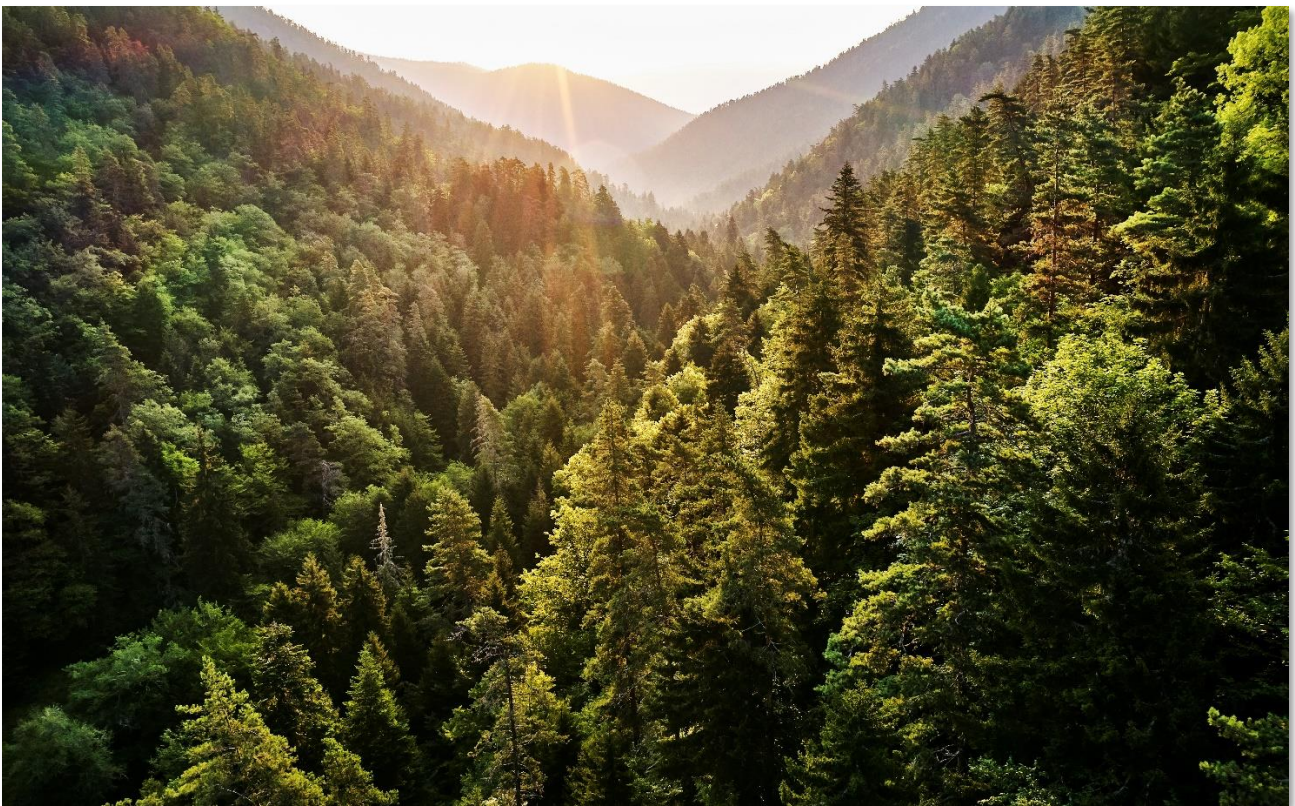


Case Study: Te Kawa a Tāne

Transforming Forestry Health and Safety



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Introduction

The forestry sector plays a vital role in Te Tairāwhiti (the East Coast region) economy, employing approximately one in four people within the region. However, the industry has faced significant challenges over the past few years which have impacted worker safety and wellbeing, with Māori workers disproportionately represented in serious harm incidents and fatalities in the sector. This highlights the critical need to address how health and safety within forestry is approached.

Te Kawa a Tāne alliance was established in October 2023 as a response to these challenges. The alliance brings together forestry industry leaders including contractors and kaimahi alongside a range of agencies like the New Zealand Police, Ministry for Social Development, and ACC. What sets this initiative apart is its focus on empowering kaimahi (forestry workers) by integrating them into decision-making processes that directly impact their safety and wellbeing.

The alliance emerged from earlier pilot work by WorkSafe in 2016-17, which identified the need for a community-led approach to address health and safety concerns. This approach acknowledges that traditional compliance-based methods have not effectively addressed the complex cultural and operational challenges within the industry. Through incorporating Te Ao Māori principles and creating a collaborative environment where all voices can be heard, the alliance aims to transform industry culture and practices.

This case study examines how Te Kawa a Tāne alliance has developed and implemented its model, the challenges it has faced, and the impact it has had on worker safety and industry practices. It also explores the potential for this model to be adapted and implemented in other regions across New Zealand, contributing to broader improvements in forestry sector health and safety practices.

Purpose of this case study

This case study examines Te Kawa a Tāne alliance to understand how the model supports worker safety and wellbeing in the Te Tairāwhiti forestry industry.

The case study seeks to:

1. Understand how Te Kawa a Tāne supports kaimahi and their whānau by integrating them into health and safety decision-making processes.
2. Document the alliance's structure, implementation, and effectiveness in bringing together diverse stakeholders including iwi, industry, contractors, and government agencies.
3. Examine how the model incorporates Te Ao Māori principles and practices to create meaningful change in industry culture and practices.
4. Identify key success factors and challenges in implementing and sustaining the initiative.
5. Explore opportunities for improving the model and assess its potential for adaptation in other regions.

Through analysis of stakeholder interviews and programme documentation, this case study provides insights for industry leaders, policymakers, and other regions considering similar approaches to improving forestry sector health and safety outcomes.

The findings will contribute to broader understanding of how these types of community enabled initiatives can effectively address complex industry challenges while supporting worker wellbeing and safety.

Methodology

This research used an exploratory case study approach. Information was gathered in two ways:

1. **Semi-structured Interviews (n=18):** Interviews were conducted with a variety of people involved in the sector, including contractors, consultants, management companies, iwi and community leaders, WorkSafe representatives¹. These conversations provided different perspectives on how Te Kawa a Tāne supports the forestry sector and importantly how it contributes to improved health and safety outcomes.
2. **Document Analysis:** Documents from Te Kawa a Tāne, information from their website, and relevant documents about vocational education and the forestry industry in New Zealand were also analysed to help inform this research.

Combining interviews and document analysis enabled a well-rounded view of how Te Kawa a Tāne operates, and its impact and effectiveness. Interview data was thematically analysed, and important insights were extracted from documentation to compare against interview themes.

¹ All quotes used in the body of the paper are from these interviews.

The Forestry industry in Te Tairāwhiti

The forestry industry in Te Tairāwhiti demonstrates the complex structure typical of the wider New Zealand forestry industry. The industry operates through multiple layers, from forest owners and management companies through to contractors and kaimahi on the ground. Forest ownership in the region includes a mix of international investors, local companies, and iwi-owned forests, managed by various forest management companies.

In Te Tairāwhiti, forestry is a cornerstone of the regional economy, with many families containing someone who is employed either directly or indirectly in the forestry industry. The influence of the industry extends into associated services including engineering, hydraulics, corporate services, and local retail businesses. This interconnected nature means that any impacts to the forestry sector ripple throughout the wider community.

This has been evident in recent years with the region facing significant challenges. The impact of COVID-19, several major weather events, and the economic recession have severely impacted all aspects of forestry.

Furthermore, the industry primarily exports logs through the Port of Gisborne with approximately 97% of production destined for international markets, predominantly China. This export focus makes the sector vulnerable to international markets and geopolitical events, affecting local business sustainability and workforce stability.

The impact of the recent weather events, also led to increased regulatory oversight and community concern about forestry practices, resulting in forestry taking a reputational hit. These pressures, combined with market volatility and operational challenges, create a complex environment for addressing worker safety and wellbeing.

The workforce itself reflects both the strengths and challenges of the sector. There is a high proportion of Māori workers, particularly in operational roles, connecting the industry deeply to local iwi and communities. However, the sector faces demographic pressures from an aging workforce, especially among skilled machine operators and truck drivers. This has led to increasing reliance on immigrant workers to fill crucial skills gaps. The work itself is demanding, and many workers face travel times of up to a minimum of two hours to reach remote work sites.

The industry operates under constant tension between competing priorities. Production pressures must be balanced against safety considerations, environmental compliance requirements often impact operational efficiency, and the need for ongoing training investment can strain contractor profitability.

Work-life balance remains an ongoing challenge given the nature of forestry operations. Despite these challenges, the sector continues to make significant economic contributions - with one company reporting inputs of approximately \$1 million per week into the local community through wages, contractors, and services.

This complex environment highlights why initiatives supporting industry sustainability and workforce wellbeing are crucial not just for the forestry sector, but for the entire region's economic and social prosperity. Understanding this context is essential for developing effective support mechanisms and ensuring the industry's long-term viability in Te Tairāwhiti.

The design and implementation of Te Kawa a Tāne model

“Locally led, regionally enabled, nationally supported”

Te Kawa a Tāne alliance emerged from the recognition that traditional approaches to health and safety in forestry were not effectively addressing the disproportionate rate of serious harm incidents affecting Māori workers. The initiative began in 2016-17 through WorkSafe's engagement with the Te Tairāwhiti community following several fatalities in the region's forestry sector.

The development process involved extensive consultation and planning through a series of wananga held over approximately six months. Key steps included:

1. Bringing together influential stakeholders including:
 - Te Runanganui o Ngāti Porou
 - Te Runanga o Turanganui a Kiwa
 - WorkSafe
 - Eastland Wood Council
 - Safetree
 - Other government agencies - New Zealand Police, the Ministry for Social Development and ACC
 - Forestry owners, management companies, contractors and kaimahi
2. Identifying root causes of safety issues through collaborative workshops and discussions with industry representatives, contractors, and kaimahi.
3. Developing a framework that incorporated Te Ao Māori principles and tikanga, recognising the number of Māori workers in the industry and the importance of cultural alignment.
4. Creating a governance structure with co-chairs from both iwi and industry leadership to ensure balanced representation and cultural appropriateness.

A crucial aspect of the development was the decision to make it community-led rather than WorkSafe-led. While WorkSafe initiated and supported the process, the intention was always for the programme to transition to community ownership with WorkSafe stepping back into a supporting role.

Notably, the development process prioritised building trust and relationships between different stakeholders, particularly given the dynamic between workers, contractors, and management companies. The use of tikanga Māori practices, such as hui protocols and whakawhanaungatanga, helped create a more inclusive and culturally appropriate environment for these discussions.

The model employs a Te Whare Tapa Whā² approach to support health and wellbeing, and has been deliberately designed to incorporate Te Ao Māori principles, recognising the importance of culturally aligned practices in creating meaningful change.

The formal launch occurred in October 2023 with the signing of an accord, marking the official commitment of all stakeholders to work together to improve health and safety outcomes in the forestry industry.

² <https://wol9.www.health.govt.nz/maori-health/maori-health-models/te-whare-tapa-wha>

The operational model consists of four key rōpū (groups): Mauri Tu (kaimahi-whānau), Mauri Ake (contractors), Mauri Ora (regional leadership) and Mauri Mahi (facilitation, coordination and communication). Each rōpū plays a specific role in supporting worker safety and wellbeing, while ensuring all stakeholders have a voice in decision-making processes.

Meetings are conducted following tikanga Māori protocols and aim to create a safe and inclusive environment where all participants can contribute regardless of their position within the industry hierarchy. The approach seeks to help break down traditional barriers between workers, contractors, and management.

The governance structure includes two co-chairs, one from iwi and one from the Eastland Wood Council, reflecting the partnership approach at the heart of the initiative. This leadership model ensures both industry and community perspectives are represented in decision-making processes. Working groups focus on specific issues or projects, allowing for targeted action while maintaining overall strategic direction.

The intention of the model is to bring kaimahi voices into the decision-making process. Hui were designed to provide opportunities for workers to share their experiences and concerns directly with industry leaders and decision-makers.

This community-led approach aims to create opportunities for more open and honest dialogue about safety challenges and solutions, though maintaining consistent engagement from all stakeholders.

The Effectiveness of Kaimahi Voice: Successes and Challenges

Te Kawa a Tāne was purposefully designed to place forestry kaimahi at the centre of health and safety practices, recognising their crucial role in creating safer workplaces. The alliance aimed to transform traditional hierarchical structures by giving workers meaningful input into operational and leadership decisions.

In its initial phase, the alliance was successful in creating opportunities for direct dialogue between workers and senior leadership. An example of this was when kaimahi were invited to meet with a company CEO in their boardroom - a first for many workers. These face-to-face meetings enabled kaimahi to raise safety concerns directly with leadership and gain insight into the corporate aspects of forestry operations. This direct engagement helped bridge the traditional divide between operational and management levels of the industry.

However, several barriers have emerged that limit consistent worker participation. The primary challenges are logistical, with many workers facing extended travel times of up to two hours to attend meetings. This travel, combined with lost wages and production time, impacts the ability of kaimahi to easily participate in discussions. Contractors have also shown reluctance to release workers from their duties due to tight production schedules and deadlines, further complicating attendance at meetings.

Existing dynamics within the industry have created additional barriers to open communication. With some kaimahi having expressed reluctance to voice concerns freely due to fear of negative consequences.

"finding the right people, people who are prepared to talk openly and honestly...there's always been reluctance."

Though efforts were made to create safe spaces for dialogue, the presence of managers and contractors at meetings, combined with the industry's hierarchical structure, continued to inhibit open discussion. The

formal meeting structure has also proved intimidating for some workers, while language and cultural barriers created additional challenges for others.

These challenges have contributed to waning participation over time, with meetings typically attended by the same group of kaimahi.

"I went to a number of meetings to start with...we really needed to get kaimahi voice out there, but we've seen those numbers diminish."

Participants have suggested several approaches to improve engagement. These include taking conversations directly to work sites rather than expecting workers to travel, appointing dedicated liaison people to gather feedback from crews, and creating more informal opportunities for dialogue. Additional support mechanisms could include establishing separate worker forums away from management, providing training for worker representatives on meeting participation, and ensuring their input genuinely influences decisions.

While Te Kawa a Tāne has created valuable frameworks for more open dialogue about safety, practical implementation remains challenging. The initiative's success varies depending on factors such as leadership commitment, economic pressures, and workplace culture. Any future improvements should focus on addressing these practical challenges while maintaining the model's strengths in cultural foundation and holistic approach to wellbeing.

Industry pressures affecting engagement

Despite widespread agreement on the value of Te Kawa a Tāne's principles and purpose, the forestry industry's engagement with the alliance has declined. This reduced participation largely stems from the external pressures the industry has faced in recent years.

"The last five years have been incredibly tough on all layers of forestry."

Economic conditions, significant weather events, and market vulnerabilities have meant companies and contractors have been largely focused on survival and basic operations. This pressure has made it difficult for them to maintain engagement with Te Kawa a Tāne initiatives.

Economic and Market Pressures

The industry is highly dependent on exports to China, making it susceptible to market fluctuations. This single-market dependency creates ongoing financial instability for companies and contractors.

Some companies are struggling with profitability which impacts their ability to generate returns for investors and affects contractors' financial stability and workers' job security. Forest companies are attempting to manage these pressures by maintaining reduced but consistent operations and working closely with contractors to share the economic burden.

This coupled with New Zealand's recession and the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic means the region has faced continual economic pressures, all of which have impacted on businesses and people.

Weather Events and Environmental Impacts

Cyclones Hale and Gabrielle in 2023 had a devastating effect on the region, causing considerable infrastructure damage and environmental issues. Many forestry operations were severely disrupted due to damaged infrastructure and blocked access routes. The cyclone damage has compounded existing economic pressures.

The industry also faced intense public criticism in the aftermath, particularly regarding damage caused by debris that ended up on beaches. These events in particular have affected workers not just in terms of available work but also their wellbeing and morale with some workers even afraid to drive their forestry branded cars into town for fear of backlash.

"We've already hit on a negative due to accidents and fatalities, and then Gabrielle come along and chucked all the wood onto the beaches and that just enhanced it."

Workforce Impacts

These issues have had significant workforce impacts on the region.

Participants highlighted a significant decline in forestry crews operating in the region. While pre-COVID levels showed approximately 85-95 crews working in the area, current estimates indicate only 35-40 crews remain active. The situation may be even more severe, as some participants noted that several crews have relocated to other regions in search of work opportunities.

To survive, workers in the forestry sector are having to diversify their income streams by moving into other forms of work like civil infrastructure, using their existing machinery for different types of contracts, relocating to other regions or to Australia, or taking on supplementary work.

Furthermore, companies are facing operational challenges, with some operating at reduced capacity. Some are reporting that:

- they have difficulty maintaining consistent work for contractors
- they have challenges retaining skilled workers
- They are facing increased operational costs.

One participant summarised the situation as being in "survival mode," noting that these pressures make it difficult for companies to focus on longer-term initiatives or additional programmes like Te Kawa a Tāne when they are focused on basic business continuity.

"you don't need to be concentrating on this [alliance activities] when you're in a state of flux and survival mode."

Te Kawa a Tāne could help alleviate these pressures

To help support the industry during tough times, Te Kawa a Tāne could consider balancing its key health and safety objectives with practical support that helps businesses navigate challenges.

Because the alliance is able to bring all forestry stakeholders together, it is well-positioned to coordinate and facilitate support across the industry, while being mindful not to add additional burden. This could include re-prioritising resources towards activities that deliver value to the industry during difficult times.

While the alliance's main focus is health and safety in forestry it's clear that the wider pressures facing the industry contribute to worker stress.

"The minute it rains, the minute you can't get trucks, the minute the road shuts, they don't get paid, and they have the same bills as the rest of us have - kids to feed, rent to pay, mortgages to pay."

While Te Kawa a Tāne cannot resolve all challenges within the forestry sector, numerous issues significantly impact worker safety and wellbeing.

Financial pressures within the industry can lead to corner cutting or unnecessary risk taking to maintain productivity targets and income levels. The sector's vulnerability to market downturns, coupled with sometimes negative community perceptions of forestry work, takes a toll on worker wellbeing and mental health. The logistical demands of the industry, particularly long working hours and extensive travel times to remote sites, contribute to worker fatigue and increased safety risks. Additionally, the growing complexity of environmental compliance requirements and increasing regulatory pressures create added stress for operations and personnel throughout the sector.

Te Kawa a Tāne could serve as an effective vehicle through which to address some of these fundamental challenges facing the industry.

The alliance could for example:

- facilitate discussions between companies about sharing resources and workers to maintain employment during downturns
- help connect workers with training and upskilling opportunities that allow them to diversify their skills while staying in the industry
- promote and market good news stories coming out of forestry. Highlight the work it does to protect the environment
- support and promote wellbeing initiatives that help workers manage stress during uncertain times.

The current meeting structure could also be reviewed to better accommodate businesses under pressure. Recognising that businesses struggling for survival and therefore have limited capacity to attend meetings.

Strategic objectives remain important, but actions should be tailored to immediate needs. This includes helping businesses navigate increased environmental compliance requirements, advocating for the industry with councils and government agencies, and supporting funding applications that could help stabilise businesses.

The key is finding the right balance - maintaining clear focus on health and safety while recognising it exists within a complex industry ecosystem. Te Kawa a Tāne can be most effective by being clear about its role while working collaboratively with others to support overall industry wellbeing.

The alliance could benefit from a strategic relaunch

The indication from those interviewed is that Te Kawa a Tāne may need to be relaunched to reinvigorate industry engagement and participation.

Participants expressed support for refreshing and refocusing the initiative while emphasising the continued importance of its core purpose. Any relaunch should acknowledge current industry pressures while providing practical support mechanisms to enable meaningful participation from all Stakeholders. However, it will still need to remain focused on empowering kaimahi through genuine participation in health and safety decisions, rather than adding additional compliance requirements.

The support for a relaunch, combined with recognition of Te Kawa a Tāne's unique value in bringing together all industry stakeholders, suggests there is significant opportunity to revitalise this initiative if approached thoughtfully and with appropriate resourcing.

Cultural integration and wellbeing

Te Kawa o Tāne was established with cultural alignment at its core, integrating Te Ao Māori principles into workplace practices while addressing critical health and safety needs in forestry. This integration occurs through a hui-based engagement model that incorporates traditional tikanga into industry meetings and discussions.

The four distinct rōpū (groups) established under Te Kawa o Tāne ensure a holistic approach aligned with Māori values:

- Mauri Tu (kaimahi-whānau focus)
- Mauri Ake (contractors)
- Mauri Ora (regional leadership)
- Mauri Mahi (facilitation and coordination)

This structure reflects Māori concepts of interconnectedness and collective responsibility, acknowledging that worker safety cannot be addressed in isolation from wider whānau and community wellbeing. The use of 'mauri' (life force) in naming these groups emphasizes the programme's focus on sustaining and enhancing the vitality of both people and the industry.

However, the implementation of Te Ao Māori principles has also required careful navigation, particularly in an industry context where some young Māori workers have become disconnected from their cultural roots.

"The Māori youth here are detached from the culture...would rather meet at the pub because they're not feeling that comfortable on marae."

This highlights the importance of supporting kaimahi to reconnect with their cultural heritage while acknowledging current realities and cultural understandings.

The alliance's work has helped to do this by building a greater understanding of Te Ao Māori among the various industry players and some participants have reported increasing comfort with marae-based interactions.

The programme also recognises that wellbeing extends well beyond physical safety. Te Kawa o Tāne takes a holistic approach that encompasses mental health, whānau wellbeing, financial stability, and career

development. This comprehensive view aligns well with Te Ao Māori perspectives on hauora (wellbeing) and has resonated strongly with both kaimahi and their whanau.

Whanaungatanga (relationships and connections) is fostered through whanau days and community events that help build connections between kaimahi, their whānau, and the wider industry. This initiative has emerged as one of the programme's most successful initiatives.

The whanau days help build understanding between workers and their whanau, create pride in the work, and strengthen community connections. Participants consistently highlighted these events as transformative in changing perceptions of forestry work and building stronger support networks for workers.

Another successful initiative is the Women in Forestry programme. This initiative aims to bring together and connect women working within the forestry industry to provide a network support system. It has taken a comprehensive approach to increasing women's participation and success in what has traditionally been a male-dominated industry. Through a combination of formal training, networking opportunities, and cultural change efforts, the programme has helped create new pathways for women while contributing to improved safety and operational practices across the sector.

Several participants highlighted the initiative's success in creating visible role models and pathways for women in the industry. The programme has helped showcase different types of roles available, from operational positions to leadership opportunities.

" There's been a huge focus on women in forestry because it's evident that women in forestry provide a safer workplace."

Manaakitanga (showing respect and care) is demonstrated through the programme's focus on worker wellbeing and creating culturally safe spaces for dialogue. This extends beyond physical safety to encompass mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

Kaitiakitanga (guardianship) is reflected in discussions about environmental responsibility and sustainable forestry practices, acknowledging the deep connection between people and the land in Te Ao Māori.

However, implementing these cultural elements requires balance. While formal protocols like karakia and mihimihi are valued, some participants felt these needed to be applied flexibly to maintain practical efficiency.

Te Kawa o Tāne could consider the following opportunities to strengthen its cultural foundation:

- Develop targeted approaches to help young workers reconnect with their cultural heritage
- Create leadership pathways that acknowledge and value cultural knowledge
- Continue to build relationships with iwi and hapū for cultural guidance
- Increase opportunities for workers and their whānau to engage with tikanga Māori in work contexts

The experience of Te Kawa o Tāne demonstrates that embedding Te Ao Māori principles in workplace initiatives requires sustained commitment and flexibility. When implemented effectively, this cultural foundation can significantly improve outcomes for kaimahi and their communities, while enhancing overall workplace safety and wellbeing.

The role of WorkSafe and other government agencies

WorkSafe played a crucial foundational role in establishing Te Kawa a Tāne, leading its development and design phase. The organisation provided key personnel to drive the programme at its inception, facilitated early workshops and meetings to bring stakeholders together, and funded the programme while providing strategic guidance on health and safety approaches. The original model was designed so that WorkSafe would gradually step back once the alliance was established, transitioning to community leadership.

Current State and Challenges

However, there were mixed views on WorkSafe's role in managing and leading Te Kawa a Tāne. Several participants suggested WorkSafe needs to re-engage more actively with Te Kawa a Tāne while others felt that WorkSafe's role should be supportive rather than leading.

Several participants indicated that WorkSafe's reduced involvement has created challenges that are impacting on the initiative. It was noted that since WorkSafe stepped back from managing the alliance there has been decreased participation and engagement from industry, although this may also be due to other factors like external pressures on the industry.

"I don't think they should be running it... they might be able to be the agency that could assist with any potential funding."

There was discussion about balancing WorkSafe's regulatory role with its partnership approach through Te Kawa a Tāne. One participant stated that some contractors were "cautious with their involvement" because they saw WorkSafe primarily as a compliance regulator rather than a partner.

Many participants suggested that WorkSafe needs to maintain some level of involvement while allowing community leadership. It was also noted that WorkSafe's involvement helps give the programme credibility and encourages participation from industry players.

The general consensus appears to be that while WorkSafe should not lead Te Kawa a Tāne, its ongoing involvement and support remain important for the initiative's success. The community-led nature of the initiative should be maintained while still leveraging WorkSafe's influence and resources to support the key objectives.

Other Organisational Involvement

Beyond WorkSafe, several other government agencies are involved in supporting Te Kawa a Tāne.

These stakeholders include the New Zealand Police, Gisborne District Council, Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), Ministry of Social Development (MSD), industry bodies like the Eastland Wood Council, and iwi organisations including Te Runanganui o Ngāti Porou and Te Runanga o Turanganui a Kiwa.

This multi-organisational approach was designed to provide comprehensive support for the forestry sector and providing a coordinated response.

"It needs to be almost like a whole government approach... because it's a human community approach."

This collaborative model enabled organisations to contribute their unique expertise and resources while working towards shared objectives of improving health and safety in the sector.

However, maintaining consistent engagement from all agencies has proven tricky over time. While some organisations have remained actively involved, others have reduced their participation or shifted to more peripheral roles. This variability in engagement has impacted the alliance's effectiveness in certain areas. For example, relationships between the forestry industry and local council have become strained, particularly following the Cyclones, creating barriers to effective collaboration.

Funding sustainability has emerged as a concern. Initial government funding enabled the alliance to focus on implementation and relationship building. However, changes in government priorities and funding models have created uncertainty around long-term financial sustainability.

The involvement of iwi organisations has been particularly valuable, providing cultural leadership and helping ensure the alliance's approach aligns with tikanga Māori and local community needs. This cultural foundation has been crucial for building trust and encouraging participation from Māori kaimahi.

Participants identified several opportunities to strengthen organisational involvement:

- Better coordination between organisations to reduce duplication and ensure more efficient use of resources.
- Clearer roles and responsibilities for participating organisations.
- More consistent engagement from all parties.
- Shift from compliance-focused relationships to more collaborative partnerships.
- Development of sustainable funding models to support long-term initiatives.

While managing multiple stakeholders presents challenges, the multi-agency approach remains valuable for addressing the issues facing the forestry industry. Commitment from all parties needs to be ongoing to maintain meaningful involvement while navigating changing priorities and resource constraints.

Training and development opportunities

The forestry sector in New Zealand faces some challenges in developing and maintaining a skilled workforce. Tertiary training has experienced significant change over the past few years, while cultural and operational pressures create barriers to consistent workforce development.

The traditional training infrastructure that supports workforce development has been substantially diminished or disrupted in recent years. Training providers like Competenz have undergone restructuring and is facing still further disruption with the ongoing tertiary education reforms. It seems that while Competenz previously played a crucial role in developing workforce capability "from the ground up," this support has somewhat diminished, weakening the sector's ability to build skilled workers.

Furthermore, organisations such as Toi Ohomai/Te Pūkenga have found it increasingly difficult to maintain viable forestry operations programmes and have recently withdrawn their offerings to the sector.

However, there are still some training available for forestry in the region with Turanga Ararau the only provider currently delivering training in the region. The offer cadetships and forestry management and have accreditation to deliver forestry applicable micro credentials developed by Muka Tangata (the Workforce Development Agency for forestry).

Access to training and assessment services also emerged as a barrier due largely to the region's remoteness. Geographical challenges present an issue for those needing specialised assessments or certifications. For instance, workers from Gisborne sometimes need to travel as far as Rotorua or even Canterbury to complete necessary qualifications. These logistics not only add substantial costs but also limit workforce development.

In terms of informal learning, the buddy/mentoring system is common on sites. This enables experienced workers to mentor newcomers teaching them on the job.

“When you come in it would normally be noted that you require a buddy...your buddy is another kaimahi that's there.”

While this approach effectively transfers knowledge and skills, it faces mounting challenges from industry pressures including labour shortages, increased mechanisation, and other constraints. Despite this, informal training continues to be a fundamental part of skill and knowledge acquisition in the industry, including for health and safety training.

Te Kawa a Tāne's Role in Supporting Workforce Development

While Te Kawa a Tāne was not specifically designed as a training initiative, it does act as a facilitator of workforce development. The alliance has been particularly effective in creating connections between workers, contractors and forest management companies that enable informal skills and knowledge sharing. These relationships have proven valuable in allowing experienced workers to guide and support newer entrants to the industry. Health and safety induction and training is at the forefront of this, and participants interviewed felt there was adequate health and safety training available currently.

The programme has also made strides in supporting the upskilling of women working in forestry through its Women in Forestry initiative. Through targeted funding and support, Te Kawa a Tāne has enabled women to access various training opportunities, including health and safety qualifications at different levels, business courses, and first aid training. This structured approach to upskilling demonstrates a comprehensive strategy for developing women's capabilities across multiple aspects of forestry operations and is highly valued.

Regular networking and development events have also been a key feature of the programme, with guest speakers and workshops occurring throughout the year. These events have attracted participation from women across the sector, including those working in operational roles, contractors, and those in management positions. This diverse participation has helped create valuable connections across different levels of the industry.

Strengthening Training and Development

The forestry sector has opportunities to strengthen its approach to training and development in several areas.

Clear industry-wide pathways for career progression would help kaimahi see how training connects to their professional growth. Currently, the lack of defined development frameworks makes it harder to align learning with advancement opportunities.

The operational demands of forestry work, combined with limited staff capacity, affect contractors' ability to release workers for training. Even when funding and programmes are available, the intensive nature of production schedules impacts consistent delivery of training initiatives.

Training design and delivery could better reflect the cultural context of the workforce. Traditional approaches to workforce development would benefit from stronger alignment with worker needs and preferences. There are opportunities to enhance training models by incorporating Te Ao Māori perspectives and values in meaningful ways that resonate with learners.

Considerations to enhance development

To better support training and career development, Te Kawa a Tāne could consider several enhancements. Firstly, the alliance could take a more active role in coordinating and facilitating training across contractors, potentially helping to address resource constraints through shared approaches and economies of scale.

The development of more culturally appropriate training models could be considered, building on the success of initiatives like whanau days and the Women in forestry network. This could include incorporating Te Ao Māori principles more explicitly into training design and delivery, ensuring that development opportunities resonate with the workforce's cultural values and preferences.

"Many Māori workers possess a different perception that stems from their Te Ao Māori worldview. Employers need to understand this unique perspective but also value, enhance, and acknowledge it".

There is also scope for Te Kawa a Tāne to work more closely with industry partners to develop and communicate clear career progression pathways. This could help create a more structured approach to career development, making it easier for workers to understand and pursue advancement opportunities within the sector.

Finally, the alliance could leverage its existing relationships to enable more structured mentoring between experienced and newer workers. This could help formalise some of the informal knowledge transfer that already occurs, while maintaining the cultural appropriateness and practical relevance that makes such approaches effective.

While Te Kawa a Tāne has created valuable foundations through relationship building and cultural approaches, there remains the potential to expand its role, should it deem it appropriate, in supporting workforce development. Realising this potential would require dedicated focus and resourcing but could contribute to addressing some of the sector's most pressing workforce development challenges.

Implementing the model in other regions

The potential to implement the Te Kawa a Tāne model in other regions of New Zealand was generally supported by participants. The general agreement was that the model could be adapted for different regions, however, participants emphasised that successful implementation would require careful consideration of local contexts and specific needs.

Several participants identified Northland as a potential region for implementation, noting similarities with Te Tairāwhiti in terms of industry structure, cultural context, and operational challenges. However, they stressed that any implementation would need to be tailored to address the unique characteristics and requirements of each region rather than simply replicating the Te Tairāwhiti model.

Prerequisites for Successful Implementation

Successful implementation in other regions would require several key elements to be in place. Firstly, a thorough understanding of the regional context is essential, including detailed knowledge of forest ownership patterns, contracting models, and forest management approaches. It was noted that comprehensive pre-implementation planning was crucial to understanding the specific dynamics and relationships within each region's forestry sector.

Strong local leadership and genuine commitment from all stakeholders emerged as another critical factor. Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of the model being a community led initiative supported by government agencies and other national organisations that might be able to provide additional support and advocacy, for example Ngā Pou a Tāne³.

This approach ensures both local ownership and broader systematic support for the initiative.

The cultural foundation of Te Kawa a Tāne was identified as both a strength and a consideration for implementation in other regions. While this approach has been particularly effective in Te Tairāwhiti due to the high Māori population and strong iwi relationships, participants noted that the cultural elements would need careful adaptation in regions with different demographic profiles while maintaining authenticity and respect for tikanga Māori.

Addressing Challenges

Several factors would need to be addressed for successful implementation in other regions.

The forestry industry's economic cycles and pressures were frequently cited as impacting operations and people. These economic pressures directly impact stakeholders' ability to fully participate in and support the initiative. Maintaining consistent engagement from all stakeholders, particularly contractors and kaimahi, was identified as an ongoing challenge during tough times.

Resource requirements, including funding and dedicated personnel would also need to be carefully considered. Several participants emphasised that adequate resourcing is essential for successful implementation and sustainable operation of the model.

Considerations for Regional Implementation

To reproduce the model in other regions there would need to be a thorough regional assessment conducted before implementation, including comprehensive analysis of industry structures, relationships, and existing initiatives.

While the Te Kawa a Tāne model has potential for implementation in other regions, success would depend heavily on careful adaptation to local contexts and ensuring proper support structures are in place. The model offers valuable lessons and frameworks, but implementation would need to be tailored to each region's specific circumstances and needs.

"I think it can be successful in another region, but we would have to be really clear about where we go and identify what the 'why' would be."

³ <https://www.ngapouatane.maori.nz/about>

Conclusion

Te Kawa a Tāne represents an innovative approach to addressing health and safety in New Zealand's forestry sector through its unique community-led model. The initiative demonstrates both significant potential and ongoing challenges in transforming industry culture and practices, offering valuable lessons for the future of workplace safety programmes.

The alliance's strength lies in its cultural foundation and holistic approach to worker wellbeing, successfully integrating Te Ao Māori principles into industry practices. This integration has proven particularly valuable in a sector with a high proportion of Māori workers, creating more culturally appropriate and effective ways to address safety concerns. The model's focus on empowering kaimahi voice in decision-making processes and building stronger connections between kaimahi, contractors, and management companies represents an important shift from traditional hierarchical approaches. Particularly successful initiatives include the Women in Forestry programme and whānau days, which have helped build stronger support networks and improved industry understanding across all levels.

However, the alliance faces substantial challenges in maintaining momentum and engagement, particularly given the pressures currently facing the forestry sector. Economic difficulties, market volatility, and the impacts of recent weather events have created an environment where many stakeholders are focused on survival rather than longer-term initiatives. Practical barriers such as travel time have also impacted kaimahi participation in alliance activities, while industry dynamics and relationships continue to influence open dialogue about safety concerns.

The transition from WorkSafe-led to community-led operation has presented additional challenges, raising questions about the optimal balance between government support and local ownership. While the original model envisioned gradual withdrawal of WorkSafe's direct involvement, experience suggests that ongoing support from government agencies remains important for programme sustainability.

Looking forward, the forestry sector should consider several key factors to strengthen this type of initiative. These include developing sustainable funding models, creating more accessible engagement opportunities for workers, and better integrating the alliance's activities with broader industry needs.

There was also strong support for a strategic relaunch of the initiative. The industry recognises the value Te Kawa a Tāne adds to the community and sector, but various factors have seen overall motivation wane. Having a planned and implemented relaunch, with clear focus on practical support for contractors and kaimahi, may help reinvigorate participation in the alliance.

While the model shows promise for implementation in other regions, success would require careful adaptation to local contexts and strong community ownership supported by appropriate resources and leadership.

The experience of Te Kawa a Tāne suggests that improving health and safety outcomes requires addressing broader industry issues while maintaining focus on worker wellbeing. As the sector continues to evolve, maintaining the balance between immediate operational pressures and longer-term behavioural change will be crucial for creating lasting improvements in industry safety and wellbeing. Success will depend on sustained commitment from all stakeholders and the ability to adapt the model to meet changing industry needs while preserving its core health and safety objectives, cultural values and community-led approach.