



National forestry centre to inject vision, direction and innovation

BY MARK HUNT

The National Centre for Future Forest Industries was formed in mid 2012 by a grant of \$2.5 million from the Federal Government to the University of Tasmania. Funded for three years, the centre's purpose is to provide a core of research activity and capacity that supports the development of a future for forestry in this country.



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Abundant views exist about what constitutes a future forest industry, ranging from a sector dominated by ecosystem services to one that uses composite and engineered products to substitute for other materials in construction. Nearly all of the imagined futures have some common attributes – the potential role of forests and wood in addressing climate change, the changes in the resource that will be available and the need to innovate with respect to markets and products.

The need for vision, direction and innovation in the forestry sector has never been more important given the recent completion of the Cooperative Research Centre for Forestry (after 20 years), a high Australian dollar, changed access to forest resources and challenging market conditions.

While based within the University of Tasmania (UTAS), the centre's

mandate is to have national presence, participation and impact. At the end of three years, it is expected that the centre will become self sustaining. Governance arrangements include an advisory board made up of representatives from UTAS, other research providers and industry.

Significant changes have occurred within the forestry sector over the past decade. Access to public native forests for production purposes has declined, and is likely to decline further, while the Managed Investment Scheme experiment has yet to deliver the economic or policy outcomes envisaged. Additionally, there is (legitimately) an increasing need to address social license issues in both public and private forest management within a sociopolitical climate where science is increasingly confused with opinion. As a result of these changes, the industry faces technical challenges in adjusting to a plantation resource for traditional hardwood solid timber products, while an urgent need exists to consider the advantages of engineered wood products – for both structural and appearance purposes.

A future carbon and energy-constrained economy will provide opportunities for increased substitution of wood products for steel and concrete. And in this future, the integration of forest management with other production land uses will also continue to grow.

Some of the critical challenges facing forestry include having to work further down the value chain than the sector has historically focused (building systems, for instance); and addressing what we can do with our residues in light of declining international market opportunities and the diminishing prospects of a domestic pulp mill.

The National Centre's role in addressing these challenges is to direct its resources to some key opportunities and risks that span both the value chain and the geographic breadth of the industry, as well as providing a balance between strategic and more immediate impacts for the forestry community in its broadest sense.

Initially, the centre will concentrate activity across three research themes and an education theme. The three broad areas of research are:

- **Future options** – Options and opportunities for higher value uses of the now-maturing plantation hardwood resource, in the context of declining industrial access to native forests;
- **Productivity** – Urgently needed solutions to second rotation productivity decline in hardwood plantations, developed within a multi-rotation, economic framework. Innovations in logistics and applications of emerging technologies to forest operations will be a key focus;
- **Risk mitigation** – Reduction of the investment risk associated with new species/environment combinations in tree plantings for industry, farm forestry and environmental services (e.g. carbon, biodiversity, salinity management).

In addition to specific R&D projects, part of the centre's role is to coordinate and facilitate research in the forestry and forest products space and through these efforts contribute to the maintenance of national capacity in forestry R&D. The present suite of projects already engages a range of stakeholders including CSIRO, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australian Forest Operations Research Alliance, Queensland Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, University of Melbourne, Southern Tree Breeding Association, Forestry Tasmania, New Forests, Australian Bluegum Plantations and Forest & Wood Products Australia.

It is hoped that as the centre grows and matures it will broaden its scope and work with an expanded group of partners and affiliates, both in industry and the research community, ultimately making an ongoing and valued contribution to the social, economic and environmental outcomes for Australia's forestry sector well into the future.