

Are Wood Councils an alternative species?

Erica Kinder

This paper is about the purpose of Wood Councils in the New Zealand forest sector and the activities and projects of the Southern North Island Wood Council.



Students from Manawatu secondary schools view harvesting machine at Fox Pine Crew, Levin

Build goodwill before negative events occur

We certainly have had a busy year in the media for forestry. There have been some events that have highlighted areas of our industry not previously seen or understood by the public in New Zealand. The rain event and flooding damage caused in Gisborne was nothing new in forestry circles. However, as it was so public and quickly grasped by the media it did emphasise a main weakness in our industry – the ability to quickly react and with empathy to a forestry crisis in the media and in a community.

What has become evident to many of our members is that it is almost too late once these situations have arisen to count on public cooperation. Also, what forestry as a sector needs to achieve is some goodwill in advance, to have some clarification around what forestry activities are, and to create understanding through education.

So, this is where the Wood Councils can come in. The recent NZIF Conference highlighted the fact that many in our industry do not seem to know that

Wood Councils exist. And if they do know, then they do not understand what our purpose could be. Some of our Australian friends even mentioned in their presentations the necessity for community-based programmes and organisations to build goodwill before these negative events ever occur, and the requirement for more education about our land-based activities.

Improve forestry sector communication

It was interesting that many attendees were nodding in agreement and it seemed to be general consensus that our sector is indeed terrible at communicating our activities. I felt that there was rather too much focus on what we could do better, and not enough on how to do it better. You could have heard a pin drop when the Australian presenter called the New Zealand forest industry, 'Focused on the negative.' But I couldn't agree more. There are many ways that we can build our engagement outside of our sector and raise the profile of our companies, while at the same time cultivating understanding. Our attention needs to be on doing this rather than lamenting the failure of others to get the picture.

Apparently, forestry and communication are considered an oxymoron. I find this not to be a completely accurate description. We have a young group of foresters who have no problem at all communicating with each other and with organisations across the world using Instagram and Facebook. They have regular and well-attended events, along with active associate contact. We also have a very good network of older foresters who have come through the training ground of the Forest Service who are linked through friendships and the bevy of boards that they sit on. It is the middle age bracket that seems absent from much of the communication, and indeed from these boards and conferences.

Reaching the right people

If you looked around at the recent NZIF Conference in Christchurch, you could see the missing element – the people who were still at work, frantically running forestry operations all across New Zealand, who do not have the time or place priority on attendance or collaboration with such things. If we wish to improve our communication, then we need to find ways of both reaching this essential group in our sector and representing them.

It is this mostly invisible and hard-working portion of our sector who have formed the Wood Councils, where in their minds it is highly efficient to have one person represent them at all the meetings and liaisons with other industry groups and save their time for their own workplace. All the ‘working groups’, ‘action plans’ and ‘policies’ that seem to need constant industry feedback can suck up an enormous amount of time, and it makes sense to have one point of contact in a region to collaborate with all these other industries and government departments.

School and community-based events

This year our Wood Council has put a lot of time into school and community-based events across the lower North Island, and I feel we have made great strides in educating both students and teachers. Our schools-based programme ‘Grow Me’ has had the direct involvement of secondary schools with three hugely successful ‘Forestry Big Day Out’ bus trips in Taranaki, Manawatu and Whanganui. Each bus trip visited multiple forestry work sites over a day, and we tried to incorporate visits that included logging, silviculture, processing, log logistics, trucking and ports.

Students were interested, but some of the teachers were enthralled. We have had calls from several schools to book in for next year and feedback that the entire year 11-year group from one secondary school would like to go. A logistical nightmare for next year. One logging crew in Whanganui had two students who quit school and went to work for them in the month following the bus trips. They are still employed, classified as ‘bloody good workers with a long future in forestry ahead’ (quoted from the crew owner). This is an excellent result and is the exact type of worker that we need.

We should not be seen as the career of last resort, or one that can only take employees after months of rehab and ‘pastoral care’ wrapped around them at huge expense in order for them to get to work. I feel that the way forward for career development in our sector is by inspiring and showcasing, not by continuing to drag in unwilling (and often unsuitable) employees. In the long term our industry needs to rely on a steady stream of increasingly educated and skilled workers who will remain in our workforce. They will come to us if we do the groundwork in the mainstream careers space and not place too much emphasis on short-term and highly expensive incentive training schemes.

Over the year in Masterton we had several smaller trips to sawmills and presentations at secondary schools that have resulted in three students (who I know of from our town) signing up for the School of Forestry at Canterbury University for 2020. One of them was the Southern North Island Wood Council Scholarship recipient, so we will wait to follow these students progress in the following years.

This year our intern programme saw three students in Taranaki, six in the Manawatu and two in Masterton complete a week of work experience ‘in the forest’. These students were paid by our Wood Council to attend in their school holidays and were hosted around a variety of workplaces. Many of these students had only just turned 16 and for some it was the first experience of going to a real workplace at all. They were provided with steel-capped boots that they could keep, some had lunch bought for them, and they were picked up daily and delivered to sites. You can view their videos on our YouTube channel and can see from the music and images how much they enjoyed their paid experience.

This is a very labour-intensive, but rewarding, way of reaching a group of young people and you also know that the parents are talking about this with others. I recently heard that this example was used in a Polytech presentation about new initiatives in the Wairarapa that is having an impact with students – great to hear. This is a good way of involving that middle bracket of our industry (those who are always at work) and send an audience their way.

Attendance at public events

Another way of informing the public about our activities is through attendance at public events. Earlier in 2019 we set up a dedicated forestry stand at the Rural Games in Palmerston North. There was a fully loaded log truck, Toi Ohomai attended with forestry simulators, and there were games and prizes set up around the log truck, along with current information on our industry and Wood Council initiatives.

We plan on attending this event again in 2020 and also expanding with a larger ‘Forestry Expo Pavilion’ at the Central Districts Field Days in Feilding. Here we are providing a lecture tent where there are to be speaker sessions over two days, along with a separate Forestry

Information tent where members and associated organisations can set up information booths. We will again have loaded log trucks, outside games for kids, and prizes of wooden products to give away.

Part of the point of this visibility is the presence of 50 Shades of Green (the rural group that has formed opposing forestry in rural New Zealand) at these rural field days, and the opportunity to present some real information and facts on our industry. We are also setting up next door to the Ag Pavilion. I feel it is important to align our industry presence, along with all the others at these events, and normalise our activities.

New film and books

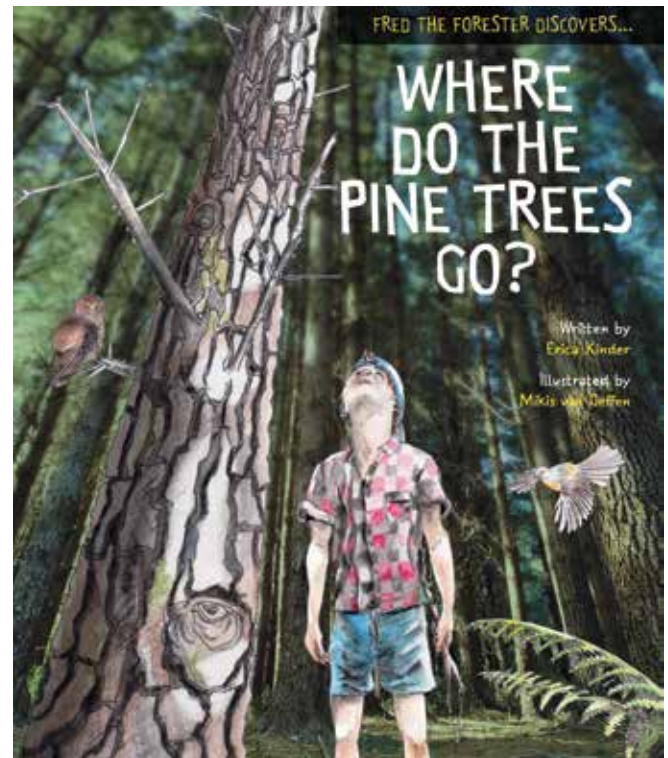
All of our careers-based activities were funded by the Forest Growers Levy Trust. With new plans and expansions for next year, we have reached out for more funding to broaden our careers programme and produce several new educational materials in the form of a short film, *Log Trucks in our Communities*, and an illustrated children's book that will be given to schools called *Where do the Pine Trees Go?* The book will also be available for purchase in 2020.

There appears to be a major gap in any resources that are available for schools to explain our sector, and in fact even some basic climate change facts. With funding, a series of books explaining carbon, climate change, tree planting and harvesting, along with wood products in New Zealand, will be produced by our Wood Council and aimed at five to seven-year-old students. There are teacher resources in the back of the book in the form of colouring-in pictures of warratahs and forests, word-finds with forestry terms, and a maze of logs to find your way through to a sawmill.

Every kid knows what a farmer is, or what a policeman does, and there are a million stories about every career except forestry. We need to explain our story in a clear and basic way. The first book is at the printers now, so expect it to be in stores next year and available through any of the Wood Councils free to members. We are hoping to start production on our next book, *What is Climate Change?*, and shoot our safety film along the lines of the Air New Zealand safety video in the new year. This can be shown at schools participating in the 'Share the Road' campaign.

2020 NZIF Conference

Next year the NZIF Conference will be held in Masterton and hosted by our local Wairarapa companies. The theme is 'Pride and Passion in Forestry', and we will try to put forward some of the positive things happening in our industry. One of the morning sessions will be open to the public (and farming community) to attend. We will invite local secondary schools and the focus will be on climate change and how we can influence this in our sector. As it is an election year in 2020, there will be also be an afternoon of parliamentary sessions where the forestry representative from each party will present to the conference. We are looking forward to



Where do the Pine Trees Go?, the first book in the *Fred the Forester* series

holding this conference and hopefully can inspire and inform some new participants of our activities.

Become involved

I will leave you with the question, 'Are Wood Councils an alternative species', or should we be considered a relevant and essential part of the future of our sector? We heard much at the last conference about our 'social licence to operate' without any mention of what the Wood Councils are doing right now about this. Many new community projects are in planning for 2020, and some of these are to be nationally delivered, so hopefully you will see someone from the local Wood Council in your patch or around your workplace. Although it can be a chore to get involved for a few hours with a local presentation or project, we will continue to drag staff out of their offices and into the public light. Most are willing once they get there, and they are always very proud to talk about what they do and why.

On the fringe?

I think Chris Goulding summed up an industry attitude at the last NZIF Conference when we were taking our group photo and I was standing on the outside edge. 'That's the right place for you, Erica,' he shouted to me. 'Yes, keeping everyone in line,' I replied. 'No, out on the fringe,' was his response.

So, is that where we are? On the fringe? I like my analogy better.

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