

THE CENTRAL NORTH ISLAND PLANNING STUDY: A PERSONAL IMPRESSION

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At the joint NZIF/NZLA/NZFIEA* Conference in Taupo this year there was a workshop on the Central North Island Forestry and Transport Planning Study, which is being undertaken by the Town and Country Planning Branch of the Ministry of Works and Development, with assistance from the Forest Service, New Zealand Railways, and other organisations. The Study is concerned with the disposal and marketing of the very large volumes of forest produce which will be available for sale in the mid-1990s and beyond.

That people other than foresters are becoming involved in forestry planning is to be welcomed. An Editorial Note in Vol. 18(1) of this *Journal* (1973) has this to say: "Because of the scale of forest-based industries, there is need to consider not only national requirements, but also international needs and markets. Moreover, regional planners must know something about adjoining regions. Nor can broader aspects of planning be strictly germane only to forests and forest industries, but must take into account other industries, people, money, transport, harbours, social amenities and the infrastructure generally. Clearly, foresters need to consult a number of other specialists to assist them in compiling realistic assessments of the local situation so that objectives can be formulated with sufficient authority to be implemented without undue or frequent changes in emphasis or direction". Foresters did not take up this challenge, but now another organisation is attempting to do what foresters ought to have been doing for a long time. While the public may be more receptive of plans from people other than foresters (suspect as they are at present), and whether planning specialists can fully understand the complexities of forestry, are matters of conjecture at present. Town and Country planning is the "in" thing, and the planners have the ball at their feet, but foresters would be most unwise to place too much trust in them to produce sound plans for the management of forests except where foresters have a major say in the planning process.

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However, it is clear from the information presented at the workshop that the planning team has done some useful studies on various technical and social aspects of forestry development. They have shown conclusively, for example, that forestry is most profitable on the best land nearest ports or industrial plants, and that both farming and forestry become less profitable the further they move into the hinterland and the poorer the land. This, of course, endorses what foresters have known for a generation or more. The study has also dispelled some myths, such as the catch-phrase that "forestry depopulates the countryside"; rather the reverse, now, for rural areas exclusively devoted to pastoral farming are in social decline.

Nevertheless, the exposition presented to the workshop was distinctly disappointing. The planners proved to be very conservative in their outlook. They assumed that there would be only large-scale forests, only large industries, only road or rail transport options, and only exports of the wood surplus. Thus, while they noted that there would be some uncertainties over the next 15 to 20 years, they did not consider at all some quite major possibilities.

For example, FRI pathologists are aware that radiata pine could, at some time, be subject to major, or even devastating disease. Moreover, there could be major technological changes which would open up quite unexpected possibilities for using or marketing wood. Allied to this, we might find, within the next decade, that it would be more sensible to use the surplus wood in this country as a source of energy and chemicals. There is also the question of economics; the evidence seems to be that our present so-called capitalist financial system is grinding to a catastrophic halt; we could move towards the stupidities of a centrally-planned economy; we could embrace entirely new concepts such as social credit, small-is-beautiful, human scale enterprises, or other systems not yet clearly defined. But in the end the decisions could well be political ones whose sole object is to win votes, such as decisions applied recently to some of our native forests, ignoring both technical and economic sense; indeed this is the most likely eventuality. In other words, the planners have shown themselves to be ultra-conservative. Equally for transport, they have not even considered the possibility of the widespread use of dirigibles.

However, the most unsatisfactory aspect of the whole exercise was their admission that they have not considered markets. It would seem that the success or failure of our recent large forest

planting programme depends on finding markets. Moreover, our economists are adamant that, to obtain maximum financial benefit from forests, we must adopt a silviculture which produces wood for known markets. This was amply presented by the Forest Research Institute Radiata Pine Task Force at a following workshop. The planning group could give no information on possible markets whatsoever, so their findings would be useless, in this respect, to foresters. Their only contribution was to advise foresters to "keep their options open". Foresters might well complain that this advice cost some \$500 000 per word! For the study is budgeted to cost \$2 million. To hark back to the editorial note already mentioned, it had this to say: "Defining the goals . . . becomes of major importance". The study defines no goals beyond transporting the surplus wood to the industries already in being, or to ports, whereas one would normally infer that planning means precisely defining goals and laying down the means of reaching those goals. However, it now seems that (as with other plans recently) all that will be done is to define a number of options, leaving someone else to make a decision.

One could say that, with such huge uncertainties over the next couple of decades, it is too early yet to try to undertake such a planning exercise. Certainly, without any attempt to examine and define future marketing options, the plan is likely to be an exercise in futility. Much more to the point, at this stage, would be to set up a very small group to form, and regularly update, the data base; this must include market intelligence and projections. Planning could then begin, on a firm basis, much nearer the time of marketing. In the meantime, foresters must clearly understand that, because we are remote from strong markets, and because transport costs are likely to rise faster than other costs, our silviculture must be geared to producing the highest-value forest products we can. The Radiata Pine Task Force has demonstrated clearly that nothing but the best will pay, and "keeping options open" is surely the most useless piece of advice that could be given to foresters at this time.

We must hope, fervently, that this exercise does not bring the whole planning process into disrepute.