Dr Luke Barry from Scion says that if we planted 200,000 hectares of the most vulnerable land, then we would be well on the way to saving $1.4 to $2.7 billion in avoided land erosion, depending on the discount rate used. The government intervention needed to ensure afforestation of that 200,000 hectares over 10 years would be about $700 a hectare, the cost to buy and plant seedlings. Achieving the annual target of 20,000 hectares a year would therefore cost the government $14 million a year, a very good rate of return for the taxpayer. It would be an even better return when the more intangible net benefits of water quality and regulation, terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, recreation, scenery, energy security, hunting and the socio-economic effects of implementing Woodco's strategy are added to the equation.

We are responsible for promoting change

It is up to us to get politicians to understand that there is market failure in the forestry sector. We need to get the government to pay a contribution towards the value of the ecosystem services that forestry provides. We also need to lobby the government to moderate the impediments that constrain the trading and amalgamation of woodlots, and therefore the attractiveness of new planting as an investment. These involve circumventing the tax anomaly which stops the sale of immature forests, making it easier for overseas residents to invest in forestry, and allowing long-term projections to be included in forest partnership prospectuses.

We also need to convince our local MPs that we also need a stand-alone government forestry agency reporting directly to its own Minister in Cabinet. Currently no top tier MPI official has a professional forestry education. In addition, any forestry policy proposal successfully inserted into MPI tends to get distorted by competing rural interests within the Ministry, sometimes even to the extent of being detrimental to the environment and the wider community.

We need to point out that there is a political opportunity for the party that first starts to support forestry properly again. The arguments are sound and we now know that there could be 100,000 voters who have forestry investments. Many of them are wealthy and influential community leaders. Let us work on mustering their support.

Hamish Levack is a forest owner.

Letter to the Editor

It was interesting to read your editorial on the need for a national forest policy. Putting your editorial alongside Chris Goulding's article on New Zealand's export of unprocessed logs, it is clear to see that you are right.

In this context it is interesting to look at the recent Forest Growers Levy proposal and the Levy Referendum because this had the potential to strengthen, unify, and build a more cooperative and inclusive framework for the New Zealand forest industry. But the democratic deficiencies in the process leading up to the referendum suggest this will not happen.

As you mention, the March referendum '…produced a majority 'yes' vote…' with 86 per cent voting in favour of the proposal. However, as you know the NZ Farm Forestry Association has a geodatabase of New Zealand plantation owners who have five hectares or more, containing 14,683 names. This database includes individuals, companies, iwi, trusts, local authorities and other types of plantation owners.

Given that only 582 voters participated in the referendum it is misleading to suggest that the best estimate for voter turnout was '…no more than 15 per cent of eligible voters….' when it in fact was less than four per cent. At least 96 per cent of potential levy payers either did not vote or did not even know that a referendum was being held and for many, the latter is most likely the case.

In November 2012, three months before the referendum, the NZFFA provided the Forest Growers Levy Referendum Board with their database including the 6,734 names for which there were validated postal addresses. Furthermore, they advised that the number of valid postal addresses in the database could be increased to over 13,000 with minimal expenditure.

In the event, the Levy Referendum Board instead relied on a legal opinion from solicitors, Kensington Swan, that advised against a mail-out on the basis that it might 'skew the communication process by informing one particular interest group but not another.' It is difficult to see how contacting 6,734 growers from a list of 14,683 could create a significant bias.

Kensington Swan also advised the Board to 'advertise details in forestry-related publications and magazines including all major daily newspapers (*NZ Herald, The Dominion Post, The Press*.)' But the Board did not advertise or place formal notices in any major newspapers.

Given what has happened, the referendum cannot be described as being democratic. If it is true that the 'yes' votes accounted for 86 per cent of the plantation area, then it is clear that the large growers dominated the referendum and that, as a result, small growers will just have to tag along (yet again).

You have to ask, is this the sort of industry we want for the future or have our industry leaders missed a golden opportunity to build a foundation that will strengthen, diversify and unify the New Zealand forest industry in an open, transparent and inclusive manner?

Yours faithfully
Roger May