

Burning Issues

Governments could be regarded as both "fire fighters and fire preventers." Unfortunately, too much conservation management in the past has been about fire fighting. To its credit, the fourth Labour Government has in the conservation field attempted to prevent fires by grappling with some of the underlying structural problems fanning the flames.

Our environmental administration has been overhauled and Rongomomona has removed the subsidies which led to such wasteful activities as forest, wetland and tussockland clearance.

But the job is not yet done. Both in the short and long term, the new Minister of Conservation, Helen Clark, her associate minister Fran Wilde and the Department of Conservation have important decisions to make which will have significance for conservation.

Rescuing the beech and rimu forests of western Southland — Dean, Rowallan and Longwood — from the ravages of the Awarua chipmill and the Tuatapere sawmills should be one of the first priorities. The fate of the threatened yellowhead in this region could be sealed by the Government's decision on these forests, due March 31, 1988. Not only are the forests a vital stronghold for this dwindling species, their milling is also being carried out at a loss to the taxpayer of perhaps up to \$250,000 annually.

Once these forests are set aside from such wasteful exploitation, they should be included in the proposed South-West New Zealand World Heritage area.

Forest and Bird's recent experience with the allocation of Crown land has starkly demonstrated the need for effective public input into decision making. The whole question of environmental quango is up in the air at present; broadly the Society is keen to see such public watchdogs have power to make policy, oversee its implementation and to ensure that quango members are both adequately representative and accountable to interest groups such as our Society.

As the current gold boom puts pressure on natural areas, mining is becoming an increasingly contentious issue. A glance at a few glossy prospectuses shows the extent to which some of our key areas have been marked out for development. We must set aside certain "no go" mining areas to ensure their integrity, and the Mining Act has to be amended to strengthen its environmental controls.

Private forest protection has been highlighted as the most important forest conservation challenge of the future. The present Government promised in its 1984 manifesto to introduce a raft of measures to protect private indigenous forests, but has in the event moved slowly. The most effective moves have been economic — removing clearance subsidies — but as a counter to this, harsh financial times have forced landowners to remove native forest in order to pay their mortgages. The Government, and the Conservation Department, must be more assertive and conducive in persuading landowners that their forests should be protected in the national interest.

Crucial to the outcome of these issues, and to the success of the Conservation Department, is strong and effective leadership. Now that DOC is up and running, it will require clear and appropriate direction. Conservationists will be looking to the new minister and top officials in the Department for an indication that they are committed to preventing the sorts of "fires" which continue to damage the environment.

Dr Alan Mark, President



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