

Executive Summary

Background

Northland Regional Council's (NRC's) Hill Country Erosion Fund (HCEF) Boost Year project ran from October 2018 to June 2019. The project was jointly funded by NRC and the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI). Its purpose was to provide a rapid stocktake of the opportunities and constraints for afforestation and forest management across the Northland region.

The HCEF Boost Year final report is designed to be an in-depth but accessible resource for all parties involved with land management and forest establishment in Northland — from regulators through to landowners. It is also designed to inform NRC's future operations — including the newly funded Sustainable Hill Country & Regional Priorities (SHaRP) project (2019 – 2023) and the proposed Northland Afforestation & Reforestation Strategy — and to contribute to partnership projects involving afforestation in the region.

Our Achievements

In the past 7 months, discussions, facilitated forums, in-house and commissioned research has included:

- identifying priority catchments through a local, regional and national lens
- establishing regional priorities for erosion control
- updating soil conservation research
- building engagement with iwi and hapū
- identifying indigenous biodiversity priorities
- organising a stocktake of historic and current afforestation activities
- developing a prototype nursery accreditation scheme and testing the idea on industry representatives
- clarifying the regulatory framework governing plantation forestry, including the ETS
- developing a one-stop-shop database of Northland nurseries, seed collectors, forestry advisors, wood buyers and harvesters for landowners
- investigating the pros and cons of the native plantation forest registration process, and the social license needed to grow native trees for harvest
- developing innovative digital tools for land management and forest establishment
- learning lessons from other HCEF regions via expert and national afforestation hui hosted by the NRC
- collating and refining afforestation good practice for Northland, with consideration of looming climate change pressures

- scoping potential markets for alternative timbers and uses for trees, including forest understory species
- planning future stakeholder engagement and communications about land management
- coordinating the planting of 2,500 poplar and willow poles, and 20,000 native trees

Internal Collaboration

The HCEF Boost team worked closely with other NRC departments to ensure existing knowledge and research were considered and well aligned. The internal technical advisory group included Land Management, Biodiversity, Biosecurity, Māori Engagement, Monitoring and Consents, Strategy, Communications and GIS departments. The high level of collaboration achieved to date has opened new channels of communication and encouraged cross-discipline teamwork within NRC.

External Partnerships

Our external partners were consulted at hui and different forums; they provided a diverse range of inputs throughout the Boost Year. These parties' future collaboration is crucial in creating a broad and effective Regional Afforestation Strategy (pending application approval).

Key project partners are:

- Department of Conservation (DOC)
- Northland Wood Council (NWC)
- Te Puni Kōkiri (TPK)
- MPI & Te Uru Rākau
- Reconnecting Northland
- Tai Tokerau Māori Forestry, Inc.
- Tane's Tree Trust (TTT)
- Trees that Count
- the Far North District Council (FNDC)
- the New Zealand Farm Forestry Association (NZFFA)
- QEII National Trust
- the Ngā Whenua Rāhui (a DOC funding programme)
- other regional & local authorities
- local and national industry representatives

Expert Advice

Numerous contracts were initiated through the Boost Year, which saw NRC engage with local industry experts across a wide range of forest and land management topics. These consultants produced a highly informed, deep analysis of issues and opportunities. Their reports can be found in the final report appendices, and a list of contracts can be viewed in the “Report Structure” section of this document.

Refining and mapping of regional afforestation priorities/opportunities and constraints was undertaken at a catchment scale by our team, with input from land management experts. Doubtless Bay catchment was used as a test case to spatially identify and record these factors. This pilot exercise may in time inform strategic land-use planning and forest design across the region, and will continue to be developed under NRC’s proposed land management programmes and partnership projects (Ministry for the Environment [MfE] Freshwater Improvement Fund [FIF] and HCEF SHaRP project).

Engagement with Mana Whenua

The HCEF Boost Year research identified a solid level of engagement by Māori landowners with NRC Land Management Advisors (LMAs), especially via advisory services and farm environment plans (FEPs cover 22,000ha [18%] of Māori-owned land). The project also highlighted NRC’s lack of a formally structured approach to Māori engagement for land management staff. We recognised a need for a whenua Māori-focussed training for our Land Management Advisors, which will be designed as a pilot from late 2019.

There are a large number of iwi involved with commercial forestry in Northland; they are well represented in industry up to the governance level and are generally supported by the private sector. Smaller whānau and hapū groups with freehold land represent significant allies for achieving regional sustainable land use goals, particularly indigenous afforestation. These groups are at varying “levels of readiness” to engage with NRC on afforestation and other land-use issues, partly due to complex, shared-ownership models (and related financial & administrative structures) prevalent on whenua Māori in Northland. These factors reinforce the importance of fostering NRC and partners’ working relationship with Te Puni Kōkiri, and of our shared responsibility in helping Māori landowners fulfil their vision for their land. NRC’s role as a culturally aware, reliable and trusted technical advisor on sustainable land use is integral to building lasting relationships with tangata whenua.

Building Industry & Landowner Support

Overall, the commercial forestry sector is fully aware of, and engaged with, the afforestation opportunity. The Northland Wood Council (NWC) is keen to continue to work alongside NRC and partners to build regional successes and alliances — including collaboration on skills, capacity and capability building, and forest management extension services. Discussions around best practice forest management and sustainable design are ongoing. The forestry sector is very important to Northland’s economy and has been managing high-quality forests for decades, though planting rates have ebbed and flowed over the years. Currently, there is an

upsurge in activity, with a number of parties engaging in opportunities such as One Billion Trees — from iwi trusts to individual landowners. As with all good land management, assessing approaches to plantation afforestation on a case-by-case (farm-by-farm) basis, whilst understanding wider catchment impacts, will deliver the best results.

During the Boost Year project, 17 nurseries provided data for a targeted survey, which showed that around 10 million trees are currently produced per annum in Northland. Critical issues for Northland's 31 plant nurseries are thought to be similar to those across New Zealand. For example, the approach of pre-ordering plants for afforestation projects will help build business confidence to enable upscaling to meet demand. Ecosourcing of indigenous trees is viewed as an appropriate and effective measure that can help to facilitate afforestation good practice, especially in light of regional biodiversity goals. Agency support of local nurseries – and closer working relationships between agencies and nursery sector representatives – is key to successfully increasing the quantity and quality of forest establishment in Northland.

More collaboration is needed with the agriculture sector to promote afforestation, soil conservation, and sustainable land use in a shifting regulatory environment. This ongoing work will ensure that current information, skills, incentives (and hence motivation), and supply of materials will not become barriers to afforestation for rural professionals or landowners. A cross-agency “land-use toolbox” can be designed as a future one-stop-shop for landowners, providing easy access to funding options, accurate and up-to-date forest establishment costings, and clarity of agency roles/extension services available. Knowledge captured by NRC's Boost Year project, especially the “Afforestation Good Practice Repository” (to be made available online), represents a major contribution to this toolbox.

Landowners have voiced a number of barriers to afforestation on their land, such as taxation, Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) complexities, and the shifting sands of the regulatory environment. They are operating in a rapidly changing landscape, with further pressure being applied to the agricultural sector through signalled changes to the National Policy Statement–Freshwater Management (NPS–FM) and the potential announcement of National Environmental Standards–Freshwater (NES–FW). Perceived instability has a direct impact on the uptake of afforestation, and will likely manifest in adjustments to NRC's SHaRP and Long Term Plan delivery over time. Trees represent a multi-generational investment in our land and communities, but such investment relies on a stable, long-term vision, as well as wise leadership from policy makers.

The effects of climate change on our landscapes and forests are also worthy of much greater assessment and action. Focussed research into this topic, specifically for Northland, should form part of a Regional Afforestation & Reforestation Strategy.

New Zealand Farm Forestry Association (NZFFA) member Michael Gravatt formally interviewed 13 farm foresters, and NRC held many informal discussions with members. Our team also attended the NZFFA National Conference in Rotorua. The NZFFA has provided a wealth of practical knowledge to the Boost Year project. Aligning this knowledge with NRC programmes will help build capability and capacity, thus assisting successful forest establishment on farms across Northland. This collaboration also ensures that decades-old afforestation wisdom can be passed down to future generations.

Finally, the HCEF Boost Year team coordinated the planting of approximately 20,000 native trees and 2,500 poplar and willow poles through 11 projects. These plantings contribute to the national goal of “planting the right tree, in the right place, for the right purpose” – and add to the millions of trees planted annually by councils, hapū, schools, community groups, foresters and many others.

Afforestation presents a significant opportunity to provide multiple benefits for Northland’s biodiversity, water quality, soil conservation, economy and climate change response. Providing an accessible range of high-quality guidance to landowners in priority areas will be fundamental to maximising these benefits. The HCEF Boost project has provided invaluable insights into Northland’s capacity to take advantage of afforestation initiatives. It has also identified a number of issues to be addressed if the opportunity is to be realised to its full potential.