

Report No. 00.48

2 February 2000

File: O/5/12/4, F/5/8/14

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Report to the Utility Services Committee
from David Benham, Divisional Manager, Utility Services
and Barry Leonard, Plantation Forestry Manager

Future Land Use and Management in the Pakuratahi Catchment

1. Purpose

This paper is in response to Report No. 00.33 to the Landcare Committee at its 3 February meeting. The report is also part of this Utility Services Committee agenda.

2. Background

The Utility Services Division was aware of the need to manage the interface between the logging activities in the vicinity of the incline walkway and the public who used the facility. As part of this process, Clive Anstey was engaged to review the operation and recommend a logging strategy that recognised the compelling view. This report entitled *Rimutaka Incline Recreation Area Logging Impact Report* was released for public comment in December 1997.

As operations proceeded, it was necessary to modify the agreed strategy in the report, particularly in regard to some small groups of trees that were to be left to maintain the “atmosphere” on the walkway and to help shield the logging activities behind them. It was quickly realised that many of these trees were shallow rooted and not “wind firm”. They also posed a potential hazard for users of the walkway. For these reasons they were removed.

During the harvesting of the lower section of the walkway the logging crews and the Division received only few complaints from the public. A full explanation was given to complaints and in some cases a conducted tour arranged. The complainants generally accepted the need for the changes when they better understood the situation.

In order to minimise the visual effect, the river flats were windrowed before replanting and Douglas Fir planted in preference to Radiata so rotations would be longer and selective logging an option.

Every effort was made to minimise damage to the old railway formation and on completion of logging the formation was reinstated and water tables upgraded.

3. Issues Raised in Councillor McQueen's Report

3.1 Roading Costs

The majority of the Council's forests are in their first rotation and incur roading costs at harvest time. Although this investment is a charge against the first rotation, the road formations remain for upgrading and use for future harvests and recreational use, i.e., Tunnel Gully now links directly to the walkway. This is not peculiar to this Council but applies to all forestry operations. While the incline was used to plant and maintain the forests, it would not have been suitable for fully laden logging trucks and either an alternative route would have been required or transshipment carried out to consolidate loads.

In our view the damage to the walkway has been minor and has been repaired.

3.2 Landscape

There are two significant landscape issues arising from logging operation. The first is the removal of the trees and the second the "slash" that remains after harvesting. In the case of the walkway, between 30 percent and 50 percent of the plantation trees would be visible from some part of the walkway. To leave this area of forest would deprive Council of a significant sum of revenue and lead to an ever increasing fire risk as trees died of natural causes.

The best "advice" from a soil quality perspective is to allow slash to rot in the field and to plant the new crop directly through. Where the terrain is steep and hauler harvesting is necessary, most of the slash is concentrated around the hauler sites and has to be disposed of for safety reasons. As stated above, the slash on the river flats was windrowed prior to planting for aesthetic reasons.

3.3 Riparian Strips

Riparian strips are bands of permanent vegetation adjacent to waterways, which act as filters for surface flows of water and to a lesser extent provide shade for the waterway. Current forestry practice is to allow regeneration in such areas other than on steep slopes where the soil plan requires replanting within 18 months. This planting may be either native or exotic but would not be included in any future harvest.

In several areas of the Pakuratahi River pines had been planted up to the river edge. At 30+ years of age these trees were being undermined and falling into the river. For

this reason it was necessary to fell them. These areas were replanted in pine to secure the banks but these will be topped at about two metres and will not be harvested as part of the next rotation.

While every effort is made to protect riparian strips and other pockets of native vegetation, there is limited flexibility when moving a two to three tonne log across the landscape.

3.4 **Recreation**

All contractors working in the forest have been made aware that the forest is bisected by a recreational walkway and that there is a high probability of people leaving the walkway to investigate the logging activity. To date, relations between the logging crews and the public have been excellent and this is expected to continue into the future. Although during the construction of the new upper access road some contractors' vehicles did use the walkway for access, now the new road has been completed the only use of the walkway will be short sections used by logging trucks under controlled conditions. Over these sections heritage items will be protected and the walkway reinstated after use.

4. **Current Situation**

Council has a signed contract with Rayonier NZ Ltd. to complete the harvest of the Pakuratahi East Forest. Among the conditions of this contract are provisions for minimising the use of the walkway, leaving selected groups of trees for aesthetic reasons, and the need to ensure that the public is not unduly inconvenienced.

Since the contract was signed it has been agreed to delete Stand 14/01 to allow further growth before harvest. This volume will be replaced within the contract with further trees from Hukinga. It has also been agreed that over this summer harvesting adjacent to the walkway will concentrate on the area to the east of the walkway from Back Road to Pig Gully Road, with the western side to be completed next summer. At this stage the harvest of summit area has not been programmed. Any significant reduction in the volume to be harvested would require discussions with Rayonier NZ Ltd on the effects. It would not be possible to substitute alternative stands, as there are none of sufficient age.

5. **Overall Environmental Impact of Logging**

Recently Dr Bradbury presented to Council a series of headline indicators that are being developed in Britain to measure progress with sustainable communities. These indicators arose from a number of themes. An attempt is made here to relate activity to those indicators.

- *Maintaining high and stable levels of economic growth and employment*

At its current levels Councils log harvest programme provides almost full time employment for the equivalent of 42 people. The output of the forest in the main goes to Centerport or local mills within the Region. Our present output of around 60,000t would represent about twice the annual throughput of the local mill at Featherston, which has a staff of around 20.

➤ *Social progress which recognises the need of everyone*

Training of logging staff is based on a number of proficiency modules. A new trainee is given on the job training and proficiency is externally assessed. Normally these modules would be completed no more than two at a time with the trainee moving into more technical tasks as their skill levels improve. Given the physical nature of the work, there is continual movement as trained staff move between employers and older staff move out of the field.

➤ *Effective protection of the environment*

Logging activities are “regulated” by a Code of Practice, The Forest Accord, resource management/regional/district planning requirements and any other monitoring that the owner may impose. In the case of Council forests, in addition to the matters set out above, a soil scientist is contracted to make three weekly inspections and to provide written reports. To date all required resource consents have been sought and issued and monitoring inspections have confirmed compliance with consents.

➤ *Prudent use of Natural Resource*

Plantation Forestry utilises land of little other commercial value to provide ongoing income, while maintaining the natural resource through replacement of nutrients either externally by the application of fertiliser or naturally by allowing cast needles and logging slash to decompose where the trees are felled. The ongoing production of timber and timber products encourages the use of renewable assets.

➤ *Improving Quality of Life*

Although the felling of forestry stands is an “unattractive” process, the growing cycle of the trees provides both a visually pleasing vista and opportunities for recreation.

6. **Red Line Area**

All operations within the “red line recreational corridor”, as set out in the Anstey report, are discussed in depth with Landcare staff before logging commences.

7. **Conclusion**

The issue here we suspect is not unusual. There is inevitably conflict between environmental care and the economic use of land. The Resource Management Act 1991 requires any adverse effects on the environment to be avoided, remedied or mitigated. To do so requires judgement calls to be made.

Any forestry operation will result in a visually unattractive environment. The questions to be asked are:

- How long will the environment be “visually unattractive”?
- What steps are taken to reduce the visual damage?
- Can anyone think of a better way?
- Do we want to carry on with plantation forestry (i.e., are we willing to accept the inevitable damage)?
- What is the balance between economic and social benefits, and environmental protection in this area?

8. **Recommendation**

That the report be received and the information noted.

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