

# Responsible importing of tropical timber

**A consultative approach in New Zealand between importers, retailers and the environmental movement is promoting a responsible tropical timber trade**

**by Lachlan Hunter**

**Chairman**

NZ Imported Tropical Timber Group

[magda.house.art@xtra.co.nz](mailto:magda.house.art@xtra.co.nz)

**A** POSSIBLY unique approach to resolving potential conflict between tropical timber importers and environmental organisations evolved in 1991 with the formation of the New Zealand Imported Tropical Timber Group (NZITTG).

New Zealand is a tiny market for tropical timber. It is better known for the gradual phasing out of timber production from its indigenous forests, which still cover over 20% of the land area but now account for only 0.7% of timber production, and the creation of an estate composed largely of the exotic *Pinus radiata*, which occupies only 4% of the land area but generates an increasing volume of wood each year (currently 18 million m<sup>3</sup> and projected to triple in the next 20 years). Technological advances, including tree breeding, have allowed the adaptation of this mundane softwood to numerous uses including not only paper, sawn timber, plywood and diverse reconstituted boards but also furniture (with surface-hardened table-tops, for example) and ground-contact roundwood, with durability supplied by chemical treatment. Nevertheless, there is a significant residual demand for other species of wood, supplied partly by other plantations and partly by imports of temperate, Australian and tropical woods, the last including some softwoods, such as Fijian kauri.

## **Charter of understanding**

The membership conditions and goals of the NZITTG are laid down in its Charter of Understanding. The goals of the group are to:

- ensure that all tropical timber imported into New Zealand is sourced from forests certified as sustainably managed;
- agree on certification procedures that provide purchasers with a reliable assurance of the sourcing of the product from sustainably managed forests;
- seek understanding of a common ground between members of the group on the key issues underpinning both the tropical timber trade and management of tropical forests;
- promote the findings, decisions, and goals of the group and where appropriate contribute to relevant policies of government and international tropical timber agencies; and
- have the entire tropical timber trade in New Zealand represented on the group.

All members of the group agree to use the NZITTG definition of 'sustainable management' of tropical forests. They agree not to advertise or otherwise promote tropical timber decking that is sourced from unsustainably managed forests.

The membership comprises representatives of tropical timber importers and retailers and environmental and conservation non-government organisations (NGOs), while a government observer represents the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Certain other conditions apply to particular membership categories. Both retailers and importers agree to a moratorium on imports from Sabah and Sarawak until such time as they can be satisfied that timber from these Malaysian states can be sourced from sustainably managed forests. Conservation and environmental NGOs agree not to demonstrate or issue media statements against members of the NZITTG on issues relating to the NZITTG goals while members are abiding by the conditions of the group and then only after discussion through the NZITTG chairperson.

Membership is by invitation and open to all groups and companies with an interest in the tropical timber trade. Membership may be revoked if conditions are breached.

A taskforce established by the NZITTG, comprising one person each from the four groups (including the Ministry), has a brief to actively seek sources of sustainably managed timber and to report these to the full group. As such sources become available, the importing members agree to phase out the importing and sale of timber from non-sustainable sources.

The NZITTG meets quarterly and makes decisions by consensus. It has a spokesperson and an independent chair elected once a year by the group.

The group has supported a forestry program in the Solomon Islands and has sought out other producers interested in supporting the principles in Medang and East New Britain in Papua New Guinea. Vanuatu timbers are also being considered. An eco-label has been developed and last year a Pacific Ecotimber Standard Checklist was compiled. The Group prepared a model government procurement policy that has been submitted to the government for its consideration. A study tour of Malaysia and Indonesia is planned. Lastly, the group is active on relevant international and national issues, such as proposed amendments to species' listings on appendices I and II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora.