

# A RADICAL OVERHAUL OF GOVERNMENT FOREST POLICIES

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In the age of neoliberalism where's the logic for continuing government subsidises to companies that log and woodchip Australia's native forests?

The millions of dollars in assistance from state and federal governments for forestry operations are the road block to shifting the source for our wood supplies from native forests to plantations.

This failure is limiting jobs growth in many regional communities where commodity logging could form the basis of thriving local industries with an emphasis on value adding.

It is time for a radical overhaul of state and federal government forest policies. Since European settlement more than half of Australia's native forests have been lost due to industrial logging and clearing.

An end to native forest logging would deliver environmental and economic benefits. Despite the reluctance of some industry players and government departments, the much needed structural shift is already well advanced. Australia has a mature plantation estate made up of about half and half of soft and hard woods.

A large amount of paper and solid wood products now come from plantation timber. About 80 per cent of the wood used to make paper in Australia and about 85 percent of our sawn timber and wood panels are plantation based.

To advance the shift, the government needs to step in and provide much needed leadership. A priority for the Forests Minister Joe Ludwig should be developing a national plantation processing industry and skills development strategy.

However, this is not what suits some of the main industry players who have grown fat on government subsidises and want to

keep the gravy train on track by creating new native forest market opportunities.

Biomass burning using so-called native forest "waste" has become one of the industry's favoured projects. This is seen as the way to lock the industry into ongoing native forest logging. If a biomass energy plant was built it would drive the continued logging of native forests so the supply of "waste" could be maintained.

Those loggers keen to maintain their subsidised native forest logging practices suffered a setback when the Greens won government support for native forests to be excluded as an eligible energy resource from the Renewable Energy Target regulations.

Rather than move on and recognise that the era of the industrial logging of native forests is over, the business-as-usual proponents and their supporters in government are doing everything to maintain the status quo.

Just prior to the federal parliament rising for 2011, the Inquiry into Australia's Forestry Industry handed down its report. Headed by Tasmanian MP Dick Adams, the nineteen recommendations reveal the disconnect Labor and the Coalition parties have with the current state of forestry in Australia.

The recommendations do not take advantage of the opportunities to develop a strong plantation processing industry and create thousands of regional jobs, while safeguarding native forests for carbon sequestration, water quality protection and biodiversity conservation.

The main intent of this inquiry is revealed in the section under forestry biomass. The recommendations assert that the burning of native forest "waste" should be defined as renewable energy. The National Association of Forest Industries is also pushing to use native forests for biofuels.

A responsible government would not support burning native forests for energy. Minister Ludwig should make 2012 the year to clean up the forestry industry with a final end to all industrial logging of native forests. This needs to include an end to the inquiries and reviews into the Regional Forest Agreements. RFAs should be scrapped.

In some states, local government forestry agencies are unable to meet timber commitments and are already paying out mills for timber that in some cases never existed.

This is where the government has a role to ensure that regional communities are not devastated by job losses. A structured transition with government assistance can ensure that the many processing opportunities with hardwood plantations around the country come to fruition and so assist to strengthen local economies.

An adjustment assistance package is needed, mainly for the workers. With many plantations now ready to harvest, most employees should be able to stay in the industry. If skills development is part of the package, many workers could move into the wood product manufacturing that should expand when the industry moves away from export woodchipping.

The opportunities to protect native forests and achieve jobs growth in regional areas as plantation wood processing comes on line are real. Is the Labor government up to the task? ■

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*Photo: Rhiannon family.*

