

DANGERS WITH USER-PAY RESEARCH

The Government decision that its research organization should either obtain some of their finance on a user-pay basis or reduce in size is starting to change the nature of the Forest Research Institute. FRI eventually expect to find over 30% of their funds elsewhere and so have vigorously pursued a variety of techniques to earn money — for example, contract research, forming co-operatives in particular fields, consulting and charging for some information.

While it is probably true that there was a need for more accountability by research institutions and there are sometimes areas where obvious savings could be made, there are also dangers in applying the user-pay principle. Some of these dangers are now beginning to show.

First of all there is a danger of highly trained scientific staff spending valuable time and energy in pursuing sponsorship. How much is it costing to obtain and administer these new schemes? Is it justifiable to spend taxpayer research funds in this way?

Another danger is that research will begin to be dictated by the user perhaps stifling more basic or innovative lines of research. Already it is apparent that often industry tends to be interested in short-term specific problems rather than inputting funds to a general research programme. In 1983 NRAC in 'A review by Sectors of Science and Technology in New Zealand' warned that "there is a need to maintain sufficient independence from the industry to be entirely objective in research, in setting goals, and in having the ability to undertake some R and D of a speculative nature". We must avoid having the 30% dictating the efforts of the other 70%. In a user-pay environment there needs to be mechanisms for ensuring a balance between short-term investigations of low risk and longer-term more basic or strategic research.

Other real problems are associated with the flow of information and accountability in terms of evaluating the scientific worth of a piece of research.

Several examples of this have already emerged. An article sent to this journal for publication has been put 'on hold' until it has been cleared by the organization who contracted it. In one of the co-operatives it is proposed that research reports (along the lines of FRI Branch Reports or Bulletins)

(1) Key to Prosperity. Science and Technology. Report of the Ministerial Working Party (1986) Sir David Beattie, Chairman.

will be sent only to members of the co-operative. If the research is being **completely** financed by the user this may be reasonable, but if not then it should be available to the tax payer as of right. What has happened to 'freedom of information'?

Another interesting example is the sale of the video on Timberbelts. It has been made to promote this research yet is being sold for \$250. One wonders if the people involved really want to communicate.

More serious to the reputation of scientists, the FRI and to the nation is a tendency, partly caused by the hunt for funds, to produce less research which has been fully scrutinized prior to publication. Two examples of this will suffice. In one co-operative it has been stated the emphasis will be on 'inside' reports available only to members of the co-operative and less emphasis will be placed on communicating in scientific publications than in the past. This could lead to producing broad general publications that have been boiled down so much that a reviewer cannot be sure if it is soundly based. Some researchers may also see this as a way of keeping some of the information to themselves or their clients. This approach however could lead to a reduction in their international reputation.

A second example is the development of models as a method of communicating results. These are now being promoted and sold in such ways that the buyer or the scien-

tific community cannot scrutinize them. A review mechanism, which includes people from outside the organization, is necessary to ensure that their validity, strengths and weaknesses can be evaluated and documented.

Finally there is the danger that staff appointed to do research for the benefit of the country will be diverted to essentially consulting work. In the search for revenue it is important to keep in mind the objectives of the organizations and not allow consultancy to become a commonplace activity. There are many forestry consultants in this country and so consultancy, either within New Zealand or overseas, should only be entered into by research people when there is no other expertise available.

The dangers in applying the user-pay principle to research are acute and the comments and recommendations in the Beattie report (1) should be heeded by Government. They have stated that "a basically sound concept has been introduced in a manner which is having significantly counter-productive consequences". If Government is also to heed this Working Party's recommendation to double the research effort and at the same time wishes to cut its input, then these problems will multiply.

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Forest Service restructuring — the effect on people

The division of the Forest Service into three separate organizations, namely the Forestry Corporation, Department of Conservation and Ministry of Forests, has created considerable discussion as to the merits or otherwise of the changes that have been made.

However the separation has been made and regardless of which future political party is elected into office it is unlikely that the newly formed organizational structures which have been set in place will be dramatically altered.

Ultimate success of any organization is dependent on the people in it and it is evident that staff from the Forest Service who have secured positions in the new organizations will do their best to ensure the success of the new ventures.

The nature of restructuring is such, however, that many Forest Service staff will eventually find themselves without a position in one of the three new organizations. The current estimate is that approximately 1100 people (30% of existing Forest Service staff) will be in this situation. These people at the present time fill positions over the whole range of the forest management spectrum and are spread throughout the country, located on forest stations, and at district, conservancy and head offices.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the Government changes to the Forest Service will be to staff who are located on forest stations. The newly formed Forestry Corporation has indicated that the staffing numbers on the majority of forest stations will be considerably reduced in favour of a more