



SUBMISSION TO THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE INTO THE TASMANIAN FORESTS AGREEMENT BILL 2012

Executive Summary

Central Highlands Council covers one seventh of the area of Tasmania, with more than 51 per cent of its employment dependent on forestry, agriculture, fishing and tourism.

It has been independently acknowledged as being the local government region most adversely affected by the downturn in the Tasmanian forestry industry.

It has a clear strategy to be proactive in proposing effective and speedy solutions to issues impacting on its community.

As the Authority earning the Innovation Award at last year's Local Government Association of Tasmania Conference, Central Highlands Council is a proven deliverer of effective strategies that bring successful results.

It has created and developed strategies that match the aspirations of all stakeholder groups within its community and detailed in its Economic Development Plan 2008.

Central Highlands Council continues to implement the independent recommendations of that plan and has positioned itself to take full advantage of opportunities when they arise.

This is achieved by having a clear focus on the immediate, medium and long term needs of its ratepayers and business community.

Central Highlands Council continually punches above its weight and confidently battles for its entire community.

The Impact on the Central Highlands

Currently, the Central Highlands region is suffering a severe and multiplying socio-economic impact from the decline in, and uncertain future of, the forestry industry.

The financial implications and loss over the last 12 months for small businesses and farmers relying on the forestry industry is estimated at in excess of \$10m, just from Council's own face to face survey of industry suppliers, retail and service providers.

In truth, the direct and indirect losses being incurred across the region are much greater and for many the future is bleak, with some on the verge of financial disaster or already out of business.

Substantial losses are being incurred across the board from fuel stations to roadhouse cafes, mechanics to shops, pubs to post offices, providers of budget accommodation to former forestry workers unemployed and struggling to pay their mortgages.

Families have been torn apart with a younger generation once again leaving the region, and state, in pursuit of work. One Highlands pub has lost 20 regular customers to mainland jobs; its turnover down by more than \$2,000 per week.

Medical professionals report several residents are suffering from the psychological effects of the decline and are currently on suicide watch or medication for depression and there have been family break-ups directly attributable to the pressures emanating from the demise of forestry in the region.

The socio-economic impact on the Highlands community is already immense.

And yet, until November 2012, the State Government was apparently oblivious to the calamitous situation despite continuous communication by Council, directly and indirectly via media coverage.

Deputy Premier Bryan Green admitted, in a meeting that month, brokered by Speaker of the House of Assembly Michael Polley, that, "the Central Highlands had been left off the list of affected areas'.

Central Highlands Council was asked to present an economic stimulus package for the region, which it did at a subsequent meeting.

Council adopted a unique strategy intended to reduce the massive effect on families, businesses and the region's financial and social well being.

It intends to stimulate and grow its economy by attracting inward investment that will enable existing, traditional, and new industries to grow, diversify and prosper.

Central Highlands Council, through its new Highlands Tasmania Brand is implementing an integrated stimulus strategy for the region.

To achieve the ambitions of the strategy, which already has the backing of business, agriculture and the wider community, it requires the support, financial and physical contributions of all potential stakeholders, including State and Federal Governments, and to this end is consulting feverishly to produce a result that quickly stabilises, then grows, its community and economy.

At a further meeting, in early December, Mr Green agreed that Central Highlands Council would receive \$300,000 to assist implementing and – importantly - accelerating that economic stimulus strategy.

Just 24 hours later, that cash offer was withdrawn without formal explanation and Council has been left alone to tackle the enormous repercussions of the forestry downturn and future uncertainty.

It is our belief the State Government abdicated a moral and actual responsibility to assist the Central Highlands region it had apparently already abandoned through ignorance or incompetence.

Because of the small rate base in the Central Highlands and the large geographic area of the municipality, Council resources are limited. Those resources are likely to be further weakened by the creation of forestry reserves within its region with the subsequent reduction in rate income from Forestry Tasmania.

Central Highlands Council demands maps of the proposed reserves be released as a matter of extreme urgency so it can assess the effect on its finances as it enters into its annual budgeting process for 2013-14 and beyond.

The provision of reserves in renowned areas of natural beauty also have implications for the development of potential and existing tourism businesses in those areas, which have, and are being, actively encouraged as part of Central Highlands Council's Highlands Tasmania branding and marketing.

It also demands Federal and State Governments detail the allocation of publicised post-Act funding so it can plan ahead and implement its Economic Stimulus Strategy in an efficient and effective manner.

Despite the inaction of State Government and its numerous departments implicated by the Tasmanian Forestry Agreement, Council has managed to pool the talents and resources of its councillors, officers and business community to best prepare itself for the future.

This, Central Highlands Council believes, should have been the role of a State Government that recognised and understood the ramifications of the Forestry Agreement process on the entire Tasmanian socio-economic structure.

But, it didn't, and Central Highlands Council is calling on the current State Government to immediately announce, and urgently launch, an investigation into the socio-economic impact of its proposed legislation on the Central Highlands and other forestry communities across Tasmania.

Furthermore it wants a Government taskforce established to work with Council to implement its Economic Stimulus Strategy and believes proactivity from within Government would assist in allaying the fears and trepidation of the Central Highlands and other communities.

Patently, that cross-community consultation has not taken place to date, yet entire regions of Tasmania face an abyss of catastrophic proportions if the Tasmanian Forestry Agreement Bill is enacted in its present form.

The legacy of the proposed Bill for future generations is, quite frankly, terrifyingly unknown.

It is also a matter of concern that the Department of Economic Development and Tourism – at a time of obvious financial crisis in regional Tasmania - has been totally inactive in engaging with councils across the state.

Further, Central Highlands Council is aware that budgetary constraints have led to a worrying and terminal 'brain drain', via redundancy or re-assignment within other Government departments, of experienced professionals from within the DEDT who could, and should, have been more effectively deployed to assist councils plan ahead during the protracted Forestry Round Table negotiation process.

This is an additional example of the State Government's lack of appreciation of the extensive implications of the Tasmanian Forestry Agreement Bill 2012, which we would submit should have been of the highest priority.

It is our belief, the Labour-Green Government has been dilatory in its duty to protect the regional and overall Tasmanian economy and has been financially inept and impotent while non-elected, non-government agencies have drawn up the agenda for the future of the forestry industry that presents a dire and perilous future for numerous communities statewide.

Central Highlands Council also fears the state is being held to ransom by environmental groups and that it is merely a matter of time before other industries such as mining, agriculture and aquaculture become the focus of protest action.

It is also concerned that elements of its own Economic Stimulus Strategy, including projects involving substantial inward investment worth tens of millions of dollars, could conceivably become, in part, the subject of undue agitation as protesters seek new pet projects if, and when, the Bill is enacted.

In the short term, Central Highlands Council is calling on the State Government to gain firm and enforceable guarantees from all environmental groups not to disrupt legal forestry operations in Tasmania.

It also calls on the Government to introduce urgently legislation protecting workers from possible injury and all work sites and work places from trespass, squatting, criminal damage and loss of productivity and income by protesters and to enshrine that in Workplace Standards law.

Recent extensive fires in the Central Highlands region have further emphasised the need for fire management and fire mitigation strategies and we insist that the State Government addresses these issues within the proposed Bill.

This, combined with the slashing of the Parks and Wildlife budget and personnel, leaves the Central Highlands seriously exposed to potential disaster.

In addition to the fire risk, the effect of the Bill on Forestry Tasmania's future operations in the Central Highlands remains a serious concern with road access reduced or denied and established tracks and trails under threat of permanent obstruction due to lack of maintenance.

Specifically, the internationally-renowned Tasmanian Trail could be severely affected. The Trail, for horse riders, mountain bikers and hikers, follows a route from Devonport to Dover with the vast majority of its course being within the Central Highlands.

The Tasmanian Trail is one of the cornerstones of Council's Highlands Tasmania tourism marketing strategy with its flow on benefits to local businesses and communities from Miena, through Bronte Park, Ouse and Ellendale.

Council has been working closely with the Tasmanian Trail to build its profile and future as a significant tourism attraction.

It is the Central Highlands' Three Capes Track, at a fraction of the investment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission is based on extensive community consultation within the Central Highlands, the implementation of its Economic Development Plan and the creation of its approved Economic Stimulus Strategy addressing the socio-economic and future financial well-being of the region for generations to come.

Central Highlands Council demands:

- State Government releases maps of the proposed reserves as a matter of extreme urgency so it can assess the effect on its finances as it enters into its annual budgeting process for 2013-14 and beyond.
- Federal and State Governments detail the proposed allocation of publicised post-Act funding so it can plan ahead and implement its Economic Stimulus Strategy in an efficient and effective manner.

- State Government immediately announces, and urgently launches, an investigation into the socio-economic impact of its proposed legislation on the Central Highlands and other forestry communities across Tasmania.
- State Government establishes a taskforce to work with Council to implement its Economic Stimulus Strategy and believes proactivity from within Government would assist in allaying the fears and trepidation of the Central Highlands and other communities.
- State Government gains firm and enforceable guarantees from all environmental groups to not disrupt legal forestry operations in Tasmania.
- State Government introduces urgent legislation protecting workers from possible injury and all work sites and work places from trespass, squatting, criminal damage and loss of productivity and income caused by protesters and to enshrine that in Workplace Standards law.
- State Government adequately addresses fire management and fire mitigation strategies within the proposed Bill.



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Mayor,

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