

IN THE BALANCE

ZANY RATING SYSTEM PUTS SPOKE IN WOOD WORKS

The Green Star rating process created and implemented by the self-styled international arbiter of sustainable construction, the Green Building Council, seems to confirm the view of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche that, "In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations and epochs it is the rule." PETER HARINGTON's report on the New Zealand situation adds weight to the notion.



Photo: istockphoto.com

The Green Star building concept was founded in America and worked reasonably well in local conditions. But when imposed almost unchanged on the Australian building industry it was an instantly bad fit – not least because it specified only FSC-accredited timber, which is still virtually unprocurable there. (*Full story, in-wood July/August 09.*)

The New Zealand wood industry saw the problems coming, but did too little too late to stop the tide – and soon faced the same FSC prerequisite.

In a bizarre, some might say cynical, development the New Zealand Green Building Council (NZGBC) amended the rules so timber accredited under any scheme listed on the NZGBC web site could be approved. But the FSC scheme was the only one on the list.

The other logic-defying aspect of the GBC system in both countries is that installing a bike rack and showers in a building attracts almost three times as many sustainability points as certified wood, recycled concrete or steel can achieve.

New Zealand Forest Owners Association researcher Glen Mackie did a “quick and dirty” calculation using the NZ Wood carbon calculator, which showed the nonsensical nature of the weighting between building material options and transport options.

His calculation compares installing a bike rack and showers to using wood instead of concrete in a 100 m² commercial building – and would result in the user having to bike to work for 147 years to save the equivalent amount of carbon as building in wood.

Despite these apparent absurdities, the NZGBC believes it is on the right path. “We are confident the rules are not pushing people away from timber,” Green Star NZ manager Rohan Bush told *in-wood*. But she admits that material credits are difficult to achieve and weighted lightly.

In April a Timber Working Party was formed to

address timber industry issues and to make recommendations about best-practice (alternative) forest certification systems. The group included the Wood Processors Association (WPA), NZ Forest Owners Association, MAF, Greenpeace, NZ Farm Forestry

Cloud over FSC

Meanwhile the very existence of FSC as a certification scheme in New Zealand conditions is under serious threat. “Industry is not sure about its longevity with FSC as our chemical derogation expires in April

pushed into using less environmentally sustainable products.”

Another anomaly is that other building materials are certified in entirely different ways. While wood is certified at the forest growing stage, wool for carpets is accredited

The logic-defying aspect of the GBC system is that installing a bike rack and showers in a building attracts almost three times as many sustainability points as either certified wood, recycled concrete or steel can achieve.

Association, NZ Institute of Foresters, NZ Timber Importers and building industry representatives.

It questioned whether radiata pine should even need certification. Industry representatives pointed out that all radiata grown in New Zealand was from plantation forests, which are sustainably grown under the Resource Management Act. As FOA CEO David Rhodes says, “The RMA requires sustainable management – just because radiata is not FSC does not mean it is not sustainably managed.”

The NZFFA, whose members own more than 40% of the New Zealand pine estate, say they will probably never be in a position to secure FSC certification because of the scale requirements.

The parties concerned seem to be heading towards the same inevitable stalemate, with the NZGBC reminding the working party that the brief was to define what certification schemes were suitable, not whether they were needed.

2010 and we cannot guarantee its extension,” working party member Colin Maunder told *in-wood*.

If the FSC board refuses to permit the use of chemicals in New Zealand plantation forestry that could force all the country’s major owners to exit the scheme – rapidly eliminating FSC-certified radiata pine from the market. While this would be a catastrophic outcome for all parties, there is no obvious back-up certification scheme.

Maunder also points out the inequities of the prevailing GBC attitude to wood certification. “Wood has a certification scheme [FSC] so they just decided to use it. Concrete and steel don’t have schemes, so they don’t have to be certified.

“To be fair on the council they say they will follow up with work on steel and concrete later. In the meantime someone planning a building will probably say, ‘I don’t have to find certified steel and concrete so I will use them instead of wood’. The construct guys on the working party agree. The perverse outcome is that builders could be

at the scouring plant – ignoring the growing stage. Thus, a farmer with sheep and trees has one land use unfairly penalised and could be forced into unsustainable options.

The fairest way

Most of the working party participants agree the only fair solution is life cycle ►



Peter Bodeker – sees LCA as fairest way to compare building materials

"Industry is not sure about its longevity with FSC as our chemical derogation expires in April 2010 and we cannot guarantee its extension." – COLIN MAUNDER

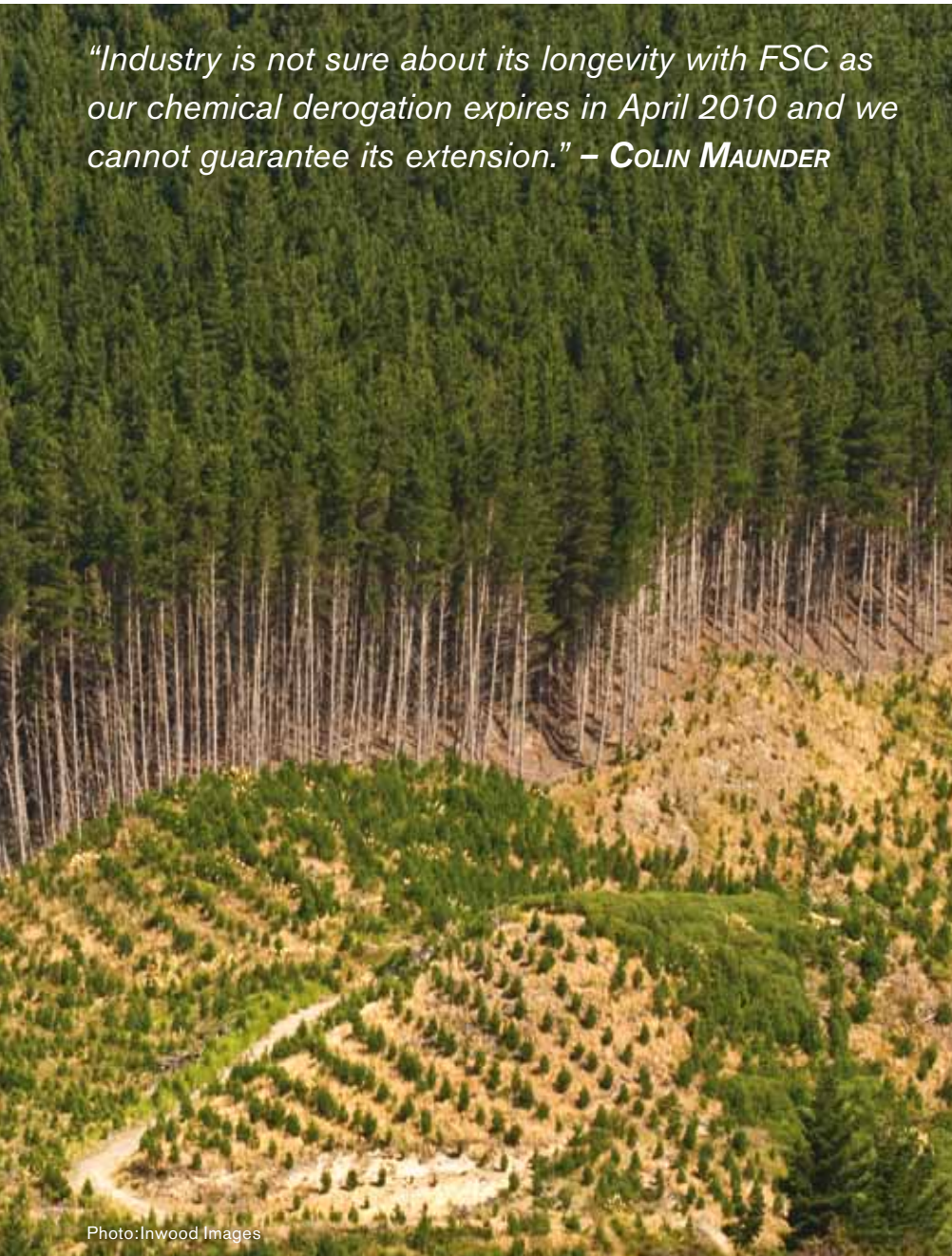


Photo: Inwood Images

analysis (LCA). "We see LCA science as being the fairest way of comparing building materials," says WPA chief executive Peter Bodeker. "We would like the NZGBC to say it will be using it in the near future."

But Bush's response offers little immediate hope: "There is still not a universally accepted life cycle analysis methodology and data set so we can really compare all building materials. In the absence of that we have to look at environmental options within the category. For example, good carpet versus bad carpet; good concrete versus bad concrete."

As things stand, the wood industry is increasingly being manipulated by the green building machine, and as Maunder says: "The industry has to decide whether to continue to engage or go our own way. Most of us think it is better to be on the inside and try to influence the outcome." **iw**

(EDITOR: Another contradiction in the Green Star sustainable building process is the existing ability to use illegal timber or the dreaded PVC throughout a building and still achieve a full 6-star rating, as the GBC Australia's Queensland and Northern Territory Green Star rating tool manager Andrew Aitken recently conceded.)

**CALIBRE
EQUIPMENT**

www.calibre-equipment.com



Structural timber grading and testing equipment specialists

Producers of the Ecoastic™ Board Grader, STFE5™ timber verification machine and TimberQual™ verification management software