

operation consumes tawa logs, which come mainly from NZFP's huge clear-felling operation on the Mamaku plateau near Rotorua. The company also buys in truckloads of tawa logs from farm clearance operations in the King Country and Bay of Plenty.

An ominous development is a proposal to set up a woodchip industry on the West Coast of the South Island. The Coast makes up only 8 percent of New Zealand's land area, yet it possess almost half of the country's remaining potentially exploitable native forest.

The company proposing the chipmill is the Westland Industrial Corporation (Wincorp) which is the parent company for Aorangi Forest Industries. Aorangi's plywood factory near Greymouth was propped up with \$1.5 million of tax-



The Gowan Valley, gateway to Nelson Lakes National Park, a scarred victim of the greedy Nelson chipmill.

Photo: Guy Salmon

payers' funds last year.

The Government's rescue of Aorangi illustrates the dangers of establishing a woodchip mill on the West Coast.

A mill based at Reefton as proposed, and using privately-owned beech forest as its source of supply, would run out of wood after about 12 years.

It would then be banging on the Government's door demanding a supply of wood from State forest. The alternative for the Government would be to allow a large number of mill and forestry employees to be thrown out of work in an area where governments have traditionally propped up ailing industries.

The longstanding Government policy of sustaining long term wood supplies to the West Coast timber industry is subsidized at a cost of about \$10 million annually while State Mines and Railways also receive large subsidies.

The Government rescued the Aorangi factory in 1984 and the timber complex at Ruatapu near Hokitika was similarly rescued from financial collapse in 1979.

Ironically, a current five-year offering of beech chipwood from State forest could give Wincorp the basis it needs to set up its chipmill on the West Coast. Conservationists are watching the situation carefully.

The company has already taken out options over "several million tonnes" of standing beech forest on private land in North Westland according to its chief promoter, Mr George Ferguson.

Port — hot political issue

Looming in the future is a more intractable problem for the forests: the prospect

of an export port for the Buller region.

Much native forest still remains on the West Coast simply because there is no nearby port. It would probably disappear fast if funds for building the port are made available by the Government.

Indeed beech woodchips — along with coal — are the main export commodities that could pay for the port, according to West Coasters.

Coasters like to dwell on the boom-time prosperity of the past and they see this being restored if only the port can be built.

Certainly the port would speed up the process of shipping out the Coast's remaining natural resources. And large areas of native forest would probably be replaced by exotics.

Much of the State forest land suitable for radiata pine on the West Coast has been cleared and used for that purpose in recent years — but much larger areas are suitable for growing Australian eucalypts and blackwoods, which the Forest Service is busily planting in logged-over native forests.

Another thing that could happen is that we could go the Australian way — cropping native forests on very short cycles for the woodchip industry.

While the export port proposal is the number one political issue on the West Coast, it is little known elsewhere in New Zealand.

A government-sponsored study of its environmental implications is now under way. Conservationists throughout New Zealand will be taking a keen interest in the findings.

The Government is committed to a small-scale sustained yield management programme for State forest beech on the West Coast. This is aimed at producing a long-term supply of specialty native timber for New Zealand's furniture and woodcraft industries, and the woodchipping is supposed to be limited to smallwood and waste material.

Conservationists do not plan to oppose this particular scheme outright unless they fail in their current efforts to get adequate safeguards, including a representative network of forest reserves.

But large-scale woodchipping is a different matter altogether, and here there is an urgent need for Government controls.

The Labour Government's election policy on environment contains a number of excellent principles relating to sustainability, reserves, and trusteeship of resources for future generations. Just how far the Government feels it can go in applying such principles to forests on private land is the real question.

The Government is pledged to recognize the protection of native forests as a matter of national importance by an amendment to the Town and Country Planning Act. This change by itself will make little difference unless the Government appoints new people to the Planning Tribunal, which has traditionally been rather one-eyed in its insistence on private land development rights — at least for rural land.



The chipmill at Richmond, near Nelson, fed by native beech forest cut on private land.

Photo: Guy Salmon

Taxpayer handouts

Other measures are available to the Government. It can control woodchip exports through existing regulations used to control other forest produce exports. It can increase its fund for reserve acquisition — a fund whose annual allocation has not been increased since it was established in 1972, and is today worth a paltry amount.

It can remove the subsidies for land-based industries which encourage landowners to clear forest from marginal land. Already agriculture subsidies have been reduced — but the big forestry companies are benefitting from a unique tax incentive arrangement announced in the 1984 Budget to replace the previous government's forestry encouragement grant scheme.

Wealthy individuals on high marginal tax rates can benefit particularly from the forestry tax incentive.

The Timaru businessman who purchased a block of beech forest adjoining Marlborough's Mt Richmond forest park, above the Perlorus River, will reap a handsome return from the government for woodchipping the native forest and replacing it with exotics.

In the Gowan Valley — gateway to Nelson Lakes National Park — beech forest is being woodchipped up to the maximum slope limits for machine operations and above that, the forest is simply being felled and burnt on the site to make way for pine planting.

These and many other examples must surely convince the Government of the need to curb these handouts of taxpayer funds which are being used for the destruction of our national heritage.

Japan operates a system of incentives for land-based industries under which operations affecting forests are subject to plans approved by the Government.

Switzerland has even stronger planning controls, which preserve one of the world's most exquisite rural landscapes — scenes which draw millions of tourists year after year.

New Zealanders will increasingly want to ponder how the short-term gains from woodchipping native forests will compare with the long-term gains from tourists, who might return again and again to spend their money in this country, if we could keep it as gentle and beautiful as it is today.