

# Right tree, right place, right purpose – but what is ‘right’?

Mark Bloomberg

‘Right tree, right place, right purpose’ is the slogan of Te Uru Rākau’s One Billion Trees programme (1BT). It seems sensible, if not axiomatic – but in practice this slogan may not be easy to apply. Let’s start with how we define the term ‘right’. Like many words in the English language, it can be used in multiple ways. It can be an adverb, adjective, noun or verb, and has several meanings when used as any of these parts of speech. In ‘Right tree’, it is used as an adjective. *The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary* offers five different definitions of ‘right’ as an adjective, but the two main ones are: (1) ‘(of conduct etc.) just, morally or socially correct’, or (2) ‘true, correct; not mistaken.’

From the Te Uru Rākau website, it seems ‘right’ will be assessed in both these senses. For example, under the heading of ‘Right place’ the website states (italics added for emphasis): ‘We want to see trees integrated into the landscape to complement and diversify our existing land uses, rather than see large-scale land conversion to forestry. *We also want trees planted to be suitable for the site and their intended use. To do this we need to align tree planting with local land-use and planting priorities and strategies.*’

So, we need to make correct decisions about tree planting that are based on technical and economic knowledge – they must be ‘suitable for the site and their intended use.’ But we also need to account for the priorities of local communities, including a preference for small-scale forestry. Note that while the priorities of local communities are explicitly mentioned in Te Uru Rākau’s explanation of the ‘Right tree’ slogan, national priorities are not. Yet the key driver for 1BT is the need to plant new forests to facilitate New Zealand’s transition to a zero carbon economy by 2050. Without this underlying need, would there even be a 1BT programme?

What this means is that there is an inherent contradiction in the ‘Right tree’ slogan. While local priorities are important, New Zealand’s targets for carbon sequestration are unlikely to be achieved without large-scale land conversion to fast-growth plantation forests. Small-scale plantings with indigenous or slow-growing exotic tree species are unlikely to sequester enough carbon in the 30 years between now and 2050. This contradiction between national and local afforestation priorities has happened before. New Zealand planted most of its plantation forests during three ‘planting boom’ periods – during the 1920s, 1970–80s and 1990s. The drivers for these booms were a combination of government policy and investor appetite. The Government wanted more plantation forests to meet goals for national economic development. Private investors, both corporate and individual, saw forestry as a profitable investment. In each of these planting booms, large-scale afforestation with a few proven fast-growth species was the rule. This was driven by expediency and economics – once acquired,

land needed to be planted completely and rapidly to meet investor expectations or government planting targets. And the planted trees had to grow reliably and quickly, with a good chance of maturing into a valuable timber resource.

In contrast, particularly in the second and third planting booms, many communities were opposed to the purchasing of farms for conversion to large-scale fast-growth plantations. This opposition often manifested in rules in local government plans that restricted the location and extent of new plantation forests – first under the Town and Country Planning Act 1977 and later under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA). In cases where indigenous forests were converted to plantation forests, political activism was the preferred response of environmentalists, although they later came to see local plans under the RMA as another way to limit plantation forests on lands with conservation value.

So, this conflict between large-scale tree plantings (to meet government or commercial objectives) and local priorities is nothing new. All the ‘Right tree’ slogan does is restate the same conflict we have failed to come to terms with for half a century now – how to be ‘right’ in the objective, technical sense (i.e. efficiently meeting targets for national development or carbon sequestration), and at the same time ‘right’ in the sense of being morally and socially correct. The Government is trying to address this. For example, government-funded tree plantings under the 1BT must meet criteria such as giving priority to small-scale plantings within existing farming operations. But of the 149 million trees planted so far under the 1BT, only 17% have been directly funded by the Government. The rest will have been planted (or replanted) by commercial foresters.

Further, it seems likely that most of the new commercial plantings will involve whole-farm conversion to a forest. In a recent report, Te Uru Rākau noted that ‘Market drivers, especially the economic prospects for commercial forestry, high log price and high carbon price, are likely to be the key drivers of whole-farm conversion rather than the One Billion Trees grant funding.’ As with previous planting booms, the Government appears happy to accept and even facilitate large-scale plantation forests to meet national objectives such as carbon sequestration. While there is some intervention using direct government funding to promote small-scale forests, once again communities’ views on ‘Right tree, right place, right purpose’ will most likely be advanced through local plans under the RMA – with lobbying and other direct action by activists where the opposition to large-scale plantation forestry is strongest. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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