

Guest editorial

The Australian forest industry: challenges and opportunities

It gives me much pleasure to be invited by the Editorial Board to contribute *Australian Forestry's* second editorial. As the new Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Forest Industries (NAFI), I would like to offer a few insights into what I consider are the major challenges facing our industry. In doing so, I am mindful of my recent appointment (some three months) to the position, and the fact that I have had little experience in forestry in my previous career. However, being an outsider perhaps allows me to indulge in (and provoke?) comment which I hope will inspire debate, and no doubt criticism.

I am fortunate to have attended the recent Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) Conference in Mt Gambier; I came away much better informed about many of the issues the industry is dealing with at this time. My main impression was of a very professional and dedicated group of men and women who are leading the world in forestry research and management.

I was particularly impressed by the many enthusiastic students I met who are undertaking forestry studies. Like many industries, ours is facing a significant skills shortage in the future. Our ability to attract talented and committed people to the industry is a major challenge. When I asked these students why they had chosen a career in forestry, each replied that they knew someone connected with the industry, usually a family member. This caught me by surprise, particularly when I recalled the situation when I left high school in Sydney in the mid 1970s. I vividly remember students from my year who were off to The Australian National University (ANU) to undertake a forestry degree, without any familial connection. I wonder how many city kids do that today?

I believe that the forestry industry has been unfairly portrayed in the media for many years in a negative manner. Is it little wonder that we are not seen by many as an industry offering attractive employment opportunities? I hope that in the coming years NAFI and the IFA can work closely together to communicate the strength and vitality of our industry to the community. Our long-term prospects and growth as an industry, profession and academic pathway require this collaboration for us to succeed.

The excellent and world-class science which underpins our industry is to be applauded. Indeed, the future of the companies I represent will continue to rely heavily on research and development, and technological innovation, to remain globally competitive. However, it is not just in the market place where this is important. As I have spent the last eight years in the highest levels of government, I am only too aware of the significance of science and innovation as an influence on the policy and decision-making processes of government. While the excellent output of the Forest and Wood Products Research and Development Corporation (FWPRDC) assists this process, I am less aware of the role and influence that the IFA has, or could have, in this area.

As I have noted above, those who would attack our industry, particularly where their claims have no sound scientific basis, are mostly not challenged by those with the professional knowledge, credibility and expertise to do so. While industry must shoulder some of this responsibility, my view is that the forestry profession should also adopt a more proactive approach in engaging in public debate. Journalists and media commentators have told me of the difficulties they face in getting professional foresters and forestry researchers to present factual information to better inform the community about forestry issues. While I accept that those within the sector may hold diverse views on particular issues, I do not believe that this can be used as a valid excuse to remain silent.

My experience has been that when professionals and scientists in Australia have been willing to engage in debate on controversial issues, and their arguments have been based on sound scientific research, the community is better informed and more willing to weigh up competing arguments. The recent debates on stem cell research and genetically modified foods are two examples.

It is a proper and legitimate role for a professional organisation to engage in and influence public debate and policy-making. Professional groups representing doctors, lawyers and engineers, to name a few, have demonstrated their ability in this role. I hope that the membership of the IFA will also seriously consider the responsibility it has as a profession to be heard as another voice of the industry.

We together face many other issues and challenges. A few which come to mind are: what role can the IFA and NAFI play in influencing the outcomes of the National Water Initiative to ensure that policy decisions at a State and Federal level are influenced by excellent research and forest management practices? In the light of the increase in the number of forestry courses offered at universities, what role can the IFA take to ensure that the courses are of appropriate professional standards? Do our nation's current efforts in research and development in forestry reflect effective collaboration, both domestically and internationally, to achieve the best strategic outcomes for our industry? During my term as CEO of NAFI, I hope to engage with all stakeholders — but particularly with members of the IFA — to explore these issues. I look forward to working with you to address the challenges which lie ahead.

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