

(Domestic and External Security Co-ordinator – DESC) to set up a committee and review the system for providing fire services to rural areas. Other committee members were from the Ministry of Forestry, the Departments of Conservation and Internal Affairs, the NZ Fire Service and DESC.

In March submissions were called for (over 70 were received) and two public meetings were held.

A draft report was submitted to Cabinet on June 26, 1989, and approval was given for the draft to be used as a basis for a second round of more detailed discussions. The Committee subsequently visited the six main centres and a total of over 300 people attended these meetings. A further 60 written submissions were received.

With the exception of the placement of the NRFA in the NZ Fire Service Commission the remainder of the recommendations were generally endorsed by most of the people and organisations making submissions, although there is still concern over the funding proposals.

A significant proportion of submissions (large forest owners, NZIF, NZFOA) wished the NRFA to be the Ministry of Forestry and not the Fire Service Commission. The arguments for the Commission included the fact that they were institutionalised, areas of vegetation within city areas now demanded closer fire fighting attention, and the fact that the Fire Service had good relations with RFAs in any case (111 calls and Volunteer Fire Brigade turnout). These arguments won the day.

Comment

The preparation and recommendations contained in the final report were not all plain sailing, particularly with regard to the placement of the NRFA in the Fire Service Commission.

The New Zealand Forest Owners' Association and the Ministry of Forestry fought hard to set up the NRFA in the Ministry. This resulted in Government delaying implementation on October 1, 1989 with the setting up of the Working Party to report to the Minister of Internal Affairs. With legislative backing it was felt that the Ministry could have done the job. The expertise will have to be transferred to the Fire Service in any case.

The Hensley report admits that the Fire Service has limited capacity to handle spreading fires in vegetation and forest, as was shown in Christchurch and Wellington in the 1988 fires.

Conditions were not easy for fire fighting in 1988 and, in my opinion, even the

presence of the New Zealand Forest Service would not have made any radical difference. There was extreme danger in Ashley, Eyrewell and Balmoral Forests and that would have been the Forest Service priority. The Christchurch city area would have been outside the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. The major Dunsandel fire blew up so quickly under strong north-west conditions that no organisation could have prevented the initial spread. As in the case of almost all dangerous fires it was the change in wind and weather which enabled the fire to be brought under control. However, Forest Service experience would have been very beneficial in the areas of rapid co-ordination and control assistance of the Dunsandel fire particularly, but also in the Rangiora area.

A rural fire co-ordinating committee was set up in Canterbury early in 1989 following the fires. The work of this committee, as for others in the country, will be a power for good in the prevention and control of fires in the future and especially when new legislation provides the necessary teeth.

In the final analysis a political decision has been made to place national rural fire matters in the hands of the Fire Service.

Other forest fire-fighting countries have not followed this pattern – Australia, USA and Canada especially. In Western Europe, because of dense populations and network of communities some countries have placed all fire organisations under the urban fire umbrella. This has not been successful in Spain and problems have arisen in France and England.

It behoves all of us in the rural areas, therefore, and those with forest interest especially, to make sure that rural needs are kept in mind by the Fire Service Commission and Minister of Internal Affairs.

The forest and rural representatives on the Working Party have a great responsibility therefore to ensure that the objectives are met.

Other recommendations will strengthen rural fire prevention and control especially in local government areas of responsibility. In the past they have often relied upon either the Forest Service or the Fire Service or both. Forest Owners have rarely shirked their fire responsibilities.

Neill Cooper
Committee Member
Hensley Report

Canadian forestry goes full circle

After being shunted from one department to another for three decades, Canadian forestry is once again to have a federal Department of Forestry.

The first autonomous Department of Forestry was created in 1960 but it was to become, in rapid succession, a branch of a variety of other parent organisations. In 1966 it became part of the Department of Forestry and Rural Development; in 1969, the Department of Fisheries and Forestry; was moved to the Department of Environment in 1971; and transferred to the Department of Agriculture in 1984. In 1988 it became a separate department, "Forestry Canada", operating through Orders-in-Council but early in 1990 is to become a full federal Department of Forestry under its own Act.

Mandate

The mandate of the new department will include: national leadership in the development and co-ordination of forest policy; forestry research and development; co-operation with involved orga-

nisations across a wide range of areas of forest management and protection. This reads remarkably like the functions of our own Ministry of Forestry which, according to the Minister, is about to be scrutinised by Cabinet to see if it should go out of existence.

Impetus

The Canadian impetus for the restoration of full departmental status has come from their private forestry sector, which was concerned at the lack of clear policies, especially for the sustainable management of forests. This lack was undoubtedly a result of the secondary status of forestry within other departments that had much wider responsibilities than forestry.

It is to be hoped that New Zealand forestry does not have to go on the same merry-go-round, when we already have the central Government structure that has taken Canada 30 years of trial and error to develop.

Colin Bassett