

One billion trees – it's a vision, not a dream

Hon Shane Jones, Minister of Forestry

Abstract

The forestry sector saw 16% export growth in the last year. This flourish in forestry exports was the result of trees established in decades past, however, I'm excited about seeing that number grow even further, driven by a change in the value and nature of our exports in the future.

Forestry is still our third largest export sector. Our opportunity with the Government's One Billion Trees Programme is to shift gear. Forestry need not be a once-in-a-generation log-shipping event. I have a vision for a strong and confident sector, sustainable and well-managed, enjoying steady supply and filling demand for world leading products. A sector that our trading partners can quietly envy, and all kiwis can be loudly proud of.

The vision

Our Prime Minister has told the story and it's true. Before the coalition agreement was on paper, I was negotiating for investment in forestry. Our regions had been abandoned and the potential of our forestry sector overlooked. In this century, forestry should be seen as a productivity driver and an environmental necessity.

It fits naturally with many of the Government's priority areas and I am proud of our commitment to expand the industry. What we believe in, and what we're investing in, is a long-term shift in this country's approach to forestry.

It's easy to point out mistakes of the past, but better still to learn from them.

There are challenges, of course. Growing and harvesting cycles that evolved over almost a century won't change overnight or even over a term (or three) of government. But they could shift over a decade of investment.

The One Billion Trees Programme is absolutely the right approach at the right time. We're enabling



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the industry to diversify, innovate and grow. We're investing not only in trees but in research and development – species diversification, new techniques, new markets for extracts, technological innovations. Our world class designers and architects will conceive uses for wood not yet dreamed of.

A forest is like a well – it's not the well that transforms lives, it's the possibilities that a supply of water opens up.

A stable supply of trees can give the industry more control over supply and therefore prices. The right price is important for sequestered carbon as well as for timber – careful changes to the Emissions Trading Scheme will give greater confidence in the carbon market and make it easier for forest owners to participate.

The balance of course is assuring all stakeholders about managing the inherent risks. The right trees in the right place for the right purpose is about judicious land use, and with a practical regulatory framework and intelligent resource management, the potential of the One Billion Trees Programme is enormous.

Forestry has so many players and sub-sectors, all interdependent. I want to be clear with forest owners, managers, processors, engineers, designers and wood manufacturers, marketers and councils: your roles are critical. We need innovation, sensible regulation, research, productivity, regional focus and national and international connections.

Te Uru Rākau means standing up together

Part of Te Uru Rākau's brief is to help coordinate these various moving parts.

Continuing to engage and advise on land use is one priority. Te Uru Rākau has done well in consulting with the sector to develop the new National Environmental Standards for Plantation Forestry (NES-PF), effective from May 2018. They have removed some of the complexity in risk management in forest planning, but

as we continue to shift our thinking about forestry, we will need to keep listening to stakeholders, reviewing and improving.

As the lead agency for delivering the One Billion Trees Programme, Te Uru Rākau's priority is to get trees into the ground in our regions. That means continuing to incentivise and support planting where possible without disrupting the commercial eco-system. Grants for council-led initiatives have been expanded, and there is enthusiasm for the new Matariki Tu Rākau commemorative planting programme for communities. Crown Forestry joint ventures continue supporting new plantings on feasible under-utilised land. Private foresters and investors will benefit from proposed changes to policy around emissions trading and the overseas investment in forestry. More new vehicles may yet be needed – watch this space.

I've been asked about the choice of Rotorua for Te Uru Rākau's head office: was it symbolism, sentiment, or sensible? Symbolism might be there but the point is having people behind that symbol who can hear, see and understand what is happening in the regions. This is not going back to the old forestry service with the Crown owning and controlling. Te Uru Rākau's job is to generate confidence and enable the industry to grow and thrive. It's the regions that rise and fall with the forestry story. Change for our regions needs to start as well as end there.

On that note, I want to acknowledge the pain inflicted by flooding damage at Tolaga Bay in early June.

It was a sight no one wants to see. I've been quite open that I was unimpressed with the initial lack of visibility from foresters during the clean-up. Your support was needed by the Tolaga Bay community.

Obviously neither forester, farmer nor meteorologist could protect any landscape from a severe, highly concentrated rain storm. But the point the industry needs to face is one of managing risk. Operators had clearly not considered how their silviculture and harvesting practices might impact the local environment. We've seen a visible accumulation of log debris in an area subject to specific erosion control measures.

This situation hammers the social licence for plantation forestry on the East Coast. It undermines forestry's value to the region. I don't want forest operators or foothills communities on tenterhooks after every harvest and every weather event – this cannot be allowed to happen again. I have asked my Ministerial Advisory Group to work on this immediately. We need ideas now for forests awaiting harvest in this area; we need smarter thinking about replanting; and we need real solutions for the 'waste' material being generated, ideally finding value through processing.

The new NES-PF provides a regulatory base to better protect the environment in future seasons. While the focus is consistency across regional boundaries, local

authorities can impose tighter controls as and when local conditions require. It won't stop a weather bomb, but it will help protect against the type of impact seen in Tolaga Bay.

The point is this: by definition, the right trees planted for the right purpose, in the right place, will not create an unacceptable foreseeable risk. Smart forests, whether indigenous or exotic, will enhance and protect their surrounding environment.

The One Billion Trees Programme puts a strategy alongside the regulation. We can invest and nurture the land, as well as produce a return from it – it doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. Clean and green is still the key to our future: Green forests, clean air, clean waterways, and beautiful, biodiverse environments for whānau and tourists to enjoy. And with our creative industries producing exceptional high-value wood products, those tourists can take that magical forest experience home with them.

There's a national culture aspect to this. We heartily claim the best rugby team, the best meat and dairy products. Let's add the world's best timber products to the list. Forests stood on this land long before we became the nation of 70 million sheep. Let's talk about forestry as part of the fabric of New Zealand – past, present and future.

The Provincial Growth Fund opens the door

For Minginui, the One Billion Trees Programme will help revive an investment-starved community.

This 1940s Forestry Service town, set between the Kaingaroa, Whirinaki and Te Urewera, fell into disrepair in the 1980s when the ban on indigenous logging saw its local sawmill close. The town was without broadband internet or mobile phone coverage, until the Trust that represents the Iwi, Ngāti Whare, stepped up. Ngāti Whare also owns a nursery, producing forest-grade indigenous podocarp species and employing nine locals. With the One Billion Trees Programme investing, the nursery is increasing production and has large orders for a range of species including mānuka and kānuka.

Staff numbers are set to grow 10-fold, meaning training, skills development and a future for the town.

Coming back to Gisborne, I note that before the Queen's Birthday flooding the Tairāwhiti region was seeing turnaround after some tough decades. I am intent on seeing the positive momentum return. Half a dozen development projects in Tairāwhiti were already accessing the Provincial Growth Fund, including a forestry enterprise.

The local sector has established new businesses at Gisborne's mill, after years in mothballs. The Provincial Growth Fund has now supported a business case to expand further, by establishing a Wood Processing Centre of Excellence.



Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern with Forestry Minister Shane Jones and Associate Forestry Minister Meka Whaitiri at the launch of the Te Uru Rākau, Forestry New Zealand business unit in May 2018, along with (from left) Waiariki MP Tamati Coffey and NZ First MP Fletcher Tabuteau

This is inspiring local leadership, and a great example of sector collaboration meeting government investment. Here are regional operators walking the talk about producing high-value timber products locally. Millions could be invested in new technology, jobs previously under threat could be saved, and many more could be created.

Though the storm impact has put these opportunities at risk, I'm determined the potential can still be realised.

Another example is establishing a 465 ha plantation of mānuka and a training programme on Ngāti Hine Forestry Trust land in Northland. Over two years this will see an apiculture business developed; up to 40 people trained with new skills and qualifications, and potential jobs.

Also in Northland, a pilot programme with Scion is investigating the potential for totara timber products. This could deliver millions of dollars a year of timber within a few years, and a processing sector could lift that to tens of millions. This is what I want to see – while there are obstacles, we can overcome them. New thinking will create new products and new jobs.

These investments, in the long term, can produce a skilled, qualified workforce, proud to be doing work that is smart and safe; knowing their value to their employers, their communities and their whānau.

It's time to realise the potential that the forestry industry has in New Zealand. With the support of those in the industry, I know it can be an industry that helps revitalise our regions, diversify our economy, and provide a higher standard of living for our people.