

Eastland Wood Council: industry and community focus

by Michael Smith

Prue Younger, Chief Executive of the Eastland Wood Council, spoke to Michael Smith about the council's industry- and region-wide activities.

Based in Gisborne, the Eastland Wood Council (EWC) was originally established as the East Coast Forestry Industry Group (ECFIG) some 30 years ago, and became an incorporated society in 2004.

According to its Chief Executive, Prue Younger, "the ECFIG/EWC was formed by like-minded representatives from the local forest growers and managers who saw the advantages of having a coordinated approach and public face for the industry in the Eastland region." (The region comprises the Gisborne and Wairoa District Councils' jurisdictions – from the Mohaka River in the south to East Cape in the north.)

Following a comprehensive review in 2006, a wider group of industry stakeholders were invited to join the council table. They included the likes of Eastland Port, contractors' representatives and trucking companies.

A membership base fee was established, plus an additional fee based on plantation hectares, which paid for the CEO and council activities. Younger adds that the "NZ Forest Growers Levy is also available for specific projects, which we have used from time to time".

LEADING ROLE

As the EWC's public face and first point of contact, Younger's leadership role



Prue Younger, Chief Executive of the Eastland Wood Council, with EWC Chairman Iain McInnes. Photo: © The Gisborne Herald

involves working with members to achieve the objectives set out in the council's strategic plan. Her responsibilities include developing and managing pivotal relationships with local district/regional councils, national forestry bodies and central government organisations.

Further, she is entrusted with enabling and supporting the Health and Safety needs of members; taking an active role in influencing industry employment and quality training in the region; and improving regional

perceptions of forestry.

RECOGNITION

Key to engendering a higher profile for the local industry is the annual Eastland Wood Council Forestry Awards, now in their eighth year. As organiser, Younger says the awards night "is a celebration that brings the industry and its associated service providers together to acknowledge the work being done at the coalface; and the great teams and initiatives that make this industry such a success on the East Coast".

(This year's awards dinner is being held on 19 May at the Gisborne Showgrounds Event Centre with comedian Paul Ego engaged as master of ceremonies.)

Initially driven by C3's Matt Wakelin and the EWC, such is the success of the event that Northland began its own version in 2016 – based on the EWC template. And Younger says she has been sought out to start a forestry awards programme at Mount Gambier, South Australia. "They approached us after one of their managers attended the Northland awards ... and they're sending two people to our awards to assess the programme."

FOCUS GROUPS

Much of the council's day-to-day work to improve industry standards occurs via three focus groups: Drug and Alcohol; Health and Safety; and Environmental. Their notable successes include a reduction in accidents and incidents across the region, fewer positive results from random testing, and countering negative impacts on the environment – reducing sediment and debris flow, and funding research for the Regional Freshwater Plan.

POSITIVE FORECAST

Forestry is an important contributor to the regional economy, employing some

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1,600 people, or 8% of the workforce, and indirectly supporting employment in transport and machinery services, and at Eastland Port.

Projections indicate a likely increase in log exports – from the current 2.4 million tonnes to a sustained harvest of 3.2 million tonnes by 2020 (Tairāwhiti Economic Action Plan, February 2017) – could create another 630 jobs in the region. Industry revenues are likely to increase from \$275 million (2015/16) to \$374 million by 2020.

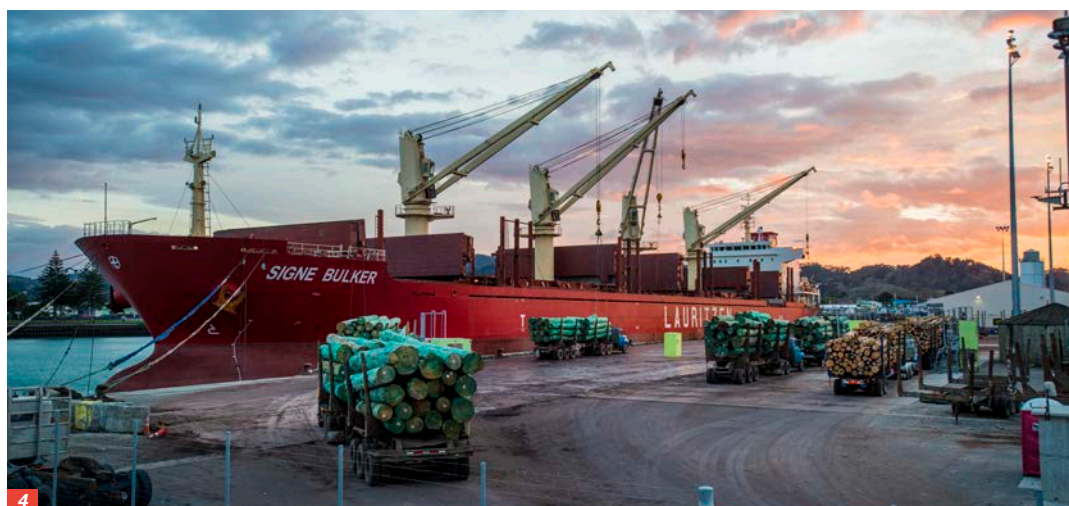
In light of the positive forecasts, the council set up 'Forestry for Life' – an ongoing campaign to inform and educate people in the industry and the wider community. Relevant industry topics are featured monthly in a local newspaper and cover everything from training and employment opportunities to drug testing initiatives and logging truck safety.

REGIONAL VALUE

Younger says the council is also mindful of the need to improve the region's value-adding ability. Currently only 4% of logs are milled locally, but the forestry sector has indicated that value adding could occur with up to 25% of the regional harvest – producing three or four times more revenue than raw logs.

The Government – through the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and the Ministry for Primary Industries – has been conducting Regional Growth Studies (RGS), to identify opportunities for economic growth/jobs in a number of regions.

In Eastland, the emphasis has been on ascertaining markets for radiata pine



1/ From the first softwood plantings in 1959, the region's forests "have evolved into an export-earning, employment-providing foundation of the local economy". Photo: ©Eastland Wood Council

2/ Some 14% of New Zealand's log exports come from Eastland (Tairāwhiti Economic Action Plan, February 2017). Photo: ©Eastland Wood Council

3/ Ten per cent of the Eastland region's workforce could be employed in the forestry sector by 2020. Photo: ©Eastland Wood Council

4/ Eastland Port ... an estimated 2.6-2.8 million tonnes of logs are expected through the port in 2017-18. Photo: ©Eastland Wood Council

wood products. To that end the Government recently announced research and development funding for a wood-processing facility (initiated by WET Gisborne Ltd) "which uses automation and robotics to turn low-value pine trees into high-value wood products".

On the same site (a decommissioned sawmill

which has undergone regular maintenance to keep the plant functional) the Eastland Community Trust is looking to establish an innovative wood processing cluster. Because they work collaboratively, clusters are often considered the driving force in business growth and innovation.

The ECT will, over time, seek a mix of industry

tenants to occupy and operate the wider site. That mix, according to the trust, "will likely include wood processing companies, marketing and distribution businesses, and even tertiary and industry training organisations. The vision is to create a wood processing hub where businesses benefit from competition and collaboration."