



Forests crucial for buying time to meet carbon obligations

The Climate Change Commission has affirmed the crucial role to be played by new tree planting in meeting NZ's carbon emission goals. The Commission's Chair, Rod Car anticipates planting 380,000 new hectares of exotic plantations to support massive reductions of emissions from industry, agriculture, and transport.

The forest industry has never claimed that it will do the job by itself.

Decarbonisation must be the thrust of meeting our climate change obligations, but this will not be easy, and it will take a good deal of time. Carbon sequestration through large scale tree planting of exotics is above all else, a tool for buying time.

Indigenous trees hold a deep emotional value for New Zealanders. However, it takes 100 years or more, before an indigenous tree could outperform and replace a radiata pine in carbon lock-up capacity.

All the same, farming versus forestry is a polarising topic and emotions are fed by misinformation and too-quickly derived conclusions. The current mood seems to be in favour of putting the brakes on forestry. The '50 shades of Green' campaign has a long reach.

In mid-January, the Wairoa District Council lifted the differential on forest land rates to 4.0. This compares with 0.7 on other rural land and doubles the forest rate bill since 2017.

Central government too appears to have abandoned a previous commitment to use trees to soak up atmospheric carbon, such as through the 'Billion Tree Programme'.

The Environment Minister, David Parker has said Labour would limit forest planting on areas of more than 50 hectares which is classified as arable.

The Forest Owners Association President, Phil Taylor says "a quarter of the forest estate is already on these land classes. If foresters were only allowed to plant the harder non-arable class 6 and 7 land, then the overall forest planting rate will fall".

In which case, taxpayers are likely to have to pay billions of dollars for imported carbon credits. Is this a fair price for protecting farming?

Planting restrictions would be a hit on iwi and farmers who in a market led economy have a choice to plant trees for sound economic as well as environmental reasons.

Forest products are a seven-billion-dollar industry and hugely important

for many rural communities and the wider economy. It is difficult to see how restrictions on plantation forestry will not be both an economic and an environmental step backwards.

Phil Taylor takes this further "I can't see what the panic is about. The total plantation estate is 74,000 hectares smaller than it was in 2003. It's only occupying seven percent of the arable land area. It's hardly a takeover."

Phil is not referring to carbon forests where the owner has no intention to harvest the trees. "There is a place for these carbon forests. It's on the most highly erodible land which would be unprofitable and irresponsible to harvest."

Notwithstanding an ambiguous political support for tree plantations, we still must work out how we are going to deal with agricultural emissions which make up 48 percent of New Zealand's total greenhouse emissions.

Without the full range of forest planting options, there is no way that we are going to meet our targets without tough action to reduce emissions further down the track.

In May 2020 PricewaterhouseCoopers pulled together some solid qualitative analysis on the economic facts around farming and forestry. They concluded

that "Ideally any discussions should avoid unnecessary competition between two industries that are the backbone of the NZ economy. Industries that can and should co-exist in harmony on both a national and individual property scale".

The PwC analysis shows "that when utilised in a manner of co-existence the combined power of farming and forestry is significantly greater than the parts".

We agree and are simply asking for forestry to be allowed to play on a level field.

Keith Dolman
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