people rather than a manager of issues and projects. MAF, NZ Food Safety and Fisheries New Zealand had just been merged and I had a demoralised team from two different organisations, cultures and locations. I concentrated on four things – our people; getting the culture right; focusing attention on what we had to deliver; and what was in our criteria. It worked and the directorate went on to be one of the best-performing policy teams in MPI, successfully delivering critical reforms in food safety and animal welfare, and introducing the Border Clearance Levy.

In conclusion

It seems like my career has led me to my current role. The challenge is not to recreate the old New Zealand Forest Service but a new agency fit for purpose in the modern age. This means doing some things differently – working in partnership with landowners and the sector rather than creating a big forestry agency to lead. Climate change, economic challenges and global disruptors mean we need to be more agile as an organisation, and as a sector, than the previous Forest Service was.

However, there are some things that stay constant – the broad range of services and benefits that forests bring, the opportunity to get economic, environmental and social outcomes, and the vision for a better New Zealand. Throughout my career I have always been passionate about my job, a believer in looking after my people, and had a drive for delivery which is essential as we chart the next phase of the history of forestry in New Zealand through the establishment of Te Uru Rākau.

*Julie Collins is Deputy Director-General: Te Uru Rākau.
Email: JulieR.Collins@mpi.govt.nz*