Private Forestry in North East NSW

Background

The impact of native vegetation and biodiversity regulations on private forestry in NSW is becoming increasingly important due to the reduction of Crown forest areas available for harvest. The wood supply from private native forest areas has been increased to meet recent demand for raw materials both to the larger mostly crown supplied sawmills but also to the smaller opportunistic operations that are evident throughout the state. This has led to increased pressure on the native forests to supply this need and so stands that may have been recently logged are recut before the timber can reach maturity. This has led to many problems such as low productivity, poor timber quality and land degradation issues such as soil compaction and erosion, as well as environmental consequences.

To promote good forestry practise to provide on going resource to the timber industry from private lands in accordance with environmental goals should be one of the prime foci of native vegetation legislation. This is of prime concern to myself being the owner of a relatively large (locally) area of land totalling approx. 450ha of gentle topography with some 100ha cleared with the balance native open native forest. I purchased this land in 2000, with the aim of integrating a small grazing venture with large potential income from native forestry. In the last decade the cleared country had been cropped for soybeans but the last harvest was undertaken in wet conditions causing large amounts of erosion and soil compaction. Cropping was then abandoned and grazing on the residual pasture was then the only land use. The native forest was continually logged (rotations of approx 5yrs) and the stand was severely degraded because of the high grading (the removal of all marketable stems no matter what size) carried out.

The dispersible nature of the soils and the large amount of noxious weeds apparent on the worst sections of the cleared land convinced me of a need to change the landuse on this section. I negotiated with State Forests of NSW to establish a hardwood plantation on a 60ha section to reduce the soil degradation and address the compaction by deep ripping. The other 40ha portion that had fewer problems was fenced off, to be renovated for grazing. The native forest portion will be divided into sections of mainly timber production with seasonal grazing only and a smaller section with native forest that will combine improved pasture with timber production.

Limiting Factors

To make this particular property viable, optimal timber production from the native forest area needs to be incorporated. The stand is in need of urgent silvicultural intervention to release the regrowth and to remove the unproductive stems. This could be accomplished with out compromising the biodiversity by adhering to prescriptions developed by government agencies notably *Forest Practice Codes Timber Harvesting in Native Forest* (State Forests 1998). The 350Ha of native forest could then be conserved in a long-term timber reserve with the ability to produce good returns over long harvest rotations. These rotations would be in a staggered format using a logical division of harvest areas to provide a smoothed income stream. The rotation length

would be envisaged to be in the range of 15 to 20 yrs. This would allow the native forest to regenerate and provide a longer period between disturbance for increased fauna diversity and volume (due to the range of environs created, ie newly harvested to undisturbed for 15yrs +).

For this rather large holding close to town the pressures of subdivision for hobby farms is a relevant matter. The value of this property is relatively high due to the local market for small hobby farms or bush blocks. The subdivision of this property would involve the clearing of a large amount of forest for the construction of roads, fences, houses, out buildings, cattle yards as well as the clearing of some other vegetation by gradual means to provide the park like appearance that appeals to these "new" settlers. The division of the native forest into smaller portions will also reduce the overall profitability of the total area due to multiplication of set costs (eg harvest plans). The property then needs some ongoing income to provide incentive to keep the property whole both for my ownership and others into the future.

The potential of this property to produce large amounts of high quality wood products with little environmental impact is very great. The nearby Bom Bom State Forest is one of the most productive and least costly to harvest in the district. Mean annual increments of 2.07 cubic meters/Ha/Yr of sawlogs and poles etc are recorded for this management area (M. Combe et al 1998). My property is located only 15 kms from local sawmills with no large infrastructure upgrades needed to transport the resource due to the ridge top access off a council bitumen road. The native forest area is in poor condition due to the continual high grading of this stand. Trees down to 20cm DBH have been removed if they are marketable (IE straight and >5m long with little defect) leaving a stand composed of small defective or crooked stems. The estimated yield for a forest in this condition is < 0.5 cubic meters/Ha/Yr

Legislation that Inhibits Good Silviculture

The silviculture intervention that is needed to bring this forest into greater timber production is that of thinning the stand. This will promote growth of existing potentially marketable stems that has been limited by the large amount of defective trees and the smaller regeneration that occurs in large numbers. Other areas that have a continuous canopy composed of non-marketable stems may need to be clear fell to allow regeneration. This thinning would allow wood to be put on individual stems at a faster rate which would then allow harvest of larger stems earlier. Large stems command a premium in the market so this would provide greater margins for the business as a whole.

This activity is regulated by the *Native Vegetation Conservation Act* 1997 with the current Private Native Forest (PNF) exemption being "*the clearing of native vegetation in a native forest in the course of its being selectively logged on a sustainable basis or managed for forestry purposes (timber production).*" The PNF exemption only exempts the activities that relate directly to the clearing of native vegetation from consent. It does not remove the legal requirements under any other act where they apply. For example, a landowner would need to ensure that all the requirements under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* and the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* have been met prior to the utilisation of the exemption. (Private Native Forestry Group 2002)

Further to this recently announced changes that would see the state divide into Catchment Management Authorities which would draw on the regional vegetation management plans (Drafts of which recently completed). The Clarence Regional Vegetation Manage Plan includes the following exemptions:

Tree cutting	The cutting of no more than 10 trees on any one hectare of a continuous land holding in the same ownership in any period of five years.
Additional Conditions	After the cutting of any tree, land within a 50m radius of that tree must contain more than 25 stems of trees greater or equal to 25cm DBHOB No more than 50 trees may be removed from a contiguous land holding in any period of one year from the commencement of the plan. No hollow bearing tree may be cleared No tree > 80cm may be cleared No listed nectar source tree that has flowered or produced seeds may be cleared. No native vegetation on protected land within 20m of an outcrop or cliff may be cleared

No private forestry exemption exists in this plan but there is reference to the forestry exemptions in the NVCA.
(Clarence Valley Vegetation Committee 2002)

The thinning of native forest stands under good silvicultural practice is not Allowed for in any of these exemptions for forestry, so clearing would have to be undertaken under other exemptions or by applying through the normal process for clearing consent. The cost for this application would be prohibitive especially for smallholdings requiring surveys and documentation.. The cost of this application would reduce the overall profitability of the project with no guarantee of approval (for my property survey $5000 + documentation $5000 approx.). The cost would have to be carried in advance as well and this coupled to the cost of the thinning would reduce the area that could be treated initially.

Promotion of Private Forestry

I want to be able to manage my forest in an ecologically sustainable manner to produce timber to provide a financial return over the long term. For this to occur, a number of factors have to be taken into account. An individual project needs to be financially viable. That is it must be worth the landowner to produce a timber product under these conditions over a long term. This involves both good forest practise and low cost of harvest including the adherence to legislation and documentation. This has been addressed in the *Report on Private Native Forestry Exemption Review* (Private Native Forestry Group 2002)

This report sets out a proposal for broad exemptions that will come under a Forest Management Plan for a set area of a property. These include a basal area minimum average for the property as a whole, a size of maximum canopy opening as well as prescriptions for regeneration. These protocols are very inflexible and do not provide for exceptions to normal native forest stands. These protocols do not work for poor

native forest areas that have little basal area (BA) or sections that have high BA but little tree size. This report also details the consent path required for harvesting operations to occur with details of authorities and documentation that needs to contacted or developed for any project. This will require large input from the landowner/consultant and will require ongoing renewal and licensing.

Under new arrangements, Catchment Management Authorities have provision for Property Vegetation Planning (PVP) which have tenure of 10yrs. These PVPs may be the tool to enable private forestry to reach the sustainable profitable position it desires. If these could be amended to include details for silvicultural regimes including thinning and harvest techniques and include a one stop shop for all other licensing and documentation, landowners would be wise to enter into these agreements. These could then be reviewed at the 10yr periods and renewal would be far easier. This would then take the place of individual project procedures and provide for an ongoing stable sustainable wood supply base for the timber industry and include benefits for the community as a whole.

The exemptions for general forestry work can be continued but the development of these individual property plans would safe guard the forests for the future. I would enter into one of these agreements if it would enable me to undertake the necessary silvicultural treatments to make the property commercially viable. This would protect this property from future subdivision with associated vegetation loss. The local timber industry would be in a better position with agreements that set aside lands for future timber production. The community as a whole will benefit from the enhanced biodiversty and conservation of native forest and from increased employment and business opportunities.

Conclusion

The timber industry on the north coast of NSW is one of the major contributors to the local economies. The reduction in crown land area available for timber harvest as well as the limited area available for hardwood plantations has led to increasing dependence on private native forests. These forests are largely in a degraded state with little silviculture work in evidence. To protect the native forest areas from further fragmentation and loss, they must be seen to be an asset for the owner and the community. If timber production can be increased, all in the community, from the landowner to the local businessman, can benefit.

To increase the production of these forests, in wood as well as environmental terms, good silviculture practice must be initiated. Legislation must be adapted to promote good forestry practice. Incentives and processes that promote these actions need to be developed without hampering the commercial viability of projects and private landowners. This may be achieved by incorporating flexible Property Vegetation Plans for development of private forestry. Other documentation and licensing may need to be fast tracked or incorporated to encourage investment. Owners of private native forest need to have confidence in both the legislation and the long-term benefit of investment to ensure the continuing viability of the local industry.

References

Clarence Regional Vegetation Committee 2002
Draft Clarence Regional Vegetation Management Plan
The Department of Land and Water Conservation

M. Combe , G.L.Unwin, R.Dyason &R.J. Peacock 1998
Resource profile of 'high graded' dry hardwood forests: implications for improving productivity.
Proceedings of Australian Forest Growers Conference 1998

Private Native Forestry Group 2002
Report on Private Native Forestry Exemption Review
The Department of Land and Water Conservation

State Forests 1998
Forest Practice Codes Timber Harvesting in Native Forest
State Forests