

# Passive Forest Policy

Hugh Bigsby

A recent book, *Forest Policy: International Case Studies*<sup>1</sup>, provides an interesting commentary about forest policy and a comparison of policies across a range of countries and sub-national regions, including the U.S., Canada, Sweden, Finland, Chile, Russia and New Zealand. While the comparisons themselves are interesting, an important component of the book is the provision of a framework for analysing forest policy. Forestry in particular has a peculiar policy context in that the rotation length, even for fast-growing industrial plantations, will span a number of voting cycles. As van Kooten and Vertinsky point out in their introduction, this means that forest policies must balance short-term needs to get elected or re-elected with obligations to the near and distant future. Add to this the uncertainty introduced by our incomplete understanding of how forest ecosystems function, the intensity and stability of public preferences for 'green' objectives and future changes in technology, and the forest policy context becomes very complicated.

The response to the complicated nature of forest policy is varied across the jurisdictions covered in the book. At one extreme are countries or regions where there is extensive public engagement in forest policy and public involvement in dealing with the complexity of forestry. At the other extreme is New Zealand, where the public sector has largely disengaged itself from the complexity of forestry, choosing instead to view forestry as being a 'black and white' issue where the plantation sector can be completely compartmentalised into the private sector and the public indigenous sector fenced and forgotten about. Rather than leading with forestry policy, the public sector is largely passive, responding in an ad hoc fashion to initiatives by industry, communities or environmental groups.

This 'passive' approach to forest policy is in stark contrast to governments in New Zealand's main markets and its competitors. Is there something uniquely different about New Zealand that makes this an appropriate choice, or is it instead a reflection of a reduced status for forestry in New Zealand's landscape and economy? As van Kooten and Vertinsky point out, the importance of a sector in the economy will determine the centrality of forestry policy in the political agenda, and the trade-offs that governments are willing to make. You can draw your own conclusions.

Arthur and Wilson, in their wrapping up chapter, also note the distinction between relying on general policies (e.g. environment, labour, industrial development) that impact on forestry as sim-

ply just another sector in the economy, and forestry policies that deal specifically with forestry across a range of policy areas. Most nations will have an explicit forest policy, or one that is specifically directed at forestry or the forest products sector. However, New Zealand does not, focussing on general policies, or the "level playing field". The distinction is not trivial, as it is not clear that this has been an effective strategy for New Zealand. Recent debates over development of the forest industry on the east coast of the North Island, which are merely a forerunner of development issues to come, continuing news about widely divergent regional approaches to forestry under the RMA, and initiatives on how forestry and biodiversity are to be managed across a range of jurisdictions and agencies, are all indicators of underlying problems in our current passive forestry policy environment.

New Zealand also runs the risk that the forest sector will be dominated by what might be called 'collateral' forest policies, or policies that impact forestry as a result of targeting some other sector in the economy. The EU's Community aid scheme for forestry measures in agriculture<sup>2</sup> and the Australian government's efforts at stabilising salinisation of farm land are prime examples of collateral forest policies.

The EU subsidy is not directly for forestry, but rather is a spillover from agricultural programmes. The driver for this particular subsidy arises from the view that, "afforestation of agricultural land is especially important both from the point of view of soil use and the environment and as a contribution to reducing the shortage of forestry products in the Community and as an accompaniment to the Community's policy for controlling agricultural production." The environmental concerns are interesting in that they are open-ended and refer to, "forms of countryside management more compatible with environmental balance", and, "the need to combat the greenhouse effect and absorb carbon dioxide." Fundamental to the scheme though is the use of forestry to assist in the reduction in agricultural subsidies by making afforestation an alternative use of agricultural land and developing forestry activities on farms for alternative income. The need for the subsidy is because farmers do not appear to appreciate all these benefits and are not all that keen on planting trees without some public largesse.

The largesse required to stimulate farmer interest is not trifling. The aid scheme is allowed to cover afforestation costs, maintenance costs in

the first five years, an annual premium per hectare to cover losses of income resulting from afforestation of agricultural land, and investment aid for the improvement of woodlands by the provision of shelterbelts, firebreaks, waterpoints and forest roads. Given the subsidies available, a farmer who undertook afforestation could receive the equivalent of \$NZ8,660/ha for planting, and \$NZ795/ha thereafter just to keep the forest going. Even existing forests are eligible for payments. For improvements to existing woodlands, payments include ECU700 (\$NZ1,855) per hectare for woodland improvement and the provision of shelterbelts, ECU18,000 (\$NZ47,718) per kilometre for forest roads, and ECU150 (\$NZ397) per hectare of woodland provided with firebreaks and waterpoints.

Australia is developing substantial collateral forest policies as well. The National Low Rainfall Farm Forestry Strategy is designed to integrate trees and shrubs into agriculture across the southern Australian wheatbelt to help relieve extensive land and water degradation due to salinity. The strategy will require substantial public investment to kick start the process and the objective is to have 30% of farmers engaged in farm forestry by 2020 with at least 10% of land area and 10% of farm revenues coming from farm forestry new industries but this investment will be forthcoming because farm forestry. Apart from collateral forestry programmes, Australia has also developed direct forest policies, both at the State and Federal levels, incorporating national strategies or 'visions' for the sector. The Commonwealth Government has produced the Wood and Paper Industry Strategy and Plantations for Australia - The 2020 Vision.

The question for the New Zealand forestry sector is whether a passive forest policy is going to be adequate for the challenges facing the country in either the plantation or the indigenous forestry sectors. The doubling of plantation wood availability in the near future is going to happen in a forestry policy vacuum that will continue to see the same knee-jerk reaction to transport and infrastructure development issues that have emerged on the east coast of the North Island. There is fragmentation of initiatives that impact on forests, with separate agendas by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (Native Trees and Plants on Private Lands), Ministry for the Environment (Biowhat), the Department of Conservation (DoC) (public forest estate as well as its perceived interests on private land) and district and regional councils (local interpretation and implementation of the RMA).

Graham Whyte pointed out a classic example of the effects of passive forest policy. A recent

advertisement in national newspapers, under the banners of Forest and Bird, DoC and the BNZ, proclaimed how successfully brown kiwi populations have recovered in Okarito forest. There was no word about the fact that this forest had been managed under a different policy (the West Coast Accord) by Timberlands West Coast (TWC) for the last decade, or that it was TWC's pest control programme, funded through sustainable harvesting revenues from that forest, that had achieved the success. With harvesting about to cease in Okarito and it will be interesting to see what the collateral effect is in the future on forest health and populations of predators without funds from harvest revenues.

Personally, I do not think that a passive forest policy, that subjects a sector with such potential to collateral and general policies, is working. While the NZIF's Forest Policy is laudable, it is still the NZIF's policy, not the government's policy nor a policy that is recognised and understood by the public, and it does not take us past the forest gate. The same can be said for the initiatives of the Forest Industries Council and the Forest Owners Association. And while I am not so naive to believe that a Forest Policy is any more permanent or sustainable than the West Coast Accord or a single-issue political platform, it does force public debate and a statement of vision and intent. I would like to see "MAF Forest Policy" change from being the name of a group with a government department, to being "MAF's Forest Policy" that provided a clear vision for forestry in New Zealand.

- 1 Wilson, W., van Kooten, G.C., Vertinsky, I. and Arthur, L. (1999). *Forest Policy: International Case Studies*. CABI Publishing, New York
- 2 COUNCIL REGULATION (EEC) No 2080/92

## EMPLOYMENT SOUGHT

Forestry Graduate (Canterbury) 36 years old

Experience includes:

- 3 years' silviculture and mensuration

- 5 years' Resource consent work

Seeks further forest industry experience, anything considered please.



**For further details**

**Phone Michael Muschamp**

**07-345 4812, or 07-548 0196**