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Almost 900 hectares of mixed podocarp hardwood forest at Takaputahi, East Cape, were purchased by the fund late last year. The blocks had been under threat from logging.

IN ITS FIRST YEAR of operation the fund spent only half of its \$6.75 million allocation because of what Denis Marshall has called “the commendably cautious way it bought property”. The committee considered applications totalling \$11 million in 1990–91 but “insufficient proposals were put before us to protect high-quality land at a price we considered to be fair,” says McSweeney.

The under-spending was criticised by some but, says Kevin Smith, “conservation dollars are harder to get and scarcer than any other dollar in government and it has given the fund a lot of credibility with Treasury and other ministers that the committee hasn’t blown its budget”.

The National Government reduced the fund’s allocation by \$1.75 million to \$5 million for the 1991–92 financial year. Committee members claim the fund escaped lightly given the current economic climate and cuts in other areas of government spending. Forest and Bird has called for the budget for the fund and Nga Whenua Rahui to be increased to \$10 million.

Establishing the Forest Heritage Fund as a separate entity rather than just topping up DoC’s land acquisition budget has had its advantages.

“In the land acquisition area DoC is often no different from conservation groups. Staff set their hearts on particular areas which may not be the key ones, or they are prepared to pay too high a price,” Kevin Smith says. “Having a group of people with a national overview who recognise that there is a limited pool of money means applications are assessed on the basis of national priorities, unaffected by the personal ambitions of particular regional conservators or senior managers.”

The fund operates as a contestable

Queen Elizabeth II National Trust

THE QEII NATIONAL Trust has been in the business of protecting landscape features, forest remnants, wetlands and archaeological and geological features since 1977. The protection is through open-space covenants signed with private landowners. Grants from the Forest Heritage Fund have enabled the trust to clear a backlog of covenant applications which it had been unable to process because of a lack of resources to assist with fencing, survey and legal costs, and also to continue processing new covenants.

Since its establishment the trust has registered over 570 protective covenants covering 23,000 hectares, with another 470 proposals for 60,000 hectares proceeding towards registration. Most of the protected areas are in the developed – and more visible – lowland regions of the country which are poorly represented in the Crown conservation estate.

The main benefit to a landowner of an open space covenant is that while the land is protected in perpetuity, the owner retains title to the land. “As far as the community is concerned,” says trust manager Tim Porteous, “the main benefit is cost-effective conservation – covenants cost considerably less than purchase – and that the owner is an on-site ‘manager’ for the protected area”.

The trust, like the Forest Heritage Fund, is never short of potential applicants. “Despite the recession and falling farm incomes, the demand for covenants continues to grow, perhaps as a flow-on effect from an increased

public awareness of the need for conservation, or because more family farms are being put on the open market rather than passing automatically to the next generation,” says Tim Porteous.

The trust has lobbied government for an increase in its annual base allocation of \$1 million. The level of this allocation is such that all forest covenants approved by the trust require funding from the Forest Heritage Fund.

The double-handling involved in securing support from the fund is a source of frustration for the trust even though the approval rate has been in excess of 90 percent. Once approved by the trust, cases are submitted to the fund’s committee resulting in delays and extra paperwork.

The trust is quick, however, to acknowledge the usefulness of the fund. “Without it the trust would be in the awkward position of turning down virtually all landholders,” says Porteous. “Voluntary protection is a powerful conservation tool and has developed a considerable momentum over the last ten years. To stifle that goodwill through insufficient funding would be most unfortunate.”

Increasingly, branches of Forest and Bird are giving valuable financial assistance by contributing to the costs faced by a landholder in fencing areas off to exclude stock. In many cases this support has allowed a proposal to proceed which otherwise would have faltered.