Standards for the assessment of sustainable plantation forest management in New Zealand

Euan Mason

I recently attended a forum on the assessment of sustainable plantation forest management run by the Forest Industries Council (FIC) and the New Zealand Foresters Owners Association (NZFOA). They propose to create a set of standards for the assessment of sustainable plantation management by building on a matrix of existing New Zealand standards. The ultimate aim is to acquire Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) approval of the new standards thereby making it easier for plantation owners to get FSC certification of their management. At time of writing, the new standards are to be written for plantations of either native or exotic species, but would not apply to non-plantations.

It is great that the forestry industry is setting standards that will improve both our environmental and our marketing performance, and I'm keen to help with this initiative.

The Council of the New Zealand Institute of Forestry resolved that this was a positive step; however they would like the standards to apply to all forests in New Zealand.

My personal concerns with the proposed new standards are as follows:

A standard that applies to plantations only

Some people at the forum, including me, pointed out that a set of standards that includes plantations only is illogical. All forests are ecosystems, and standards that ensure sustainability should be applicable to native forests as well. Proposers of the new standards agreed that they were taking a "pragmatic" approach. This was justifiable, they asserted, because including native forest management in the standards would result in an evaporation of support from environmental groups. Support from such groups is viewed as critical for the creation of national standards that would be endorsed by FSC. The technical logic of distinguishing sustainability of exotic plantation management from that of native species management was not adequately explained. It will, however, create a myriad of problems with definitions and unforeseen effects.

Premise relating to "natural" forests

Many of the current standards for plantations have as an implied premise that "natural" ("native"?) forests in or around plantations should be preserved (PPFM, VEP, NZFA, SGS)[1] . However it is currently quite feasible to

1 PPFM - Principles for commercial plantation forest management in New Zealand (1995)
NZFA - New Zealand Forest Accord (1991)
VEP - Verification of environmental performance: Draft report card, User guide, and Audit protocol (September 1999)
SGS - SGS QUALIFOR programme: New Zealand Plantations Main assessment checklist (August 2000)

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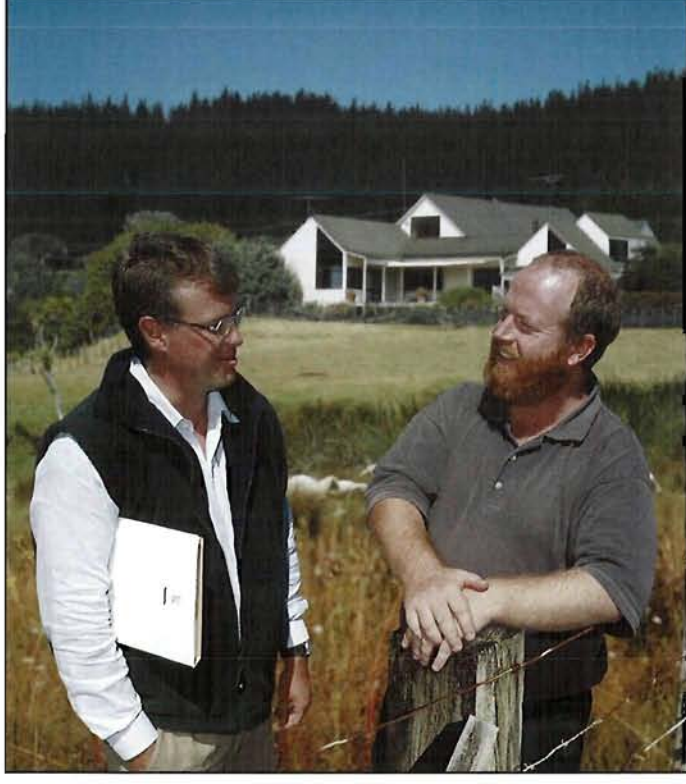

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manage native forests partly for wood production in a manner that the FSC will certify. I recently visited a native forest harvesting operation at Gowan Hills in Southland that was FSC certified, and John Wardle's beech management at Oxford is surely FSC certifiable. If the FSC will currently certify native forest harvesting operations, why create a standard that actively discriminates against them?

All of this raises a few questions:

Would landowners with both native forests and plantations on their properties be exempt from FSC certification of plantations if they wished to harvest wood from their native forests?

If the matrix standards are incorporated into the FSC certified standard, then the answer is "yes". Someone like John Wardle, who has both exotic plantation and is managing beech forest sustainably, would be unable to get FSC certification for his plantation management no matter how good the plantation management was. You could argue about definitions of "Forest Management Unit" perhaps, but my reading of the VEP, NZFA, SGS, and SCS[2] suggests this is a problem.

How much more difficult will it be for private landowners to gain FSC certification of sustainable management for wood production from native forests if preservation of such forests is enshrined in a national standard created by FIC and NZFOA and endorsed by the FSC?

This may partly explain why FIC/NZFOA is getting such good support from environmental NGOs for the proposed standard. A forest industry standard that has an implied premise that all management of native forests for wood production is unsustainable would present an insurmountable obstacle to those wishing to obtain certification that they manage native forests sustainably. The result? More clearance of native forests for pasture, diminished opportunities for finance of pest control obtained from the forests themselves, more public reserves, and an increased load on the taxpayer to fund pest management in those reserves. In addition, we would import even more unsustainably managed tropical hardwood than we do currently (New Zealand's total hardwood imports from all countries for the year 2000 were 13,251 cubic meters with a value of NZ$ 17.5 million).

What about plantations of exotic species that include important native biodiversity in the understorey? Would the destruction of the understorey during harvesting prevent them from meeting the standards?

This could be a problem for FIC and NZFOA in future if elements of the existing standards are adopted. "..members will exclude from land clearing and disturbance any area of 5 hectares or greater which has actual or emerging predominance of naturally occuring indigenous vegetation of any height" (NZFA, endorsed by PPFM and SCS). Some clearfelled sites in northern Kaingaroa would meet this definition well.

How about naturally regenerated exotic forests? They are not plantations, and they are arguably "natural" and they are also a valuable commercial resource. Should they now be preserved? If not, then what about harvested and subsequently naturally regenerated native forests?

This highlights the inconsistency embodied in the standards. Prior to 1970, plenty of plantations were harvested and then the sites regenerated using natural regeneration. On some sites natural regeneration might provide high enough initial stockings that we could improve wood quality by managing spacing instead of by investing heavily in highly bred seeds and pruning. Such an alternative paradigm may be more cost-effective than our current high investment/low stocking management paradigm. Should the standards rule out this alternative? If not, then why should country of origin make a difference to indicators of sustainability for management? If so, then why should regeneration method make a difference? New Zealand has adopted a fragmented approach to Forest Policy for the last 14 years. Some would argue that we really have no forest policy, relying solely on the market to determine our forestry future. To adopt a set of standards for plantations for marketing purposes that pander to one small section of the community by implying that natural forests should remain undisturbed would demonstrate conclusively that in this instance the market has failed us very badly.

2 SCS - Scientific Certification Systems, forest conservation programmes; draft and certification standards for New Zealand plantation management (March 22, 2000).

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