



# Wairoa: Community perceptions of increased afforestation

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## Introduction

That money does indeed “grow on trees” is a key element in the Government’s One Billion Trees Programme (1). This relates to recognition of carbon credits as a part of the market system and as a plank in New Zealand’s commitment to address climate change. Other environmental, economic and social outcomes are also projected, including erosion control, improved water quality, income generation and job creation.

Policy success is contingent on effective implementation and community “buy-in” (2). In this instance, announcement of the Programme prompted orchestrated opposition, highlighted in the Wairoa District, generating widespread publicity and demonstrations on the steps of Parliament. Posters appeared along highways stating the threat of negative social impacts on rural communities, such as loss of employment, the provision of public facilities, retail outlets, and small schools.

To better understand community views and any potential and actual social impacts, research was conducted using a people-focused, whole system approach (3). Key stakeholder groups included farmers and tangata whenua; policy officials in central and local government; forest scientists, and agricultural extension workers; farm supply companies and Wairoa residents. Field work extended from April till November, 2019. In total over 80 individuals participated. Twenty-nine respondents were interviewed face-to-face. A further 15 were interviewed as they went about their business in Wairoa. Twenty-four survey sheets were completed and returned to various drop-off points, and 16 Wairoa residents were engaged through formal group meetings.

## Context

Hacking away at the bush to get the first grass cover in place is described as the outstanding achievement of European settlers in making the current landscape (4). This image still retains a powerful hold on the imagination. Clearing the bush and establishing a pastoral economy was central in the development of the Wairoa District. The overall context of Wairoa including its physical environment, history, and experience has produced a distinct, ambitious, and proud community. These elements emerged as fundamental in shaping current community attitudes towards land-use change.



Agriculture, forestry and fishing remain the main source of employment, and agriculture remains the dominant land use. On a range of measures, however, the District lags behind other parts of Hawkes Bay and New Zealand as a whole. The population is now almost 25% less than in 1991, school enrolments have decreased from 2,269 to 1,427 (since 1996) and unemployment has increased (5). Close to 90% of land in the district is identified as steep/hilly. The current population is 66% Maori. Yet Wairoa retains a vitality evident in its exceptional number of social clubs and associations (>70) its strong voting record in District Council elections, and the level of community participation in voluntary activities.

## What we were told

- Farmers expressed overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards increased afforestation, fears of community decline, job losses, and closure of retail outlets and service provision. Subsequently the narrative shifted to attacks against corporate forestry, and environmental effects, including those from slash management, harvesting, replanting practices, and fire risks, as well as cynicism about carbon credits, climate change, and grants for tree planting.
- Maori landholders expressed attitudes to trees in line with their cultural values which include a healthy ecosystem and social well-being. Consequently, the One Billion Tree Programme was accepted as supporting Maori aspirations for development and their strategic perspective on land use. This support was not unconditional, but shaped by the priorities of each individual iwi, but all recognised the value of commercial forestry alongside pastoral farming and the use of native tree species for carbon credits. Existing agreements between iwi and forestry companies which include management protocols, job training programmes and employment opportunities, back such perspectives.
- Forest scientists and corporate managers pointed-out that commercial forestry is market led, generates well-paying jobs and offers a clear career structure. They also noted the industry's preference for rolling hill country and steeper slopes, and that flatter, fertile areas are usually too expensive to buy. Highly erodible slopes and areas lacking easy access also have limited appeal. Planting for carbon credits does not fit their business model which centres on the sale of timber.
- Government officials and agricultural extension officers broadly supported the income from increased afforestation, and its potential help to counter climate change and erosion. They argued the need for a more nuanced approach that targets "The Right Tree, Right Place" and complements farming. Policy analysts, emphasised that the Programme maintains the agency of existing land owners and that there is no compulsion to sell. They noted that the complex concepts of climate change and carbon credits remain poorly understood.
- Local residents feared the negative effects of job losses, although many young people, in particular, also saw the potential of new job opportunities. Most supported increased planting of native tree species as a basis for an expansion in tourism. Farm supply companies noted the threat of decreasing sales if farm numbers declined and any acceleration of farmers purchasing supplies from outside the district.



## Making sense of what we heard

Contextual factors provide insights on views that have a long history (6). The major increase in afforestation in Wairoa occurred in the 1990s planting boom. Projected job increases back then (7) have not materialised. Since 1970, permanent farm labour in the Hawkes Bay Hill country has fallen by 69%, replaced at least in part by contract workers drawn from outside the district. Farm numbers in the hill country have fallen by 43%. Many rural schools have closed, and retail and service outlets have shut-down. These trends have been compounded by national and global policies. In Wairoa, this has resulted in on-going rural population decline.

There is no evidence that sectoral policies can reverse recent trends or achieve effective regional development (8). The issues facing Wairoa are complex, multifaceted and deep-seated (9). Comparable data on labour inputs to farming and forestry is problematic given the different time frames and variations in management systems involved. Work in both the forest and farm sectors in Wairoa is already heavily dependent on overseas, migrant labour. Meanwhile longer-term trends in these sectors suggest an increased substitution of labour by improved technologies. Yet, on a per hectare basis forestry is a better export earner than sheep and beef. Properly managed forestry can help ensure better/diversified returns, good job prospects and contribute to vibrant rural communities.

## Conclusions

There is polarisation between groups centred on the right tree in the right place. Expectations of scale and timeframe differ. This polarisation is important to overcome.

There is a raft of growing pressures on farmers to plant trees to be sustainable. These include climate change, landscape resilience, water quality, animal welfare, and as a source of income and as an alternative source of feed. There is a need for work with all parties to co-develop a way forward that better aligns community expectations and outcomes with the multiple goals sought. Social impact assessment has a key part to play in this approach.

## References

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