

Submission to the Select Committee considering the Tasmanian Forests Agreement Bill 2012 (No. 30)

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Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to you as a member of the public concerned about the future of Tasmania and its forests.

Process

Firstly, I would like to congratulate you on following due process in regards the bill. Putting unelected lobby groups behind closed doors and asking them to reach agreement concerning what should be done about the forest industry in Tasmania is not a proper way to devise important government policy.

Especially a policy with far-reaching consequences for people's livelihoods, the future of rural communities, and the future availability of natural resources.

Representation

The process ought to have involved extensive public consultation, have sought expert opinion on all aspects of the deal, and it should have been 100% transparent. Many people and interest groups, including the Tasmanian Conservation Trust, The Environment Association, the Forest Practices Authority, the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, boat builders, specialty timber users and local councils, were not represented at the negotiating table.

Review

I think, therefore, that the Upper House has taken exactly the right action by referring the bill to a select committee. The Upper House is constituted as a house of review and this bill has been put together by such a strange process that a review is certainly needed. Those members of the public left out of the negotiating process leading up to the bill can now be heard, issues which have been left out can be considered, and a wide range of experts can have their say.

Deficiencies in the bill

Some points that I believe the committee would find useful to consider are:

- The proposed reserves have not been adequately defined in this bill. We may assume, but cannot be sure, that they correspond approximately to the areas agreed in the Tasmanian Forest Agreement 2012. They need to be accurately defined in this bill so that the public have the opportunity to comment on them.
- Do the proposed reserve areas cover the forests where biodiversity is most at risk and where protection of values is most required? The Tasmanian Conservation Trust has pointed out that the forests with the greatest biodiversity and most in need of protection of their values are not in the proposed reserve areas (which are apparently in the tall wet forests), but in drier forests of eastern Tasmania, mostly on private land.
- Will the proposed reserve system lead to intense and unsustainable harvesting in areas available for commercial harvest, particularly in the high-biodiversity forests on private land?
- Is the money on offer from the State and Commonwealth for the maintenance of the proposed reserves sufficient, particularly in light of the fact that DPIPWE and staff of Parks and Wildlife in particular operate under a very tight budget?
- Following on from the above point: Millions of dollars are required on a continuing basis for the upkeep of roads and bridges so that they remain passable for public access and for firefighting. Up until now these funds have come from the proceeds of commercial harvest. How will the government make sure that access for firefighting is maintained, without a large increase in government expenditure from a decreasing tax base in an economy in recession?
- Forestry Tasmania staff are highly trained in firefighting and have a professional firefighting system including manned fire towers, radio systems and fire trucks. How does the government propose to maintain and pay for an effective firefighting force if Forestry Tasmania staff numbers are drastically reduced?
- There have already been media reports about the non-availability of contractors' heavy machinery for use in firefighting because contractors have left the state. How does the government intend to fill the machinery gap once the bill is passed and more contractors have packed up?

- How does the government see itself replacing the many jobs lost in the industry, particularly in rural areas, bearing in mind Mr McKim's Green Team's commitment before the last election of "growing jobs in the timber industry"?
- One of the aims of the bill is creating "peace" between those people opposing forestry and the people working in the industry. How will the Government guarantee this "peace" in face of the fact that Environment Tasmania, The Wilderness Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation, in their December 2012 leaflet, make the following proclamation: "Let's move on ... from logging native forests" and the "Markets for Change" organization and other non-signatories to the agreement are still working to end all native forest harvest?

Amendments

I believe these questions need careful consideration. The process of preparing this bill has been so poor, and the results are so incomplete and flawed, that the bill cannot be fixed by a handful of amendments.

Goals unrealistic

Schedule 1 of the bill specifies the vision for Tasmania's forests: "resolution of longstanding conflict surrounding the management of forests", "a protected area estate valued for biodiversity", and "sustainably managednative forests". There is no evidence that it will achieve any of these goals: the conflict is likely to continue, native forests of high biodiversity value will almost certainly come under unsustainable harvest pressure, and the bill is silent on how a sustainable timber industry will be developed.

Formal enquiry required

I believe that to achieve the goals set out in the bill a formal enquiry should be set up with the aim of fully investigating the above three issues by engagement with the public, with scientists, with economists and with technical experts. The enquiry should be open to the public and its report should be a public document.

Future of the rural economy

This hearing is not about gaining one-off Federal money for regional development or exit packages bailing out timber firms in financial trouble. It is about the future shape of the resource-based part of the economy of Tasmania. As one commentator so aptly put it, Tasmania has no future as "an aged care facility in a national park." I urge the Tasmanian Legislative Council

to look at the big issues and not to be swayed by narrow sector-driven or party-driven agendas.