



**Media release from the Southern Wood Council
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Retiring Southern Wood Council chairman predicts greater wood use in the building industry

The use of wood for building in New Zealand is likely to take off as we recognise it is the world's most renewable raw material.

That's the prediction from Matthew Hitchings, who has just stepped down as the inaugural chairman of the Southern Wood Council.

Mr Hitchings has, for the last seven years, headed one of the most active regional forestry groups in New Zealand.

The Southern Wood Council brings together forest owners, wood processors, port companies and council economic development unit representatives from throughout Otago and Southland into one of only a few truly independent groups of its type.

The rationale behind forming the council was providing a forum to work collaboratively, and under Mr Hitching's leadership, the collective has achieved that. In fact, the Council has become a model for other national groups.

"We have gained credibility both within the region and nationally for bringing all the different facets of the industry together to speak collectively on issues that affect the region. It's provided a positive force for the individuals passionate about the forestry industry, and for the local companies and district councils as well."

The forestry industry here and overseas is currently facing challenges from high costs and constraining markets, but wood as a sustainable commodity has a positive future as it prepares to meet the building supply competition head-on.

"It's renewable qualities are going to make it increasingly attractive across the globe, but especially for the building industry as it faces demands from customers for environmentally sustainable construction products," Mr Hitchings suggested.

The 215,662 hectares of commercial plantation forests in Otago and Southland are well positioned to meet those demands, with the harvest predicted to double to about 2.8 million cubic metres a year after the next decade.

And of course the carbon-storing qualities of its trees also positions the region well as New Zealand is about to introduce its Emissions Trading Scheme.

One of the developing forestry sector trends Mr Hitchings is particularly encouraged about is the current move towards bio-energy, where wood off-cuts are used to produce energy, and to power wood processing. "It's an innovation that's gaining momentum in forestry in the south, and really puts us at the forefront of sustainability initiatives as a sector.

He's also noted with interest the growing trend for Douglas fir production in the region, . "We've become renown as an area that grows the species very well, the timber is also becoming recognised as a premier framing wood. "

The Council has also worked collectively over the last seven years on promoting forestry as a career option, and Mr Hitchings is pleased to see information now at local career events which demonstrate the considerable depth of work available in forests and wood processing that crosses all skill levels.

The Southern Wood Council has also taken the role of producing valuable information on the collective resource to assist councils and port authorities with planning. A report commissioned by the council shows the sector is a significant employer and contributor to the local economy, accounting for up to \$200m in regional exports annually.

"The council's made fantastic progress since 2001 in providing the sort of voice that other primary sector industries have enjoyed, and I believe is well set to continue its collaborative approach," Mr Hitchings observed.

"Wood's warm aesthetic qualities have long attracted people to its use, which adds yet another string to the industry's bow. It's an enduring material, supported by an enduring industry."

The Southern Wood Council Inc was set up in 2001 to promote, encourage and coordinate the sustainable economic development of the forest products industry in Otago and Southland. One of a few truly independent groups of its type in New Zealand, it includes all the major forest owners within the region (ownership or management of over 140,000 hectares of production forests with an annual harvest of over 1.2 million m³ of wood), the larger wood processing and manufacturing companies, the port authorities, and each of the three economic development agencies from local councils.

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