



▲ Gordon Wong, in-house lawyer for Masterton based Forest Enterprises, one of New Zealand's leading forestry investment managers.

In-house in Masterton

One of the Wairarapa's primary industries is forestry, and one of New Zealand's leading – if not the leading – forestry investment managers is Masterton-based Forest Enterprises Ltd.

Gordon Wong is the company's legal services director.

"I don't think there are too many in-house lawyers in Masterton. I'm one of a rare breed here," he says.

Mr Wong joined Forest Enterprises in April 2014 after acting for the company in private practice for about 23 years.

"So it's a case of leaving private practice to join my biggest client. I was in private practice in Wellington. The last firm I was with was Duncan Cotterill, where I was a commercial partner.

"I've been a partner in various firms. The first partnership I joined was Simpson Grierson and it was there I advised Forest Enterprises on the company's innovative investment structures. I've also had other in-house roles at Telecom and at Telstra Clear where I was general counsel and regulatory manager. This role at Forest Enterprises is quite different, because I've got skin in the game. I've got a shareholding in the company and I'm also a director on the Forest Enterprises board."

Mr Wong has two homes. He has bought a house in Greytown, which is his base during the week, and he has a house in Khandallah, where he works on Mondays and any other days he may need to be in Wellington. "I call the study in our Khandallah home the Forest Enterprises Wellington Office!"

"I've got the best of both worlds," he says.

"When I feel like being cosmopolitan I line up all my meetings in Wellington CBD for the week day I'm there, and then I enjoy the semi-rural life here in the Wairarapa.

"Greytown is absolutely beautiful. I'm really enjoying living there during the week and working in the Masterton offices of Forest Enterprises."

How do you find lawyering in Masterton?

"The most exciting part of working in Masterton and being in-house is just being very close to the forests that we manage here in the Wairarapa," Mr Wong says.

"I've always preferred being a corporate lawyer, being in-house, because you get involved in all aspects of the business and so you build up that industry knowledge. We've got highly qualified people here – a very experienced Managing Director, accountants, marketing and customer service managers as well as the forestry experts. I'm not just working with commercial people; I'm also working with foresters who spend most of their time out in the field.

"At the same time, I do miss the collegiality of a large law firm. It can be quite an isolating experience working in an industrial precinct of Masterton. But we continue our relationship with Duncan Cotterill and I brief work out to the firm. I do miss the opportunity to bounce ideas off people, and just being surrounded by other lawyers and sharing ideas and views.

"On the other hand when you're in-house you actually work in a truly multi-disciplinary environment. I think there's a lot more teamwork. Also I think I now have a better appreciation of the commercial drivers and the investment goals of our clients.

"You get involved in the practical aspects as well. As a director, I need to be out there in the forests. Now under the Health and Safety at Work Act there are a lot more responsibilities placed on directors in terms of due diligence and, for us, understanding the risks and hazards of forestry.

"Regularly I'm out there traipsing through the forest wearing gumboots and the high-vis vests talking to the silviculture contractors and logging crews, watching these massive harvesting roads being built and getting a really good understanding of the business of forestry. That's something I didn't have the advantage of when I was in private practice.

"I think it's the excitement of getting in the field and seeing the physical results of the legal work I do. When I first acted for Forest Enterprises, I was advising on structuring the investments and the offer of shares to new investors. Now I'm part of the company's management and preparing log sales and marketing contracts to see the good returns produced for our clients.

"It's great. I think I have matured from my early 'seedling' years as a lawyer and I'm now harvesting the growth in that legal knowledge", Mr Wong says.