The Solomon Islands form a mountainous and coral atoll archipelago stretching over 1,400 kilometres into the Pacific to the south east from Bougainville. The nation bearing their name is a relatively new member of the British Commonwealth having been a sovereign democracy since 1978. The population of 410,000 people is primarily Melanesian with some Polynesian and Micronesian influence. There are over 300 islands with the five major island groups each providing a different Melanesian ethnicity. The country is struggling to cope with lack of domestic capital, lack of infrastructure, difficult transport and communication logistics, low literacy rate, rapid population growth and, more recently, debilitating internal ethnic tensions.

The government is undertaking a massive reform program aiming to increase efficiency in the public service and in the management of the economy. This report describes the forest policy context of recent years in Solomon Islands and addresses the legislative, policy, institutional and financial framework now in place. New legislation passed by the Parliament is an excellent platform from which to install a new standard of forest management.

Importance of the forests

The forests of Solomon Islands are of fundamental importance to all aspects of livelihood and culture. They are the most obvious natural resource, covering 85 per cent of the land area of Solomon Islands. The forests contain the cultural heritage, protecting tambu and historical sites. They supply food, bush materials and protect water supplies.

They provide the land and resources for the major part of the subsistence production, which supports the majority of the population. Direct forestry paid employment rivals agriculture as the largest employer...
with an estimated 2,700 people employed in the forest industries. There are 91 large logging licensees of which 19 are operating at present, providing over 50 per cent of the nation’s export revenue earnings. The largest of these licensees are foreign owned, providing capital and expertise but also resulting in a significant share of profits going offshore.

There are also more than 500 smaller licensees who, while each cuts a relatively small volume of logs, generate cash at local level and supply timber primarily for housing. Rapid population increase and the move to more permanent housing construction methods mean that demand for these supplies is constantly growing. The licensees also supply an insatiable demand for export of valuable species like Kwila and Rosewood, which are prohibited from export as sawlogs.

The current harvesting rate, which is about double the long-term sustainable rate, can continue for only a few more years. Over the next several years, the costs of timber production will rise steadily because the remaining resources will be increasingly difficult to access.

The forests of Solomon Islands are also precious in world terms. The total world area of tropical rainforest is being inexorably depleted. The intrinsic value of this resource is inestimable. The economic value of scenic, biodiversity and cultural attributes are increasingly being realised through a growing ecotourism industry. The causes of forest destruction that have operated elsewhere are also evident in Solomon Islands, and these are not only logging.

**Forests Act 1999**

**Necessity for the new Forests Act**

A new Forests Act was passed by Parliament in June 1999 and implemented with Regulations on 29 February 2000. The Forests Act 1999 was required because the previous law was inadequate to deal with modern forestry practice. This was so whether the harvesting was carried out with heavy machinery or with small portable mills,

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**Table 1  Solomon Islands forestry: vital statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total land area</td>
<td>2,334,900 hectares, approximately 90 per cent forested including gardens and logged areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of accessible merchantable forest</td>
<td>598,500 hectares net</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>estimated at 450,000 and increasing at 3.5 per cent annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual rainfall</td>
<td>3,500 to 11,000 mm with 250 rain days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable harvest rate (estimate)</td>
<td>250,000 cubic metres per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current harvest rate</td>
<td>550,000 cubic metres per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual f.o.b. harvest value</td>
<td>SI$200 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual duty revenue</td>
<td>SI$50 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx. direct employment</td>
<td>2700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Solomon Islands Forestry Commission, Honiara.*
whether by large companies or by individual landowners. Since its consolidation in 1969, the Forest Resources and Timber Utilization Act was amended nine times, including two major amendments in 1977 and 1990, making it very difficult to follow and it consequently came to be bypassed or ignored. A key point in reaching this situation was that, when the law was framed by the colonial administration, it did not permit logging on custom-owned land. Then, when this was permitted, a process was introduced to shortcut the identification of forest ownership rights. This was the establishment of a process to determine forest ownership rights via hearings of Area Councils. It is clearly biased against the custom forest-owner and there are many disputes and disappointments as expectations are often unmet. The Forests Division is still coping with the multitude of disputes and disappointments caused by the complexity of the Act and by abuse of its processes.

Implementation of the new Act including re-equipping and re-training the Forests Division of the Department of Natural resources are being assisted by a major AusAID program. An earlier program initiated in 1991 was abruptly withdrawn in 1996 due to disagreements at Government level at the rate of progress. The first program aimed primarily at maximizing revenues from export of forest products through improved surveillance and monitoring. The present program, which is considerably broader in scope, is further described below.

Key policy features of the new legislation

The objectives of the Act are
• to ensure proper management of forest resources in an efficient, effective and sustainable manner
• to promote the development of a sustainable commercial timber industry so as to ensure maximum benefit to present and future generations
• to protect and conserve forest resources, habitats and ecosystems, including the maintenance of ecological processes and genetic diversity.

These objectives are explained and established through a set of principles, which guide the Minister and the Commissioner of Forests in the exercise of their powers. These are
• sustainability of resource utilisation
• the rights of custom owners
• application of the precautionary principle to management decisions
• the balancing of economic and ecological objectives
• the protection of biodiversity
• consistency with international treaties and obligations and
• consistency with the national policies for forest resource conservation and timber industry development.

These objectives and principles are surely impeccable in requiring attention to all the complex issues of economic, conservation and social development. They are the criteria against which the future will judge our performance.

Promotion of a sustainable forest resource and sustainable industries

The new legislation addresses the defined objectives by requiring documented policies for the protection of forest resources and for the development of the timber industry and by requiring that a Code of Forest Practice be followed in field operations. The policies and the Code are requirements of the Act.

The Code and the policies must be approved by the Minister and tabled to the Cabinet. In preparing them the Minister will take the advice of a new body, the Solomon Islands Forestry Board. This Board will comprise representatives of each of the sectors involved, including the custom owners.

The other necessary steps are to reduce the current harvesting rate to sustainable
levels. This requires a reduction to about 50 per cent of the present rate and it has to be achieved in the face of the importance of the timber industry to the economy.

Draft policies addressing this critical issue have been prepared for stakeholder discussion during the next several months. It is hoped that a strategy which has sufficient support to be implementable will emerge. The alternative of allowing the excessive cutting rate to continue until the industry collapses is unacceptable given the drastic effect both on the national economy and on future merchantable forest yields.

**Introduction of land-use capability assessments**

The procedure for issue of a licence will first ensure that proposed harvest areas are suitable for the purpose through a Determination of Potential Forest Uses. This involves an assessment of the capability of the land in question to support a commercial timber harvesting. It is to be prepared by the Forestry Division after recommendation by the Provincial Government and publicised before any licence application can proceed. This will prevent unrealistic expectations and will ensure that forest harvesting is not permitted in areas of special environmental sensitivity.

- Disputes will be notified and settled independently of the Government administration through Councils of Chiefs, Local Courts and Customary Land Appeal Court.
- Negotiations between logging companies and landowners must in future be in accordance with the new procedures.
- Adequate publicity and adequate time must be provided to ensure awareness.
- The identified landowners must decide the type and scale of the forest harvesting operation through their nominated custom representatives.
- Owners must invite a logging company to enter an Agreement with them for the work to be done. This agreement must follow the model established by regulation.
  - The Agreement must be ‘fully understood and fair’ and given consent by the Provincial Government (appealable).
  - There is a mandatory requirement for adherence to a Code of Practice and for a performance bond to ensure reforestation.

**Small-scale timber harvesting**

Where the wood is for custom or domestic purposes and not for sale, no licence is required. Where forest owners wish to sell timber, there are Local Timber Harvesting Licences and Community Timber Harvesting Licences available. Owners can fell and mill up to 200 cubic metres per year under a Local Timber Harvesting Licence. A community may combine their efforts to cut up to 2000 cubic metres per year under a Community Timber Harvesting Licence. In these cases the procedure for establishing ownership rights is simpler.

**Land-clearing permits**

The new legislation treats large-scale land clearing in the same way as timber harvesting, that is, a permit is be required. Traditional clearing for garden sites and village use does not require a permit.

**Establishment of Forest Reserves and State Forests**

Where necessary to protect a water catchment area, the Minister may declare any area as a Forest Reserve. Similarly State Forest reservations can be used to protect important conservation values. This power allows for restriction of the rights of owners to affect the values of the land as a catchment. Such a constraint is a significant power and it cannot be exercised without adequate consultation and consideration of the impact of the declaration on existing rights. The Bill includes provision for compensation in the
event that rights are significantly restricted and if no satisfactory alternative arrangements can be negotiated.

Public land whether freehold or leased may be declared to be a State Forest with the consequence that there is security of tenure for forestry developments such as state owned forest plantations.

Implementation strategy for the Code of Forest Practice

Attention to the Code is mandatory under the new legislation and there are significant punitive powers. It is no longer a ‘guideline’. It is however necessary to accept that there are neither the resources nor the ability to move instantly from where we are now to full compliance. The strategy to get there will necessarily involve increased monitoring and enforcement capacity and use of the punitive powers. It is also recognised that education and incentives must be the primary tools in obtaining compliance. There will never be enough forest officers to supervise every operation constantly and there must be widespread understanding of the Code of Practice and a willingness to accept it. The environment must therefore be created in which attention to the Code is not seen to be a burden but to be in the interests of all parties.

The first priority for implementation is to update the current draft Code. There will also be training of officers and licensees. Efforts will be made to increase the knowledge of forestry and of the Code throughout the community generally.

Implementation of the new legislation

Resources for the implementation of the Forests Act 1999 and for strengthening of the forest administration are identified through an AusAID/SIG funded bilateral Forest Management Program, which started in August 1999.

This three-year, SI$16.5 million, program has six components.

1. Providing the policy regulatory and legal framework for a sustainable forest industry

Outputs include
- implementation of the Forest Act including revision of regulations
- establishment of a Forests Board or stakeholder representatives to advise the Minister.
- preparation of policies for forest resource management and for timber industry development.

2. Improving forest monitoring and revenue capture

Key output
- establishing an effective monitoring capacity

3. Improving infrastructure for monitoring

Outputs include
- restoration of infrastructure
- provision of new facilities in additional locations

4. Improving institutional arrangements

Outputs include
- options for reduction of harvest to the sustainable level.
- improved landowner awareness of timber rights
- revised Code of Practice and reduced impact logging guidelines.

5. Policies for increasing domestic processing

Outputs include
- analysis of economics of present situation
• options for increasing value-adding processing.

6. Improved inventory and silviculture

Outputs include
• silvicultural prescriptions
• improved inventory capability
• revitalised electronic data storage.

Institutional arrangements and effectiveness of forest management

The Forests Division of the Department of Natural Resources administers the Forests Act. It is headed by a Commissioner reporting to the Minister via the Departmental Permanent Secretary. There is a total workforce of 113 including 56 established (that is, permanent public service) staff. The established staff are almost entirely trained to technical certificate level at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education. Five only have diplomas or degrees from either the University of the South Pacific or PNG universities. There is one post-graduate recently returned from scholarship study in Australia. The Division has nine field stations usually comprising a small office and two or three houses. These have had no investment or upgrading since the previous AusAID project was terminated in 1996. The premature termination was symptomatic of the government attitude to forest yield regulation at that time. Private sector revenue generation was the primary preoccupation. The Forests Division was deprived of political support and funds and it became progressively de-skilled and demoralised.

Government funds remain scarce but the attitude is now very supportive.

The primary logistic difficulties that affect every aspect of the national economy remain. Resources are scarce. Mobility is primarily by motorised canoe with dangerous coastal journeys of five or six hours often necessary for forest officers to reach licensed felling areas. The primary preoccupation of the field forest officers is the monitoring of ship loadings for revenue collection. Monitoring of the standard of operations within the forest is made difficult by the problems of mobility, the lack of communications and the lack of sufficient trained staff. Government financial processes are complex and lack delegation. There is a chronic shortage of funds. There is no credit available and simple matters like obtaining fuel or repairs are extraordinarily difficult and time consuming.

The customary tenure system results in varied cooperation by the landowner licensees. They may at times be in aggressive dispute with the logging company about the standard of operations and insistent that a licence be cancelled immediately. At other times they may be tolerant of blatant abuse of the Code of Practice and resistant to efforts to enforce it. Politics and commercial opportunism play a part in these situations all too frequently. Nevertheless efforts are being made focusing on inspection and approval of annual harvesting plans and monitoring against the Code of Practice.

The task of the field forest officer presents challenges not often found elsewhere.

Conclusion

This paper reports the progress made towards introduction of an improved standard of forest management in the Solomon Islands. The very significant difficulties, which have been overcome in the progress achieved so far, should be acknowledged. At the same time it must be accepted that only the framework and the basic means are now available. The continued commitment of Government to the reform and revitalisation is crucial to success.