

What sort of organisation do we wish to be?

The New Zealand Institute of Forestry is a great organisation. It has been punching above its weight recently in providing submissions to government and in contributing to policy related to forestry. These are among services to the community that we provide as experts, and in that respect, the last few years have been a golden age for the Institute. When suggesting that people join, I'm sometimes asked, "What can it do for me?" With apologies to John Kennedy, I'm tempted to suggest people "ask not what the Institute can do for us, but what we, as an Institute can do for humanity".

Some changes are in the wind. In 2006, Council agreed to form a committee to undertake a wide-ranging membership review. As part of this process, in October 2006 a questionnaire seeking members' opinions on the structure of the NZIF and "services provided to members" circulated. 17 percent of Institute members responded to the survey. A report from the review committee of survey results has been presented to local sections and made available on the NZIF web, and from this process the review committee has prepared some recommendations intended to make the NZIF more professional.

The results of the recommendations may impact on the future structure and role of the NZ Institute of Forestry, and it is important that members discuss the inferences that are being drawn from it.

There is a proposal to make providing "services to members" the number one objective in our constitution. This would become our prime reason for being. The NZIF excels at "promoting forestry". "Services to members", on the other hand, involve internal, introspective things, and so long as we did not employ a large staff, we would be providing services to each other. Much of the work done by the Institute is voluntary. Is it appropriate that as members of the NZIF we should be largely concerned with providing services to each other? Is that what we want the Institute to be? Surely there's more to Institute membership than, "what's in it for me?"

Another proposal is to change the membership structure to promote registration. There would be one "registered forestry professional" category, and this category of membership would be seen as a higher standing than the current "Full" membership. It has even been mooted by a couple of people that the "Full member" category might disappear entirely. If you didn't want to be registered, you would be relegated to a non-voting "Associate" standing. In my view, motivation for registration should be external to the organisation; if employers or clients demanded it, or if you could use it to market yourself, then registration would have value. Motivating members to be registered by denying non-registered members voting rights is unduly prescriptive. I'd seek registration in order to retain voting rights, but I am concerned that the NZIF may lose many members and become less representative as a result of this change.

Employing a fulltime executive officer is a further option being floated under the banner of "professionalism". This goes in the same package as "services to members", in that you would presumably pay more to be a member, but the fulltime executive would allow the Institute to provide more services. It's relevant to ask what extra services we should expect from a fulltime executive. It's also relevant to ask whether members' voluntary contributions to the NZIF might diminish with rising expectations of services from a paid executive.

Then there is the option of reverting to the "New Zealand Institute of Foresters". This sounds more like a professional organisation of foresters than "New Zealand Institute of Forestry" and fits well with an entity that demands members undergo an examination and partake in continuing professional development in order to vote. However, in 1988 we changed from "Foresters" to "Forestry", with surveyed members voting 2:1 in favour of the change. The reason given was that many members were not foresters. Is this still true? We should check before alienating non-foresters among us.

At the heart of the debate are questions about what kind of organisation the NZIF should be and what roles it should strive to play. There are many dimensions to the issue, but surely one of the most important is whether the NZIF exists to serve members or whether it has a perhaps more crucial, wider role to play in the community. My membership and contributions to the Institute are motivated primarily by my perception of the Institute's wider roles and by the fellowship it fosters among people involved in the forestry sector. I favour changes that might make it better. For instance, I would like to see it engage with professionals in the Department of Conservation to a greater degree, because ensuring that our management of 6.3 M ha. of native forest is sustainable has never been more urgent. It would also be good for it to take a more proactive approach to climate change by catalyzing carbon trading. Then there's the impact of our currently high exchange rate on exports of forest products. For me, questions of internal organisation are relevant only to the extent that they enable us to improve our performance in these wider arenas.

None of the new proposals are set in stone. They are, however, planted in wet concrete that will dry progressively over the next few months. If you have opinions on these or other proposals arising from the survey, then join the discussion.

Euan Mason, Editor

Erratum note

The formulae in Richard Woollon's article in the February 2007 issue of the NZ Journal of Forestry were incorrectly transcribed during layout.

We apologise for this error. Readers are referred to the electronic version of the article available on-line at: <http://www.nzjf.org> for a corrected version.