

Transforming the productive landscape

Encouraging the commercial use of totara as a viable farm-based option is the goal of the Northland Totara Working Group (NTWG), as Michael Smith reports in this second part of a two-part story.

THERE is no doubting the enthusiasm and energy that Paul Quinlan, landscape architect and member of the NTWG, brings to the debate about the sustainable management of native tree species – specifically naturally regenerating second-growth stands of farm totara in Northland. But he acknowledges the need to overcome legislative impediments; and public opposition to the cutting down or commercial use of any indigenous trees, following a history of destructive bush and forest clearance in New Zealand.

Quinlan says the Forests Act – whose purpose is to preserve, protect and sustainably manage remnant indigenous forest areas – did not anticipate or provide for the management of regenerating native timber trees within production landscape contexts.

“The act did not envisage application to such a highly modified, spatially scattered, second-growth resource like farm totara. Nevertheless the resource is still subject to the act. It’s like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

“MPI [Ministry for Primary Industries] is well aware of this difficult situation and is considering how it can be adequately addressed. We are in dialogue with them in the field, but there are no easy answers as any significant changes would probably require an amendment to the act.

“Given the potential political fallout/criticism associated with what could be negatively perceived by the public as exploiting native forests again, it is understandable that politicians are wary and unlikely to have much appetite



‘Float’ bed by David Trubridge: acrylic fabric and water-resistant totara. Photo: ©Design Mobil



Coloured-grade totara flooring. Photo: ©Alan Goodhew

to take it on. Nevertheless, we are proceeding with the assumption that, in time, reason will prevail and the legislation will be appropriately amended. In the short term we hope to find a more workable solution – perhaps just within the interpretation and administration of the existing provisions.”

Complexities

Quinlan adds that, in the meantime, harvesting permits can be obtained, but it’s a time-consuming and costly process. “For large tracts of high-value native forest areas it is probably not unreasonable. However, although the regenerating totara resource has significant cumulative scale, it comprises a comparatively lower-value resource with small quantities spread over many properties.”

He points out that Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) plans and permits pertain to individual property titles and mapped ‘forest areas’; and that the economies of scale work against their cost-effective application to the farm totara resource.

“I have recently tested [prepared and submitted] an SFM plan ‘template’ developed by MPI for immature totara forest areas. The plan involves regenerating totara forest within a dairy-farm context covering 11.6 hectares [comprising several patches of forest], and proposes an annual sustainable harvest rate of less than 15 cubic metres.

“It was submitted in September last year and is still being processed. The costs involved with preparing this SFM plan are simply not commensurate with the relative value and volume of

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SFM permit provisions still too complex

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the timber involved. When approved the plan will still need to be registered on the land title and an annual logging plan prepared and approved – i.e. more paperwork – before any harvesting can be undertaken.

“In all, applying the SFM permit or plan provisions of the Forests Act to the farm totara resource is still too complex, too costly and too slow, and is a significant disincentive for landowners.”

For its part the ministry emphasises its flexibility in applying the act to reflect different characteristics of different forests. An MPI spokesperson says its template for farm totara plans/permits has simplified the process, but there remains the need to satisfy the prescriptions of the act, which will always involve a level of complexity.

A need to change public perceptions

The spokesperson adds that MPI is ready “to assist landowners to realise the opportunities presented by the regenerating totara resource, and will work with the NTWG to explore possible options to scale up the farm-grown totara opportunity in Northland within the existing Forests Act framework”.

With respect to totara plantation crops, the spokesperson says they can be registered under the act as planted indigenous forests. “While approval is still required to mill and export indigenous timber sourced from a planted indigenous forest, sustainable harvest controls under the Forests Act do not apply.”

Public sentiment

Hand in hand with the complexities involved in harvesting the resource is the need to change public



Northland farm totara: integrating native forestry into the productive landscape. Photo: ©Paul Quinlan



A thinned and pruned permanent sample plot of totara. Photo: ©Michael Bergin



Paul Quinlan speaking at a Northland Totara Working Group field day. Photo: ©Chris Kennedy

perceptions. Quinlan says, “I believe the legacy of the past exploitation of native forests is a deeply entrenched ‘preservationist’ attitude within the general population – generally against the ‘logging’ of any native forests/trees.”

“However, the pendulum is slowly swinging back to the point where many are becoming more open-minded about the possibility of sustainable management of our native tree species. The planting of native forests is certainly well supported and people generally feel there is a distinction between remnant native forests and regenerating forests.”

He says the NTWG is convinced that an ‘informed’ public would support the harvesting of farm totara as being more ecologically acceptable – provided it has credible sustainability credentials – giving it the edge over other native timbers.

A fellow member of the NTWG, scientist Dr David Bergin, says: “At this stage it is probably difficult to justify establishing totara, or any other native timber, based on a classical economic analysis of the rate of return ... given relatively slow growth rates compared with radiata pine and market issues [no functioning commercial-scale supply chain and competition from cheaper imported timbers].”

“But there is a need to integrate native forestry into our productive landscapes for a wide range of environmental, social, cultural and economic reasons. We need to factor in non-timber benefits in economic modelling for planting and managing our native timber species. Future generations will then have the ability to manage our natives for timber production, while at the same time enhancing water quality, indigenous biodiversity and wider landscape values.”