

# Trees make rural mayors nervous

Neal Wallace  
neal.wallace@globalhq.co.nz

WAIROA Mayor Craig Little is nervous.

In the last eight months 10,000ha, 7% of his district's remaining pasture land, has been sold for forestry and he estimates it will cost 60 direct and indirect livestock farming jobs while creating 15.

Little's primary concern is the impact on local communities and services but also on the district's largest employer, Affco's Wairoa meat works, which gets a third of its stock locally.

"More forestry planting threatens our sheep and beef industry, our local economy and the district's largest employer."

**“ For us it is an alarming rate. If they keep going at that rate we'll have no farmland left. ”**

**Craig Little**  
Wairoa District Council

He says 18% of the district is already plantation forest.

More than 30,000ha of land in the Gisborne, Wairoa, Wairarapa and Tararua Districts has been sold to forestry in the last year, removing an estimated 300,000 stock units.

Forestry companies have also been active in Otago, Waikato and King Country.

Little says the pace of land use change worries him and his community and is the unintended consequence of Government incentives for its Billion Trees programme.

The land use change cannot be considered a gradual redistribution of land use as

claimed by Forestry New Zealand chief executive Julie Collins in the *Farmers Weekly* last week, he said.

"For us it is an alarming rate. "If they keep going at that rate we'll have no farmland left."

A briefing paper Little prepared for a meeting this week with Government ministers says 2017 agricultural census figures show 1000ha of forestry directly and indirectly employs 1.5 people. For the same area of sheep and beef farming the figure is 7.6 people.

While supporting the Billion Trees programme Little says the scale and scope of forestry planting poses a catastrophic risk to rural communities like Wairoa.

Billion Trees grants, the ability to earn income from carbon credits and the less stringent criteria foreign buyers must meet to buy land have created an uneven playing field.

He fears communities will be left to tidy up forestry blocks that are not milled or managed but farmed for carbon credits and councils could earn less through rates.

Little urges the Government to tailor forest planting to each community and tighten the overseas investment rules for foreign buyers.

Nationally, exotic forests cover about 1.7m ha but between 2014 and 2016 29,000ha was converted from forestry to other land uses, mostly pasture.

Forestry is NZ's third largest export earner, earning \$6.4 billion in the year to June 2018, and employs 9500 people.

Tararua Mayor Tracey Collis fears the cumulative impact of fewer children at schools, the loss of volunteers and the impact on local retailers as people leave the area when trees replace livestock.

Collis respects the right of landowners to sell to whoever they wish but the speed of change has surprised her.

In the 2017-18 year four Tararua



**NO HELP:** Tararua District Council was turned down for money to help repair roads damaged by logging trucks, Mayor Tracey Collis says. Photo: Vicky O'Connor

farms were sold to forestry but in 2018-19 it was 12.

"It's a large increase very, very quickly."

Forest companies are buying land with easy access and better quality soils, which is not consistent with the Government mantra of right tree, right place, right time.

More forestry means rural communities will have to meet the cost of road maintenance for greater numbers of logging trucks.

The Transport Agency recently turned down a request from her council for money to repair roads damaged by logging trucks.

Fifty Shades of Green spokesman Mike Butterick says the scale of land use change has caught out everyone – including the Government.

His Wairarapa pressure group is seeking a pause in the Billion Trees programme and an independent review of the impact



**FEAR:** Wairoa Mayor Craig Little worries rural communities will be left to clear up uncut forests grown for carbon credits.

of large-scale forest planting on rural communities.

While the group is not opposed to forestry the policy contradicts the Primary Growth Fund, which provides money to enhance and grow rural communities.

Similarly, overseas investment rules have made it easier for

foreign companies to buy farmland for forests, which is inflating land prices.

Butterick says using forestry to offset carbon emissions is delaying not encouraging emitters to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, what he describes as a 20-year band aid.

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