*Opinion editorial –* Ngā Pou a Tāne Chair Te Kapunga Dewes

**MĀORI NEED REAL OPTIONS NOT WISHFUL THINKING ON LAND USE**

Climate change is a vital issue for Māori, not only because – like indigenous people around the world – our communities will be among the first to feel its effects, but also because we will be the most vulnerable to its impacts.

How Aotearoa responds to climate change could also be a catalyst for enormous positive change for Māori, socially, environmentally, and economically. But this will only be possible if we can work in partnership with the government to ensure a just transition to a low emissions economy, mitigating the impact on our vulnerable communities.

For a large proportion of Whenua Māori, afforestation is our best option. The legacy of colonisation has had a significant role in this. In many cases, forestry is the only sustainable development option for Māori land not only because it is remote and rugged, but our unique ownership structures make mortgaging near impossible, and attracting investment very difficult. Over half of Whenua Māori is currently in forestry because 80% of the land that remains in Māori ownership is of poor quality for the purpose of economic wealth creation, while large areas returned through settlement processes are in exotic forestry.

Until recently, how this land is used was largely unregarded. Hidden in the hard-to-reach parts of rural Aotearoa, much of Whenua Māori is on hillsides and in gullys, far away from rolling grasslands and the ports and roads that would make it attractive for farming, production forestry or commerical speculation. Suddenly though, planting trees has become part of the national conversation, and in some quarters, even a threat. And in that increasingly heated kōrero, both the farming and environmental lobbies are seeking to assert their views over the future of Whenua Māori.

Some of these views are not inconsistent with our own. Recloaking the whenua in native species is a worthy aspiration – and one that is achievable over the long-term. We are not in conflict about the preference, nor the environmental benefits of native afforestation.

However, the groups that promote a native-only approach tend not to discuss how this option can be operationalised. If they were able to show a pathway that is at least break even on marginal and remote Māori owned land, we would welcome that.

But in reality, they can’t, because the economics of native-only planting simply do not stack up – even with a heavy hand on the scales of the ETS. Costing, by conservative estimate, at least ten times as much to establish and requiring at least three and a half times the area of land as exotics to sequester the same amount of CO2, natives simply will not grow fast enough to make a meaningful difference to our climate change efforts in the next thirty years. A ‘native-only’ solution would leave Māori landowners indebted and reliant on an uncertain and unnecessary regime of subsidies and Government support.

For those advocating that exotic trees have no place in rural Aotearoa, their arguments suffer from the total lack of any factual basis. And so, they utilise any rhetoric that supports their argument: pines are toxic to water, needles cause acidity in forests, there is no biodiversity in pine forests, and the list goes on. These statements are simply not true, no matter how often and how loudly they are told.

We are sure that many – particularly those from the academic or environmental sector – have entered this debate with good intentions. But what their approach boils down to is simply a desire to assert their control. Once again, Māori are being told how others believe it is best to use our land, and the Government – through its latest ETS proposals – are lining up with them.

# Rather than attempting to constrain how Whenua Māori is used, Ngā Pou a Tāne believes what Māori need are more options, not fewer. Any groups looking to remove opportunities, like the planting of exotic trees as permanent forests or as a nurse crop for transition to natives, from our Māori landowners cannot be said to be working in our best interest, or even that of the environment. They are either unlikely to be Māori and therefore don’t have our unique understanding of Mātauranga Māori, they have no skin in the game in terms of responsibility for landholdings, or they are uninformed – they’ve been lied to.

# We say this not to be dismissive, but because it is inconceivable that anyone with the best interests of Māori at heart would choose to take away the potential of the best performing options in the carbon economy. There are quite literally, billions of dollars at stake. Billions of dollars that could make a fundamental difference to outcomes Māori for generations, while putting Māori knowledge, Māori land and sustainable Māori investment at the centre of our climate change efforts.