

Guest editorial

Social responsibility for the New South Wales forests

The history of forestry in New South Wales reflects a prolonged struggle by the State to maintain wood supply from native forests while building up a more productive and efficient plantation softwood resource. This editorial examines, within this framework, the policies and practices which have underpinned the management of the native forests. It shows how the financial priority accorded the softwood program has had some detrimental effects on the native forests. Now that the plantations have taken over the primary wood supply role, society should accept a responsibility to restore the productivity, health and vitality of the native forests. In so doing, it is appropriate to establish, preferably through a public inquiry, social expectations of the forests, and how those expectations might be met.

A brief account of forest policies and practices

During the 1800s and early 1900s, exploitive harvesting of the native forests removed only the more desirable species and highest quality boles. This, together with recurrent fires, degraded much of the forest. The *NSW Forestry Act of 1916* created a modern forest service and, by World War II, good progress was made in bringing order to a rather chaotic scene.

The post-war years saw the emergence of scientific and sustainable management. Professionally-trained foresters were appointed in larger numbers, fire protection systems were imposed, forest inventories implemented, growth and yield studies undertaken, and formal management plans prepared. Group selection was adopted as the main silvicultural system. This was designed to eke out sawlog supply from a limited resource by retaining, at each harvest, all possible trees likely to make sawlogs at future harvests. It is also a system which ensured that structural and biological diversity was maintained throughout the forest.

Post-harvest treatment was an essential and integral part of the selection system. This involved ringbarking or felling of trees with no commercial value and, where necessary, establishing regeneration by creating seedbeds, and by direct seeding or planting. At the peak of activity, improvement fellings were being applied to around 10 000 ha y^{-1} and regeneration treatments to 2000 ha, and 1000 ha were being planted.

Despite these practices, the forests brought under management could not service the demand for wood as the Australian economy expanded rapidly after World War II. During the late 1950s the Forestry Commission began to warn the Government of an impending resource shortage. Concerns about the inadequacy of the public forests were also mirrored by concerns about the decline in supply from the private forests.

Against this background, it is perhaps surprising that the wood volume harvested from the public forests did not decline appreciably during the next 30 y. This can be attributed, in part,

to the industry's acceptance of sawlogs of lower quality, and technological developments in harvesting and sawmilling. However, the main reason lies in the extension of harvesting to previously inaccessible forests.

Access to more powerful harvesting machinery after World War II permitted logging within the often steep and rough terrain of the mountain forests. This required a major investment by a forest service with limited financial resources. New road construction of all classes was around 700 km y^{-1} for many years, taking up in 1963/64, for example, 27% of all Forestry Commission expenditure.

In the event, access to the mountain forests did not fully resolve the wood supply problem. By the late 1960s, supply–demand projections were highlighting a critical shortage of sawlogs until the yield from the softwood plantations increased towards the end of the century. In response, the Forestry Commission reviewed its policies and practices leading, in 1976, to publication of an 'Indigenous Forest Policy'.

This policy continued to be based on a number of socio-economic imperatives: meeting the demand for wood, minimising the need for wood imports and limiting increases in the price of wood. Moreover, it was accepted that the public interest would be served by according financial priority to the softwood plantations and reducing expenditure on the native forests.

The old-growth mountain forests were now accorded the primary role in hardwood production, and these were heavily logged. At the same time, management of the coastal forests was designed to build up log supply for the future, and to maintain structural and biological diversity. And importantly, and perhaps most critically, essential post-harvest treatments were substantially reduced in order to fund the softwood program.

The Indigenous Forest Policy continued to underpin forest management through the 1980s. By the early 1990s, however, the premise that future demand for hardwood could be met through low-input management of the coastal forests was under challenge. There was a growing appreciation of the value-adding potential of hardwood, and a continuing strong demand for hardwood to service domestic and export markets.

In response, the Forestry Commission introduced silvicultural practices with a greater focus on stand regeneration. But after some 20 y of fairly benign silviculture within the coastal forests, there was opposition to these practices on ecological and other environmental grounds. In 1996 a review committee challenged the sustainability of all forest values under these practices, and harvesting restrictions were imposed. It again became difficult to guarantee effective regeneration within a wide range of forest types and under diverse stand conditions.

Social conflict over the role and management of the native forests had escalated during the 1980s. Rainforest was withdrawn from wood production in 1982 and, in 1991, a moratorium was placed on logging the most sensitive old-growth forests until justified by environmental impact assessment. Subsequently, the Regional Forest Agreement process transferred a substantial part of the wood production resource to national parks.

Current harvesting within State forest is based on selection practices which have wood production and wildlife conservation as co-equal objectives. However, the sustainability of the harvest and the adequacy of post-harvest treatment remain matters of concern.

Looking to the future: accepting social responsibility for the state of the forests

There can be no doubt that, in economic terms, all Australian governments, both State and Commonwealth, benefited greatly from policies designed to draw heavily on the native forests while building up a softwood resource. The basic objectives have been realised — there has been a relatively seamless transition from a hardwood to a softwood-dominant forest economy. Moreover, these policies helped create the circumstances within which expansion of the national park network would have only limited social and economic impact.

These favourable results were not, of course, without environmental cost. Seeds of social conflict were sown through the logging of rainforest and old-growth mountain forests, harvesting at unsustainable levels, and constraints imposed on regeneration and other post-harvest treatments. Nevertheless, and despite the wisdom of hindsight, it is difficult to envisage what else successive governments might have done to achieve supply and price objectives at a time of rapidly expanding demand, and before the emergence of a broadly-based environmental ethic.

While many foresters were concerned at the environmental implications of these policies, they believed there would be ample opportunity to restore the productivity of the native forests as the softwood program entered its mature phase and generated positive

financial flows. However, there has been no substantial investment in native forest restoration.

It is time to appreciate there is much more to forest conservation than relocating State forest–national park boundaries. There are many fine State forests in New South Wales, but embedded within them are areas which have been degraded through past policies and practices. The Government must accept there is no free lunch! It has a responsibility to restore the productivity, health and vitality of these forests, and, indeed, there is a commitment to do so under the ‘ecologically sustainable forest management’ provisions of the Regional Forest Agreement.

Forest restoration is required not only in current State forests but also in harvested forest which has been transferred to national park. The case for forest restoration would be given extra force were it to take account of concerns about the extent of tree decline and dieback within the forests, and the contribution that well-stocked and dynamic forests can make to sequestration of atmospheric carbon.

The State forests of New South Wales are a valuable resource integrating wood production and biological conservation. This requires scientific and sustainable management of the highest order — including programs to restore the forests in an ecologically appropriate way. The relegation of the forests to a trading arm of the Department of Primary Industries has done little to enhance public confidence in the State’s stewardship of its forests.

It is time to recognise that the New South Wales forests are too important a resource to be left to the vagaries of political decisions of an immediate nature. It will be in the public interest to establish more clearly what society expects of its forests, and how these expectations might be met. This might best be done through a broadly-based public inquiry — perhaps a Parliamentary inquiry — drawing on evidence from professional foresters, government agencies, the forest industries, conservation groups and the public at large.

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