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The Times They Are A-Changin'

*Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.
(Encarta Book of Quotations, accessed 01/11/06)*

Bob Dylan made these words popular in 1964. However, he could have written them today and added a section on trees, forests, and their role in the world's economic, social, industrial, environmental, and political life. The world's concept of forests is changing. It's been many years since public forests have been looked on primarily as wood producers. Further, ownership of private forests is shifting as industrial forests are taken over by timber investment management corporations, typically having 10-15-year horizons. Forestry professionals are called on to manage forests for a broad diversity of objectives, many of which do not relate to wood production. Forests managed for wood face new challenges and new opportunities to produce wood needed for essential products and do so economically, efficiently, and in ways that meet environmental standards.

New choices are faced by the forest industry. Wallinger (*Whither the future of US forest industry—and American forestry?* Journal of Forestry 103(7)368–369, 2005) points out the economic questions faced as chemical recovery boilers near full depreciation and solid wood products depend increasingly on small trees that bring little return to investors. He adds that the industry faces inadequate technical options to be competitive and calls for a dialogue on strategy for support of the wood industry and research to develop value-added options.

The “flattening” of the world described by Friedman (*The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 488 pp. 2005) emphasizes the new levels of opportunity, cooperation, and competition in today's world as information and technology are developed and disseminated rapidly and protective walls are removed. Schuler, Adair, and Winistorfer (*Challenges and response: Strategies for survival in a rapidly changing wood industry*. Engineered Wood Journal 8(2)23–25. 2005) cite source changes being driven by globalization, technology advances, and demographics. They call for developing a competitive workforce, encouraging innovation, and investing in research to develop new products and systems.

As we look at the demands on the timber resource and changes in production and marketing systems, the game includes both competition and cooperation, with increasing difficulty in deciding between them. The times they are a-changin' and we must continually look ahead to change not only with them, but ahead of them. This poses urgent challenges for education, research, and industry as we become immersed in the new world and its complications. I believe a key to meeting those challenges is emphasizing a founding principle of wood science—working with forestry scientists to focus basic sciences and engineering on effective management and use of the timber resource. Advances in science and engineering that can improve our understanding and use of wood increasingly drive our changing world. Bringing them to bear on management of the timber resource is truly exercising our founding mission.

ROBERT L. YOUNGS

*Professor Emeritus
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University
Blacksburg, VA
ryoungs@vt.edu*