

FORESTRY & LAND USE

FORESTRY VS FARMING: WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

New Zealand ships a lot of goods around the globe - US\$37.4 billion worth in 2020. That roughly translates to \$7,500 for each of us. It is all a little remarkable considering how far we are from the rest of the world.

A good thing though, as New Zealand has got to make money.

We have an open economy which works on free market principles. Success depends on doing the right things and doing them well. While people seem to accept that we are good at forestry, not everyone thinks forestry is good or at least not good enough on land used for sheep and beef.

Federated Farmers are taking this further in calling for government to restrict forest planting. They are seeking new policy/regulation to constrain the right of farmers to plant trees on their land on all land classes.

Depending on what version of history one reads, you may or may not identify with the sentiment behind the call to act now to stop loss of pastoral farming land to forestry (say if you buy the idea of meat and wool's stellar role in nation-building).

But there is too a growing voice for reverting farmland to indigenous forest, in this case the drivers are ostensibly environmental and wellness.

But what is the science saying?

- Last year's PricewaterhouseCoopers' Report, commissioned by MPI, found that, on average, the value-add for forestry, per hectare, was many times higher than it was from the average hill country property.
- The just released Ministry for the Environment's latest environmental report scores exotic forestry highly for its low impact on soils. For instance, it seems that exotic forests are the land use least affected by low macroporosity, which is an indication of poor drainage.
- Likewise, MfE found that most (88%) of exotic forest soils have low phosphate. This element has downstream environmental impacts, such as lowering water oxygen levels and promoting toxic algal growth. Some 61% of dairy and cropping properties were above the target range.

- The Climate Change Commission calculates there is a need for another 380,000 hectares of plantation forests within 15 years for New Zealand to reach its greenhouse gas reduction targets. This represents about 4 percent of the existing sheep and beef estate.

These reports, which were not commissioned by the forest industry, provide a clear indication that trees, whether exotic or indigenous, are good for soil, water health and the battle to combat climate change.

A point of difference here is that plantation forestry is a productive land use while indigenous forest is not, at least under present policies and within the average Joe or Jane's lifetime.

It should be a commercial decision for landowners to plant trees based on their assessment of the productivity of that land and their responsibilities to environmental stewardship. They should be backed not blocked if they want to improve farm profitability and the environment by planting trees.

Forestry, regardless of the scale, is a valid productive use choice for landowners.

While a minion in terms of global greenhouse gas emissions, (contributing less than 0.5%), New Zealanders have got used to spending and now have the 12th highest per capita level of emissions, apparently. The world out there knows that and are not slow to apply leverage.

If we fail to get that modest area in trees because of planting restrictions, then the government may have to reduce livestock numbers instead. And I do not think Federated Farmers would want that.

In fact, Federated Farmers should welcome more forestry for many reasons. Not only does it provide an alternative income for farmers, and de-risk livestock from further climate regulations, but it holds a considerable amount of the erodible landscape from damaging farming downstream.

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