NZDFI - New Zealand Dryland Forests Initiative

The New Zealand Dryland Forests Initiative, an R&D project to grow durable eucalypt forests in this country, has taken a major step forward in the last year, winning significant new funding for its next phase.

What began seven years ago as an investigation into an alternative source of timber vineyard posts is now a million-dollar programme, the largest eucalypt forest research project in the country.

Based at the Marlborough Research Centre and supported by Proseed, the NZ Farm Forestry Association and the national School of Forestry, the potential of the project has captured the imagination and the support of farm foresters and wine growers, five regional councils and Marlborough's local electricity lines company as well as a number of landowners.

As well as providing a durable hardwood for a range of uses, rapidly growing eucalypts are an eligible species for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Afforestation Grants Scheme and Emissions Trading Scheme. They offer a sustainable land use option, combating soil erosion by their rapid regeneration after felling or burning and some species provide nectar for native birdlife and bees.

The NZDFI tree breeding programme, focused on five species of eucalypts, is well underway.

Using thousands of seeds collected from Australia, breeding populations are being nurtured for testing in order to identify the trees with the best genetics for New Zealand conditions, looking for such qualities as rapid growth, good form and early heartwood formation as well as durability.

The project aims to establish New Zealand as a world leader in the breeding of durable eucalypt species and to create a supply of high quality hardwood for the domestic and, potentially, the international market.

Early in 2010, the project received significant affirmation; MAF approval for a $399,000 grant from the Sustainable Farming Fund spread over the next three years.

That SFF grant helped to secure a range of other financial support, to a total of $320,000 in cash and supplemented by an additional $300,000 plus of "in kind" contributions.

The new funding has allowed the tree breeding programme to expand beyond Marlborough into a nationally significant multi-species research programme extending into some of New Zealand's driest regions from Canterbury north to the Wairarapa, Gisborne and Hawke's Bay.

Project manager, forestry consultant Paul Millen, says the SFF grant will be used to establish breeding populations for three more species in 2011, bringing the total planting up to 60,000 trees at up to nine sites, far more than was initially envisaged.

"The new funding has enabled us to eliminate a big element of risk from this project. The number of different species means we have a much broader programme to take us toward our target of developing a range of genetically improved varieties that are best adapted to producing high quality timber in our dryland conditions."

He says it was the Marlborough Research Centre which gave the project its initial impetus, with the Centre providing advice and hosting the initial discussions, and then facilitating the linkages between the forestry researchers and wine sector by hosting workshops and science meetings.

"It was a far-sighted commitment to a project that began with the simple target of finding a superior quality vineyard post but which has grown into a tree breeding programme which has exciting long term prospects for our forestry sector and timber export industry."

NZDFI Chairman Shaf van Ballekom says the Marlborough Research Centre's role has been key to the great progress being made with the eucalypts project.

"It's a wonderful facility managed by very professional people and is allowing the NZDFI to focus its efforts on science and trial work. Overheads are kept to a minimum because the administration of the project by MRCT staff is done efficiently and effectively. It's a pleasure to work with staff who are also taking such a keen interest in the outcomes of the project."