

Legislative Council  
Tasmania

Government Administration Committee "A"

Inquiry

Impacts of the Proposed Transition out of Public Native Forests

Submission presented by George Harris on 19/04/2011

I am grateful for the opportunity to present the following information to the Legislative Council Inquiry: Impacts of the Proposed Transition out of Public Native Forests

I am a full-time self-employed woodworker, and have operated as such since 1982, a period of 29 years.

Current Committee member, Woodcraft Guild Tasmania inc. and have served as President for two terms

Current Committee member, Furniture Designers Association inc.

Current Chairman, Fine Timbers Tasmania inc. which owns and operates the Chain of Custody system for Tasmanian fine timbers.

Member, Timber Communities Australia

I am one of six who organised the 'Treeroots' gathering of timber industry people in Campbell Town on Friday, February 4.

I appear in my own right as a designer and manufacturer of furniture and products in Tasmanian Special Timbers. I do not have, and have not sought formal approval to speak on behalf of any of the organisations I have membership of.

The points I wish to make are these:

A transition out of public native forests for timber harvesting is neither necessary nor desirable. In fact, the opposite is the case.

A well managed native forest timber harvesting and processing sector cannot be replaced in terms of economic, social and environmental returns by a plantation-based timber industry in the short, medium, or long term. While plantation sourced timber may expand in its contribution in the medium and longer term, the native forest based sector cannot be abandoned.

No transition is possible for the activities based around Tasmania's unique Special Timbers.

The presence of an industry based around Tasmanian Special Timbers is worth far more than the net value of its trade. It goes to the very heart of the essence of Tasmania. It occupies iconic space in our artistic, cultural and heritage landscape and contributes significantly to tourism induced commerce and employment. It is a fundamental part of the Tasmanian brand.

Special Timbers are the timbers that are unique and endemic to Tasmania, and are found in limited quantities in particular areas of our native forests. They are highly prized by woodworkers for their decorative qualities and their application to specific purposes, and include Blackwood, Myrtle, (especially Tiger Myrtle), Musk, Celery-top Pine, King Billy Pine, Huon Pine, Blackheart Sassafras, Native Olive, Horizontal Scrub and many others.

Special Timbers are the basis for the highest value-adding achievement of the entire timber industry. These species are the basis for a manufacturing industry that directly employs 2,000 people in FTE (full time equivalent) positions, and a further 8,500 people engage in related activities either as a hobby, or to a limited commercial extent.<sup>1</sup> These timbers cannot be substituted by any other timber.

Special Timbers are an inalienable part of an industry that comprises furniture designers and manufacturers, wood turners, sculptors, musical instrument makers, wooden boat builders, and the craft shops and galleries that are an iconic element of our tourism and visitor experience. These have put locations like Strahan, Richmond, Geeveston, Stanley, and Salamanca Place on the map. They have given outlets like the Design Centre in Launceston and the Tasmanian Wood Design Collection a well deserved international reputation.

The combination of stunning materials, brilliant design, and flawless execution have raised Tasmanian made timber products to the equal of any that can be found anywhere on the planet. Special Timbers are an intrinsic part of the Tasmanian brand, and share the stage with our fine wines, full flavoured boutique beers, superfine wool, Leatherwood honey, quality apples and berry fruit varieties, Atlantic Salmon and endemic fish and seafood species.

The recent Australian Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart is a reminder of just how special our boat building timbers are. Huon Pine, Celery-top Pine and King Billy, which only grow in Tasmania, are recognised internationally as among the finest boat-building timbers available. This festival is not just about museum

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<sup>1</sup>

pieces, magnificent though they are, it is just as important for new work, for keeping skills alive, and for creating new opportunities. What a tragedy it would be if new work in wooden boats could only come from imported timber and plywood, and boat builders could only stand and watch as the magnificent local trees grow old, die, fall over, and rot on the forest floor! Contemplate the value to the local economy and the significance to the tourism industry the Wooden Boat Festival has become, and the contribution made to it by the nature and reputation of our endemic boat building timbers.

The making of musical instruments is emerging as a significant activity in Tasmania, and many makers are using Tasmanian Special Timbers. It is believed there are sixty active makers, and an exhibition in Hobart in 2009 displayed the work of forty musical instrument makers, past and present. Instruments currently being made in Tasmania include guitars, (both electric and acoustic), violins, harps, drums, recorder, clarinet, and recreations of medieval designs in string and wind instruments.

In terms of dollars per tonne, musical instruments probably bring the greatest return of any downstream processing activity in timber. For example, a violin weighs around 450 grams, and the leading Australian violin makers receive \$12,500 for their orchestra standard instruments. That equates to more than \$27 million per tonne!

There are instrument makers in Tasmania reproducing medieval designs whose entire output is being commissioned or sold in Europe over the internet. Considerable interest in Tasmanian Special Timbers is developing in America, and is resulting in sales and exporting of timber blanks for guitars as well as the work of local guitar makers.

I know five guitar makers in the Hobart area. I attach images of guitars made by a friend. He started making solid body electric guitars last year, and has landed a commission by a Canadian blues artist. He lives in Sydney for three months of the year, and tours the Americas, Europe, Russia and Japan. He is promoting my friend's guitars wherever he travels.

We have a Spanish born violin maker living in Burnie who attended a conservatorium and started with a philharmonic orchestra from a young age. She won a scholarship to attend an international Stradivari violin making school in Italy at the age of 23. She emigrated to Australia in 1993 and settled in Tasmania in 2005. She is currently doing a PhD at UTAS researching the suitability of Tasmanian timbers in stringed instruments.

Beyond the specific interests of retailing to tourists and visitors to the state, the presence of a vibrant arts community is a factor in the presentation of the state as an attractive visitor destination, whether based around specific events or not.

The mark of a mature community of reasonable dimensions is the comprehensiveness of its arts, cultural and education facilities, and the capacity it has to service its own community aspirations in these areas, and to be more than a cargo-cult tourist destination. Tasmania has a level of population where such would be expected.

The presence of a unique timber resource should bring the expectation of facilities and programs to take advantage of it, in the areas of education and training, and research.

The University of Tasmania supports furniture design courses in two locations, with post-graduate opportunities, through the School of Architecture in Launceston, and the School of Art in Hobart.

The Co-operative Research Centre for Forestry is attached to the Hobart campus, and relates closely with the local industry, as well as to national and international research projects.

The viability of each and all of these would be jeopardised by significant retreat of the timber industry in Tasmania from native forest sourced timber.

The Special Timbers sector cannot exist on its own. It relies on the presence of associated activities in close proximity. The transition of other activities out of native forest would lead to severe problems for the Special Timbers sector. Even if the area available for Special Timbers harvesting was to remain the same, and other activities (such as eucalypt saw log recovery, pulp and chip log recovery) were to cease, the viability of the Special Timbers sector would be threatened. The current harvest of around 12,500 cubic meters of Special Timbers is too small on its own to generate enough royalty payments to pay for forestry road extensions or maintenance, and is too small and dispersed to attract harvesting contractors.

Not all Special Timbers are represented in good quality across all areas of native forest. Some species are present in some areas, but not others. Timbers like King Billy and Huon Pine are severely restricted by the scarcity of the circumstances in which they thrive, and by competition. Over 80% of the known and mapped Huon Pine is in existing reserves, and for King Billy it is over 90%

Much of the area recently designated as within the Special Timbers Strategy has not been previously harvested, and much of it has not been developed with a network of forestry roads. Facilitating access and paying for it would be a major issue if other native forest harvesting activities were to be abandoned.

The best management option for the careful long-term management of native forest containing Special Timbers would be to have a sufficiently large area to work with, so as to not concentrate the impact. Special Timbers are, by nature, much slower growing than eucalypt species, and the longer the rotation the better. Myrtle and Sassafras need at least 200 years to attain a good size, while Celery-top needs at least 400 years, and King Billy around 800 years. Huon Pine

regularly live to more than 2000 years, with the oldest core sampled at 3,300 years and still growing.

Requirements differ among the various user groups in the Special Timbers sector. Those of the wood turner are quite different to those of the furniture designer, the cabinetmaker or the wooden boat builder.

A full age range of trees of all species would be highly desired. I have recently stood astride a newly emerging Huon Pine shoot, barely 30 mm high, to take a photograph. At 100 years the stem will still be small enough to put one's hand around. In 2000 years time I hope a woodworker will be able to reap the same reward and enjoyment that I have in working with this iconic timber. He or she may express gratitude if the authorities in that age have seen the wisdom of maintaining a good management regime where not all trees are in reserves, and not all have been harvested, either.

I am offended by suggestions by some that our future supplies of Special Timbers could be supplied from plantations. This is nonsense. Even Blackwood, the most rapid growing of our Special Timbers, has not performed at all well in plantation trials. Nothing compares with the beauty and diversity that naturally grown timber offers the craftsperson.

There is no business case for making furniture in Tasmania if the only material available is the same as that available everywhere else. There is no business case for making conventional or budget furniture in Tasmania. The market is too small, and the cost of servicing offshore markets is prohibitive if there is no natural advantage. In Tasmania the natural advantage is the unique timber and the story that goes with it. In any handcrafted product three things are essential: good design, good materials, and good workmanship. A deficiency in any one can degrade the performance of a piece in the market place. In Tasmania the edge is our Special Timbers. I recently heard a Tasmanian furniture designer achieved a price of \$20,000 for a Huon Pine desk. I cannot imagine that kind of price being commanded by a product made of plantation timber!

Any community, especially a geographically disadvantaged community must play to its strengths and natural advantages. It makes no sense to turn your back on natural resources. Good management is a marketing point for any manufacturing and retailing enterprise, and that is especially so for products in timber, given that the industry is such a target for the protest industry.

In the current debate, I feel it is important to examine where this issue has come from, and what and who has contributed to its flourishing. It is what I describe as the politically co-opted protest industry. It had its genesis in Tasmania in the No Dams campaign. A group of individuals discovered that an organisation based around a popular campaign could raise money, lots of money, and it could employ people. Those people were the ones who put themselves forward. They discovered it was more fun than a real job, and they were doing something they enjoyed. It has grown into a popular movement that has spawned a political

party that currently contributing the numbers enabling governments to have been formed in Tasmania and Canberra, and without whom those governments would collapse.

The popular movement depends on perpetual conflict. It is the means by which supporters are motivated, and funds are raised. The absence or removal of conflict is of major concern to such groups, although new conflicts can always be promoted. It is just that the anti-timber industry focus was the next major subject when the No Dams issue was removed, and The Wilderness Society successfully made that transition. Today it has around 45,000 members, around 100 paid staff, and raises and spends around \$15 million annually.

Gunn's as a company attracted little attention when it was a middle level saw milling company. At that time, the focus of attention was on other players, such as Risbys, ANM, North Forest Products, Boral, and others. Once Gunn's became listed on the stock exchange, and started expanding, it became the principal target, especially when it acquired and operated chip mills. The Risby family was hounded out of the industry in Tasmania, after a long and proud history. Gunn's became very successful and expanded rapidly, acquiring more distressed assets. It was the only ASX 200 listed company ever to be headquartered in Tasmania. It thought it could weather the storm of relentless environmental activism, but it now has succumbed, and the decision to exit native forest logging is a symptom of the disease that is sabotaging the state's economy.

The issue of whether Gunn's does exit native forest logging is one being watched closely by other saw milling companies, and they see the opportunity to continue while native forest harvesting remains available. There clearly is not enough resource to sustain Gunn's together with all the other operators, which to me is a symptom of the fact we have already locked up far more native forest than we ever should. This is the case especially as the legislated minimum of 300,000 cubic meters of quality saw log appears cannot be met into the immediate future. Therefore, with an exit by Gunn's, the remaining saw milling companies should be able to continue, ultimately enhanced by (but not restricted to) appropriate plantation supplement. However, the extra value and turnover from high quality timber from native forest is essential to maintain economic performance and employment levels, and most importantly, to maintain the existence of the Special Timbers sector.

I believe the Statement of Principles process should be abandoned. I believe a process that considers the interests of a few major players, and with a view not much further into the future than 2027 is not in the interests of Tasmania or Tasmanians. The following is an extract from my personal contribution to the Kelty interim report:

“I do not believe an agreement can be reached under the Statement of Principles that I would have any level of happiness with.

I do not believe an agreement can be reached that is in the best interests of the Tasmanian community.

I do not believe an agreement can be reached that is in the interests of myself or any other person of similar interests currently working, or likely to engage in similar work at any time in the future.

The Principles provide for “*ongoing specialty timber supply including eucalypt for our Tasmanian high value furniture and craft industries through a negotiated plan and timeline.*”

Yet they also require that they “*Immediately protect, maintain and enhance High Conservation Value Forests identified by ENGO’s on public land*”

A simple overlay of the maps within the Special Timbers Strategy showing Special Timbers distribution with those of the Wilderness Society and Environment Tasmania showing HCV forest indentified by ENGO’s reveal that the area sought would not make it possible to deliver any Special Timbers, let alone an on-going long-term supply.

I believe the process that delivered the current task was flawed, and that the Statement of Principles itself is a seriously flawed document.

While I believe that peace in the forests and an end to conflict over forestry issues would be a nice situation to be in, I believe that an understanding of the nature of the conflict and its motivations would lead any observer to conclude that such a set of circumstances, with an acceptable level of equity, cannot be delivered by negotiation, and certainly none that would have any level of permanence.

In such circumstances, I am completely opposed to bargaining away any further assets, especially those that I consider so precious: our Special Timbers.

I am disgusted that others in the bargaining process are seeking to negotiate assets on my behalf for which they have such little regard.

I believe these negotiations were entered into in circumstances of distress, and that Special Timbers are the ant that gets trampled when the elephants are stampeding to save themselves.

Not only should no surrender of territory or entitlement be contemplated, but there can be no surrender of territory or entitlement without compensation, and it is clear that the federal government have indicated that no further money will

be available to provide compensation. Equally it is clear that the state government is not in a position to offer any compensation. No one, as far as I am aware, is entering this negotiation from the timber industry side with a preparedness to bargain away territory for no compensation, (or at least I hope that is the case!), and no one associated with Special Timbers that I know would regard anything as suitable compensation for trading away access to Special Timbers for generations to come.

Consequently, I could not support an agreement and I believe abandonment of the process should be considered.

Such abandonment of the process should be accompanied by a move to seek support on the floor of the Tasmanian House of Assembly for an affirmation of support for the native forest-based timber industry, for the support and extension of the RFA and the RFA process, and support for the Special Timbers Strategy and the Special Timbers sector, and a rejection of the concept that a transition from a native forest-based timber industry to a substantially or entirely plantation-based timber industry is either necessary or desirable.”

From an examination of the maps I hereby submit, it can be seen that the ENGO claim for HCV status of areas of state forest would lock up most of the area containing Special Timbers, and most of the area identified in the Special Timbers Strategy for management under that strategy. This cannot be supported, and I urge the Tasmanian parliament to reject it. Further, the area nominated and proposed by the ENGO's as the future source of Special Timbers does not contain much suitable timber, and in some cases areas harvested in recent years. While some Special Timbers regrowth may be regenerating, it would need hundreds of years to be ready for harvesting.

The Statement of Principles specifies a provision for Special Timbers, but that is not supported by objectives being pursued by the ENGO's or the policies taken the recent state election by the Greens. The Greens and the ENGO's have frequently called publicly for the end to native forest logging, and this cannot be supported.

Under the Australian Constitution the parliament of Tasmania has the ultimate say on most aspects of land use on public land in Tasmania. I urge the parliament of Tasmania to use this authority to make a strong statement on the future long-term management of state forest, and that should be for the careful management and harvesting of sustainable amounts of timber to meet the needs and aspirations of the community. I believe we have already locked up more forest than we ever should, and I oppose the locking up of any more forest for the purposes of reserves for their own sake. There are mechanisms in place that adequately manage for biodiversity, for conservation, for threatened species, for indigenous heritage when discovered, and these are adding to reserves where

appropriate. These mechanisms are working well, and are an asset to the timber industry.

I make a plea for consideration of the artists and craftspeople of the future, not just to 2027. A young person just entering Art School or trade training should have a full future ahead of them. We need to ensure there are such opportunities for people 100, 200, and 1,000 years from now. Once public land is put into reserves, the political reality is that it will never come back out.

Another perverse implication is that within Australia, HCV forest status means absolutely no timber can be removed. It is different in other countries, as timber can be removed from designated areas, as long as the conservation values are maintained. It is only in the 'Protected Areas' that no timber can be removed.

Another topic necessary to be understood is the problems with FSC certification. There is too much scope to stop, slow down, or drag out the approval process, and it poses too much risk to investment. I believe FSC is not designed to be available, it is designed to be not available.

Important links to additional information:

<http://www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/peaceful-resistance-rainforest-activists-still-fight-precious-tasmanian-forests> (follow the money trail)

[http://www.fpa.tas.gov.au/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/General/FPN\\_April\\_2011vol\\_10\\_no\\_4.pdf](http://www.fpa.tas.gov.au/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/General/FPN_April_2011vol_10_no_4.pdf) (see Wilkinson article)

<http://www.stringsandtassiewood.com/> (see esp. research details)

[http://www.stuartandsons.com/index.php?option=com\\_phocagallery&view=category&id=3:detail&Itemid=75](http://www.stuartandsons.com/index.php?option=com_phocagallery&view=category&id=3:detail&Itemid=75) (Australian made piano featuring Tasmanian timbers)