

FORESTRY & LAND USE



Forestry, super-fires, and you

Late summer presents a particular threat to our forests as we enter the traditionally driest months of the year.

And some say the risk is increasing, as climate change induced higher temperatures and wind speeds, with lower humidity and rainfall, can at times turn our rural sector into an incendiary bomb.

A weak moment in these conditions could bring Hawke’s Bay into the realm of super-fires experienced overseas. No wildfire is good, but super-fires are larger, hotter and can travel faster. They can create their own weather with what are called pyrocumulonimbus storms.

Control is more difficult, dangerous, and costly. In our context, no one would be spared the loss.

Several New Zealand farmers have died when land-clearing fires got out of control. Courts have imposed significant penalties. Bad as this is, this cost would pale against that of a super fire.

Fire may be accidental, from using machinery, a burn-off which gets out of control, or it can be malicious. Acts of God, say lightning, figure too. But in just about all cases people provide the flash point. They, if you like, hold the fuse.

Most people recognise that plantation forestry is a big deal in Hawke’s Bay. That it is a success story with many beneficiaries can easily be demonstrated across the spectrum of economic, environmental, social, and cultural indices. It is also increasingly seen as our best and easiest opportunity to nail carbon in the battle to offset climate change.

Even those who don’t like the business cannot dodge the role we play for stability, even survival, in a backdrop of burgeoning debt and business loss relating to handling of the pandemic.

might see forestry’s vulnerability to fire as reason not to plant.

“People hold the key to preventing a Super Fire in Hawke’s Bay.”



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Some do, but many investors with their eyes wide open see sufficient reward from forestry.

They see the risks as manageable. Case in point, forest boundaries are now closed to recreation and protocols are in place to avoid fires through timely restriction of the use of machinery like bulldozers, trucks, chainsaws, and welding equipment.

Even so, foresters are keenly aware that most fires start outside the forest and do not follow property boundaries. They are driven by terrain, existing vegetation, and the weather. An ember can be blown two kilometres and start a new fire.

The 2019 Pigeon Valley fire in Nelson is illustrative. It was started by sparks from a contractor discing near a forest. This turned out to be a national scale event.

Here in the Bay, a proliferation of life-style blocks is concerning as these typically have outdoor fire risks and a lack of practical experience to reduce those risks. So too is the increasing interest in outdoor recreation as prime destinations are often near our forests and more people are heading out there in response to Covid restrictions.

So, if you are living close to a forest or just out there doing it, take a moment to know and abide by the rules on all forms of fire lighting. A useful start would be to look at the excellent guidelines for reducing fire risk on the FENZ website, and get updated information if you want to light a fire:

<https://www.checkitsalright.nz/>

There's also a guide the forest industry has produced:

<https://www.nzfoa.org.nz/resources/file-libraries-resources/fire/831-rural-fire-guidelines-managing-the-risks/file>

Above all else, be aware that you hold the fuse, take that responsibility seriously and help

us avoid the dark days that would follow a super-fire in our backyard.

Keith Dolman, CEO

Hawke's Bay Forestry Group



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