



# Just do something!

BY TONY RICHARDSON

The topic of climate change has been debated in professional circles for many years. In a course he developed for the Association of Professional Engineers in 1991, the author remembers raising a series of questions on global warming: "In the meantime, what do we do? Do we wait for the evidence to come in, and then react (hoping that it is not too late, if indeed the greenhouse effect is real)? Or do we make contingency plans now to cater for a range of possibilities?" In today's climate, these questions now seem rhetorical: the time for fence sitting is over, he argues.



Tony Richardson with Treesmart's own 40ha hardwood sawlog planting next to the Cathedral Range near Taggerty, Victoria. Newly planted trees are the future of a harvested plantation sequestration industry. PHOTO: Andrew Lang

In the 15 years since, the incoming evidence has clearly indicated that climate change is real, and is mainly caused by humans and their profligate use of fossil fuels. Until very recently in Australia, however, the burgeoning pile of scientific evidence has not been matched by a plethora of political commitment and action. Only in the past six months has the Federal Government grudgingly accepted that global warming might be real (or at least a little uncomfortable). It has taken the independent action of the states, a groundswell of public agitation, and the emergence of a credible leader of the Federal Opposition with a clear climate change platform, to convince the Government that there might be a loss of votes if they continued to ignore climate change.

Even so, there has been more talk than action about climate change. The Federal Government continues to refuse to sign the Kyoto Protocol. on the grounds that, "Why should Australia sign if other large nations do not sign?" This is akin to asking why I should be convicted of murder for only killing one person, if others remain unconvicted of killing hundreds.

### It's time!

It is time for Australia and Australians to do what is morally right for humanity, rather than worrying about what others might or might not do.

In thinking about actions to take, time is of the essence. While exploring longer term solutions, we also need to implement solutions that can make a difference in the short to medium term. In this respect, carbon sequestration in harvested plantations can have a significant impact. The National Emissions Trading Scheme (NETS), proposed by the Australian states to implement an active carbon trading scheme from 2010 onwards, recognises the role that can be played by offsetting of emissions in plantation forests, including the ongoing storage of sequestered carbon in timber products. Such plantations can be established within two years, and within another five years they can be extracting carbon dioxide from the atmosphere at around their maximum rates. This timeframe is much shorter than that proposed for many of the

more exotic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and sequestration schemes. It is also more cost-effective, and can bring about many other social, economic and environmental benefits, such as providing economic support to the farming community to help them drought-proof their farms, assist in salinity control, reduce pressure on the logging of native growth forests, and improve the trade balance by reducing the need for import of timber products while generating valuable export industries.

Plantation forests can also play a major role in the development of cost-effective, base-load renewable energy resources. The residue from harvesting operations (including thinning and pruning) comprises about 70% of the volume of wood in a harvested plantation. Using that resource for the generation of electricity (rather than thinking of the residue as a 'waste') can generate copious quantities of renewable energy, while at the same time ensuring that carbon remains sequestered in coal that would otherwise be burnt to generate that energy.

Australia has already lost many years to inaction in the climate change field. For a country with abundant supplies of land, sunlight and other natural resources, we have been overly concerned with protecting industries that consume massive amounts of energy in their operations (e.g. aluminium smelters) or industries that produce massive environmental problems in generating the required energy (e.g. the coal industry). It's time that we started thinking forwards as to where we will be in 20-50 years time, rather than thinking about the immediate future (i.e. the next election) or backwards. While the NETS scheme is not due for implementation till 2010, voluntary schemes are being established on several fronts, with a view to having the infrastructure required for a mandatory scheme up and running well before 2010.

It's time to get off the climate change fence! In the words of John Kennedy, the legendary Hawthorn football coach, "Don't Think; Don't Hope; Do Something!".



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