

PUBLIC INPUT INTO HARVESTING - WHANGAPOUA FOREST

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INTRODUCTION

Whangapoua Forest straddles the Coromandel Peninsula between the Coromandel and Whangapoua Harbours, with Mercury Bay to the immediate south of the forest.

The gross area of the forest is 10,556 ha.

The forest occupies generally moderately steep to steep terrain on both sides of the Coromandel Range with the topography often being irregular and broken by numerous streams. The slopes are covered by an unstable rock mantle with the brown granular clay soils derived from this altered rock being porous and easily saturated, with an associated decrease in cohesion and the formation of the slickenside clay surfaces. Mass movement erosion during major storm events has occurred in the past.

The climate of the area is characterised by frequent high intensity but highly localised storms, often of tropical origin. Associated local flooding of the alluvial farmland is common. In this area, the return period for a rainfall event of 133mm in 24 hours is estimated to be only two years. The long term records indicate an average annual rainfall of approximately 1700mm, with a distinct May to September "wet season", although significant rainfall events can occur during summer months.

The forest was established by the NZ Forest Service with the first plantings occurring in 1949. However it wasn't until 1963 that any substantial plantings took place, with establishment of the first rotation completed

in 1985. Approximately 99% of the stocking is in *Pinus radiata*.

When the Forest Service was dis-established in March 1987, NZ Timberlands Limited (a subsidiary of the NZ Forestry Corporation Ltd) took control of the forest plantation area with the remaining, substantial native forest areas of Whangapoua Forest being transferred to the Department of Conservation. The management of the plantation area of Whangapoua Forest remained with NZ Timberlands Ltd until October 1990.

CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP / COMMENCEMENT OF INITIAL PLANNING

In the late 1990's during the government's programme of selling the State Forest Assets, Ernslaw One Limited was successful in securing the management and cutting rights to Whangapoua Forest.

As some of the earlier established stands within the forest had reached maturity, some considerable preparation was necessary for the eventual harvesting of these sites. (Some preliminary planning and investigation of harvesting in Whangapoua Forest had been undertaken by NZ Timberlands LTD). Once Ernslaw One Limited had become established at Whangapoua the objectives had to be determined and the preliminary planning undertaken for the forthcoming harvesting of the forest, utilising as a basis for this work, some of the information contained in harvesting reports and plans initially commissioned by NZ Timberlands Ltd.

Early investigation and communication soon determined that there were a number of issues which were of concern to the local communities or groups, and that we were going to have to give these serious consideration if we were to progress our harvesting programmes with minimal disruption or delays. These issues were many and varied and included the following:

1. There was no history of relatively large scale exotic forest harvesting in this area of the peninsula. People were concerned about what was going to occur.
2. The arrival of a new company into the area - there were suspicions of the company's intentions. Foreign ownership of the company appeared to be a cause for anxiety amongst many local people.
3. There was concern that the company would harvest and not replant.
4. Because of the close proximity to three major harbours and with forest catchment areas generally draining directly into these harbours, there was concern that any harvesting activities would have major impacts within these marine areas. Whangapoua Harbour is a noted habitat for estuarine birds and shellfish, sizeable mussel farms are located in Coromandel Harbour, significant tourism ventures operate within the Mercury Bay area, and many recreational activities are pursued in each of the three harbours.
5. Concern was expressed that an increase in the frequency of floods or increased silt deposition could impact on the vegetation and wildlife on the numerous freshwater wetlands which exist on the coastal flats below the forest.
6. Concern about the possible impacts on farmland which exists on alluvial flats downstream of the forest and which are susceptible to flooding and silt deposition if a high intensity rainfall event was to occur. During a major storm event in 1971 considerable flood damage was sustained by several dairy farms downstream of the forest. This occurred following some large scale land clearing operations by the Forest Service and much of the resulting farm damage was attributed to these operations. This past event was mentioned regularly by local people.
7. Concern about the impact on water supplies. Water is drawn off watercourses for dairy farms and horticultural use. This is important to dairy farmers on the coastal plains below the forest. The Matarangi Beach Estates, a large coastal housing development also draws water from a major stream within the forest.
8. Concern that the impact of harvesting may have some negative effects on the growing tourist industry in the area. The main issues relating to this concern were logging traffic on public roads and landscape values.
9. A major concern with many local people was the introduction of heavy logging traffic on the generally substandard roads in the vicinity of the forest, and with this traffic possibly travelling through local settlements and towns.
10. Concern that employment of local people would be minimal with most of the labour being introduced from outside the region.

What also had to be taken into account is that this part of the Coromandel is a very

environmentally sensitive area with many local individuals and groups taking an active interest in a number of environmental issues. Although to date, gold prospecting or mining had been the principal target of these individuals/groups. Thus it was obvious in the very beginning, that we as a forestry company, intending to carry out relatively large roading and harvesting programmes, were going to have to take the time to do our job well and to earn the confidence of the local people.

Over the following few months, regular contact continued with individuals and groups. This included meeting with the Whangapoua Forest Action Group which had been formed as a result of the ill feeling and concerns within the local communities, regarding the sale of the forest to foreign owners. The first meetings with this group could have been termed as confrontational. Initial contact with other established Coromandel environmental groups occurred at a meeting arranged by a Department of Conservation liaison group, which provided opportunity for these groups to express their concerns and for new forest companies on the Coromandel Peninsula to present their positions.

At the same time considerable planning and investigation was carried out, attempting to address the issues that we had been made aware of and to ascertain the most appropriate forest management systems and techniques that were necessary to sustain long term productivity and maintain stability of the land.

PUBLIC MEETING

To progress the public consultation process it was decided that a public meeting should be held to inform the public and interested groups of our intentions and plans for harvesting Whangapoua Forest, and to provide the opportunity for the public to

express their concerns, comments or suggestions.

Invitations were sent to over thirty interested or affected groups (which included at least six local "environmental" groups) and advertisements were placed in the local newspapers.

On the evening of the 23rd July 1991, the meeting was held in the Whangapoua Community Hall with an estimated attendance of up to 200 people. The size of the meeting was an indication of the strong local interest, considering the rural setting of the venue and the very cold and wet, wintry night. The meeting was chaired by the Thames-Coromandel District Council mayor.

The first part of the evening involved a presentation by company personnel on the long term management proposals for the forest, with major emphasis on options for transport routes and forest harvest planning. The presentations generally included reasonable detail and considerable explanation so that the audience were given the opportunity to be as well informed as possible. Slides, overhead projections, and computer analysis were used to assist the presentations.

The prime objective, apart from informing the public, was to convince the community at large that Ernslaw One Limited intended taking a responsible and professional approach to the long term management of Whangapoua Forest. A further objective was to display an open and honest policy and to show that we were readily approachable by anyone who may have questions relating to the forest management.

The latter part of the evening was made available for the audience to ask questions and/or to make comments. Much of the discussion during this stage of the meeting appeared to be generally positive,

nevertheless there were still many questions on a number of issues. These questions were often able to be answered with some assurance and confidence because of the preparatory work which had occurred preceding the meeting.

Final discussion was held on further, ongoing communication, and the decision was made at the meeting to change the name of Whangapoua Forest Action Group to the Whangapoua Forest Residents Group and to broaden its representation to 14 members in total. This resulted in the group eventually comprising of individuals representing the farming community, environmental groups, contractors, tangata whenua, recreational groups, and other interested parties.

This meeting was regarded as a critical event in the public consultative process, as it gave everyone the opportunity to participate in discussing the management of Whangapoua Forest, it presented the chance for the company to gauge the general feeling within the communities, and it provided the occasion for the company to establish its credibility as a responsible land manager.

FURTHER PUBLIC LIAISON / PREPARATION FOR HARVESTING

Following the public meeting further detailed planning and investigation continued and as the forest was subject to a Section 34 notice under the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Amendment Act, this had to be applied for from the Waikato Regional Council for forthcoming summer roading operations.

Continuing liaison with the public took the form of several meetings and field visits involving the Residents Group, meeting with, and keeping informed the three local Community Boards, discussing forest activities on a regular and ongoing basis

with forest neighbours and any other affected individuals, and having frequent dialogue with the Maori community of wahi tapu sites within the forest. In most cases this liaison and communication was initiated by the company and was done principally to keep people informed and to promote a trusting relationship.

The association with the Residents Group during this period became generally quite positive and probably contributed to removing or lessening many of the community concerns that were expressed initially. This association was also solid proof that the company was genuine in its willingness to communicate and inform. Following the public meeting, the first meeting with the Residents Group involved some ten elected members, however after that, subsequent meetings were attended by only five to six members.

In October 1991, the first substantial operational activities commenced, some 11 months after Ernslaw One Limited commenced management of the forest. This involved a programme of roadline harvesting and subsequent road and landing construction during the following summer months.

In November 1991, the first major consent application was submitted. This was for a Land Use Consent under the Transitional arrangement of the Resource Management Act for proposed work in Whangapoua Forest for the two year period April 1992 to March 1994. This application was advertised however no public submissions were received relating to the application.

COMMENCEMENT OF SKYLINE HARVESTING OPERATIONS / MONITORING PROGRAMME

In June 1992, the first major skyline hauler operation began on the forest. The

equipment involved in this operation was all modern and of the latest technology, providing the opportunity for the most appropriate harvesting systems to be utilised on the forest with the potential to cause minimal impact to the environment. This was a reflection of the company's attitude to its commitment to establishing and maintaining operations to the highest standards possible.

Twelve months later, in June 1993, the second major skyline hauler operation commenced on the forest. The specifications and requirements of the second operation were very similar to those for the first hauler gang, which was to confirm a continuing high level of commitment by the company to good operational systems and standards.

Because of the major emphasis on soil and water issues in this area, Ernslaw One Limited, in an effort to determine the effect of forest operations on streams and estuaries in and around Whangapoua Forest, and to provide base line data to establish the current state of these sites, commissioned the National Institute of Water and Atmosphere (NIWA Hamilton) to assist in the implementation of environmental monitoring programmes. The programmes were developed after consultation between staff from the Waikato Regional Council, NIWA, Ernslaw One Limited, and members of the Whangapoua Forest Residents Group.

In September 1992, the programme to monitor the effects of the harvesting of catchments in the forest on stream habitat, water quality and biota was commenced. At the same time on-site assessments began, and these were to provide a brief, independent audit of the current land management practices and their effectiveness in minimising soil damage and loss of sediment from the forest site. Following this in October 1993, NIWA

commenced a monitoring programme to detect effects of forestry activity (if any) on intertidal areas of Whangapoua and Coromandel Harbours, focusing on the intertidal sediments of the harbours and their biological communities.

The reports and results of these monitoring programmes to date have been made available to Waikato Regional Council and the Whangapoua Forest Residents Group.

DISCUSSION

A. **The essential factors which Ernslaw One Limited were compelled to consider to ensure the successful management of Whangapoua Forest:**

1. It was apparent right from the beginning that regular communication and consultation was going to be an extremely important aspect of the management of the forest if we wished to succeed in our objectives and to have minimal disruption to our programmes. It was necessary that this communication was generally initiated by the company and was directed at all levels of people interested in, or affected by activities on the forest. This included regional council, district council, community boards, tangata whenua, forest neighbours, interested community groups, and school parties. It was also acknowledged that this communication was not just a 'one-off' exercise, it was to be an ongoing feature of our overall management of the forest. This entailed often visiting and talking to our neighbours, talking to interested community groups and hosting field visits, regular liaison particularly with the local tangata whenua and keeping them informed of our activities when wahi tapu sites

were encountered, and an established communication with the district and regional councils.

2. It was obvious that the company was going to have to allow whatever time was necessary, to ensure that sound and realistic planning was possible and to give the communities the opportunity to gain some confidence in Ernslaw One Limited. Besides many planning issues, there were a number of roading, harvesting and cartage options which had to be considered and evaluated, including the local community issue of regular, heavy logging traffic possibly using the local, sub standard, unsealed public roads and having to pass through local settlements.

To have commenced any harvesting operations within the first few months of the company's initial purchase of the forest, would have invited considerable criticism from the local communities.

3. It was important to display a responsible and professional attitude to the management of Whangapoua Forest and to initiate sound and innovative planning. Incorporating the best forest management practices available and introducing the latest forest technology when appropriate, was helpful in promoting local community confidence in the company.
4. To create an open and honest relationship with the local communities and to prove that there was no intention to conceal any part of our activities. Controlled access to the forest was made available and groups and individuals were regularly invited to view forest operations.

5. To display long term management policies for the forest which of course included replanting programmes.
6. To construct a new arterial route through Whangapoua Forest which resulted in all logging traffic essentially avoiding the majority of local unsealed roads and local settlements.
7. Apart from some individuals with specific harvesting skills, over 95% of the workforce directly employed on the forest came from the local communities.
8. The determination to attract responsible, skilled and committed contractors to the forest. This was a lengthy process however it was regarded as important to ensure that the eventual workforce was committed and able to perform to high standards.
9. It was essential for close supervision of all operations and activities for at least the first one to two years. Once the workforce was totally familiar with the standards required and could maintain these at all times, the level of supervision was able to be slightly relaxed.
10. The commitment by Ernslaw One Limited to generally follow the harvesting guidelines recommended in a report by the Land Use Impact Section of the Forest Research Centre, in order to minimise any disturbance to stream and estuary ecology.
11. The introduction of a scientific monitoring programme for the streams and harbours by Ernslaw One Limited, exhibited the company's serious

commitment to the long term management of the forest.

B How well has the company done - the public perception.

This is probably best measured by what the company has achieved with Whangapoua Forest since late 1990, considering the wide range of environmental values present in and around the forest, and the predominance of very environmentally aware and active, local communities.

Since the commencement of the first roadline harvesting in October 1991, the planned harvesting programme has continued uninterrupted for the past four years.

The Section 34 notice for this programme of initial roadline work for the 1991/92 summer was approved without any opposition.

The Land Use Consent application for the period April 1992 to March 1994 (during which the main harvesting was to commence) was advertised, however no public submissions were received and it was subsequently approved by the Regional Council.

The company is currently operating within a three year Land Use Consent which commenced in April 1994. Several submissions were received following this application however all of these excluding one were resolved at a pre-hearing meeting. The sole remaining submission (from an individual apparently representing three groups) was resolved at a formal Regional Council hearing. However it was significant that some 13 months elapsed between the lodging of this consent application and its subsequent approval. This created serious concern about the potential for this extended process to upset wood flows,

work continuity, short/medium term planning, etc. If we are to avoid the situation where this sort of time frame becomes the norm rather than the exception, then we must continue to promote our industry in a positive light to both local authorities and the public at large.

The existence of the Whangapoua Forest Residents Group has had obvious impact on the levels of liaison and communication between the company and the communities, however this has been variable. During the initial period, the group which was termed an 'Action Group', displayed some opposition to Ernslaw One Limited, but after some dialogue with the company, the changing of the name to a 'Residents Group', and extending the membership to represent a wider section of the community, the relationship became more positive. This continued for some time which permitted improved communication with the local people and promoted confidence and trust in the company. However, after a period of some two years, the active members had reduced to only three or four, completely changing the make-up of the group, and the general attitude of the group became more negative. This was illustrated by the fact that the group was a major submitter for the second Land Use Consent Application. This eventual make-up of the Residents Group, because of its remaining membership, was representing a much narrower sector of the community.

Nevertheless, over the past five years there has been virtually no public opposition or criticism of the management of Whangapoua Forest by Ernslaw One Limited. Some specific concerns mainly relating to other than soil and water, have occasionally arisen, however these have usually been raised by individuals and have been addressed by the company. These have included such issues as road dust, noise, water supplies.

Much of what Ernslaw One Limited has implemented in Whangapoua Forest over the past five years, is what any good forest management company would have done irrespective of the views or concerns of the local communities. The implementation of good, sensible and practical forest management practices will generally address and satisfy the majority of concerns which people may have, however if the company does not effectively communicate and inform the public of its intentions, then there is the very real potential for lingering concerns and probably criticism.