

Farming – a forester’s perspective

Jamie Falloon



Sometimes it pays to walk in another’s shoes, is an adage that we should all stop and think about. Understanding different perspectives and considering others’ views is something that is missing in the forestry carbon gold rush we are seeing playing out in rural New Zealand.

I grew up in a farming community in Bideford northeast of Masterton. My background is forestry, and after a few stop-start career plans and four years of fun at Otago I ended up working as an accountant. Quickly into this I realised this was a terrible career choice for me and I started a forestry degree in Canterbury.

My first job was working for Tasman forestry in Taupo in the woodlots team working for Mike Bartells. However, sometimes the call of the land beckons and my family and I left Auckland and moved back to the Wairarapa to live the farming dream at Bowlands. Sixteen years later I’m still here, so I suppose that’s a win.

I’ve always had about seven neighbours, and now most them are forests. I’m right next door to Hadleigh Station, which was the poster farm of 50 Shades of Green. Disclaimer – I bought one of the houses and 95 ha of land from the forest company. So while I support their principles around rural communities, it would be hypocritical to be a strong supporter and I believe land and business owners should have the right to make decisions based on

their positions and beliefs. I also think their message has become anti-forestry and slightly xenophobic.

Most of the land in Bideford was converted in the 1990s, with probably about seven or eight farms left. The forests are mainly investment forests of a range of sizes, which are now coming to the end of a 10-year logging cycle.

At the start of the logging there was a community meeting called, which involved mainly Forest Enterprises and their logging contractors, the Masterton District Council and local residents. This was a really valuable meeting because it allowed the community to understand what was happening, and it helped the loggers and truckies understand that there were people who were going to be massively impacted by the logging.

This also allowed the Council to plan the dust sealing around houses and buildings to lessen the impact of up to 100 logging truck loads a day. A bit more planning, like waiting for the road to dry a bit after heavy rain, would have made a huge difference to Council repairs and maintenance of the roads. However, we got through and the roads didn’t become impassible.

Overall, we’ve got on pretty good, although everyone has a memory of a very close call. There are

some rules though. Add another five minutes on the trip to town because passing a loaded logging truck is not for the faint-hearted. There are hardly any cyclists who use our road so that's a positive. The drivers have realised that a logging truck is not faster than a bolting calf and farmers appreciate the help from a truck horn when the dogs are getting tired. The main one though is don't get in the way of the speeding utes heading home about 4pm, so some work around this from the forest companies would be useful.

Anyway, back to the main story and the words of the first paragraph, which I think our relationship with logging and forestry in our community is trying to replicate. We are past the pissed off bit and well into the living with it stage. But this is not the case in many places and the large-scale planting for carbon is driving a bigger wedge between farmers and foresters.

This just plays into the anti-forestry farming divide. Messages are becoming very provocative and the recent debates between the forestry sector and 50 Shades are showing this. There isn't much listening going on, and hoping for a regulated solution from the Government is nuts. Asking for the Government to legislate/regulate land use and activities is a slippery slope towards a totally managed environment that tries to limit any possible environmental, social and community effects. The farming sector is guilty of this and they get the same message from me.

I firmly believe in the market being the solution, so at times I appear conflicted between the price of land and returns from farming versus forestry. But today's business environment has changed and there are other factors – environmental, social and community – that are becoming as important as just making money.

Sheep and beef farming is being squeezed. Losing neighbours to forests is sad as it takes a piece of the community out and we lose some of our resilience. However, if you've slogged your guts out and get a good price then at least we need to be happy for the people who have made tough decisions.

My view is that both sides need to think smarter about how our industries should try to be closely aligned. My experience in water politics is that we are a long way apart and the drive to convert land into carbon forests is adding to this distance. Can it be bridged – well I'm not sure. Do the people buying the land come and get involved in the community? Do they ever make contact and get involved in the local horse sports or catchment groups or voluntary fire brigades? Or do you just plant it, lock the gates and move on to the next big deal?

I've seen forestry representatives highlighting all the environmental benefits and trying to discredit the farming industry. There are large areas of forest land on farms, but very few farmers are members of the Forest Owners Association. Why is this the case? Well it's probably because we are not well represented. How many

forest companies are members of Federated Farmers? Until we recognise that hill country forestry and farming are complementary land use activities, rather than competitive, we will always have a point of tension.

If you dig below the surface, the two industries depend on each other for shipping of export and import products. One of the reasons we get good shipping is because the scale of the dairy and meat industries means New Zealand is well serviced by containerised shipping lines. If more farmers realised that the log boats coming here are full of fertiliser, or PKE, then they might understand the extra benefits of logs being shipped.

I think our industries are at a critical point and need to work closer together and not just pay lip service to this. I hope there are no discussions around trying to curry favour with the Government, especially now farmers have just rightly embarrassed them with the huge Groundswell protests.

I hate the slogan 'right tree in the right place'. I think it is so meaningless as most people believe it means natives, not pines. This is because there is an anti-pine tree rhetoric around this slogan. The right tree decision is actually based upon what the landowner wants rather than the Government or Councils imposing planting controls.

My model on my farm is 500 ha of forest on 1,300 ha of farm. Carbon credits and future log revenue will likely have a big impact on my farm's profitability and resilience. This model is one that should be progressed and used more around the country. This needs integrated land management planning, and identifying the good farm and forest land at both the farm and the catchment level. We still need to produce food and fibre, and both wool and wood, so rather than taking the easy option and buying the whole place bring different options to the table.

This will take a different mindset, and now it's time to bring the koha and the kai and get to know the community. Help is what we need to work together and understand the opportunity. This will take time and effort, but in the long run it will be a successful model for New Zealand's land use.

So foresters, go hug a farmer, and help them see the land use opportunities. Any farmers who read this will know the benefits, so I'm talking to the converted here, but there are still thousands who struggle to understand the ETS let alone the opportunities on their farms to have a piece of it.

Carbon is the gel to get this working. If this locks up huge areas of land it won't work. Foresters' social licence will be lost if it involves large-scale conversion to pines. Farmers have the land and carbon will provide new cashflow streams. The successful foresters will access this by working together, not just throwing cash at it and shutting the gate.



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