

Chipping away at private forests

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Woodchipping is the fastest-growing threat to New Zealand's native forests.

Indigenous woodchip exports have grown seven-fold since 1976. Almost all of the increase comes from clearfelling of native forest on private land.

After clearance the land is burnt off for farm development or pine planting — or in many cases, is simply abandoned. The land being cleared is usually marginal for any kind of productive use. Many cleared slopes soon revert to weeds.

A cheque from the woodchip company can give a farmer an overseas trip or a new swimming pool. For others, the temporary income from woodchipping allows a marginal farm to struggle on a bit longer.

For conservationists, the devastation to landscapes and wildlife caused by woodchipping has grown to a scale where

it can no longer be ignored.

And all New Zealanders must ask, is this a wise use of resources?

The Joint Campaign on Native Forests — alarmed by the upsurge in woodchipping — is mounting a campaign to get controls on native forest clearance, and to divert the woodchip industry toward New Zealand's plentiful exotic forests instead.

Many exotic timber sawmills today have chipmills which use the waste slabs from pine milling operations. These mills attract no criticism from conservationists.

Voracious appetites

The chipmills that worry them are those set up to consume native forest. Whole trees are fed into them.

There are three such mills now in operation, and a fourth in the offing.

The chipmill at Richmond near Nelson was originally set up to make use of immature exotic trees blown down in the Wahine storm in 1968. In recent years it has turned increasingly to chipping beech forests, clearing private land right up to the straight-line boundaries of the Abel Tasman and Nelson Lakes national parks.

Two years ago a second indigenous chipmill was established at Awarua near Invercargill. It is busily clearing mixed native forests in the Catlins and Rowallan districts. Like the Nelson mill, it is completely dependent on a big Japanese corporation which takes all the chips.

A third indigenous mill operates in conjunction with NZ Forest Products Ltd's pulp complex at Kinleith. This

Private clearance on Mt Owen, inland from Nelson.

Photo: Guy Salmon

