

March 22, 2011

To the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry:

We are members of the community in far East Gippsland, a region once heavily dependent on the Australian forestry industry. We are writing to submit our views and concerns to your inquiry into and the current and future prospects of the Australian forestry industry, particularly in regards to the following terms of reference:

- Environmental impacts of forestry, including... the development of win-win outcomes in balancing environmental costs with economic opportunities;
- Social and economic benefits of forestry production;
- Potential energy production from the forestry sector, including: Biofuels, biomass...and, carbon sequestration;

Our region was once heavily dependent on forestry production; it provided employment for a significant percentage of our community and Orbost was proudly known as "Victoria's Premier Timber Town." However, these days have already passed. For reasons that range from increased mechanization, to the collapse of the woodchip market, and the scarcity of remaining resource, our local economy has been steadily transitioning out of forestry production for at least a decade. Several years back, in 1995, tourism was estimated to be worth twice as much to the East Gippsland region as forestry, which employed only 2.9% of our population. The writing was on the wall then; forestry has not been sustaining our community for years.

Despite the need for change, our region is not struggling. Instead, it is thriving; adapting and growing in the new circumstances to be a more diverse, vibrant community than ever before. Indeed, the diversification of our economic base away from the single mainstay of forestry production has made us a more economically and socially resilient community, has improved the breadth of opportunities here, and has attracted many new residents.

The forestry industry was a hard taskmaster: in our region people worked long hours in dangerous conditions, suffered injury and disablement, and often for wages that nowhere near compensated for these demands. While the products of our labours were shipped away, largely overseas, to be processed and value added, our community was left living in a landscape transformed: forests drier and less diverse, wildlife diminishing, wildfire risks increasing, air and water quality suffering.

Now, the Orbost district is becoming a new place. Our new economy continues to be sustained by agriculture as it always has been, and is supplemented not by forestry but by tourism and associated services. An influx of "tree change" migrants has moved here to enjoy life amongst the remaining forests, and the region continues to adapt. Our community now relies on the social and economic benefits of forest preservation, rather than forestry production.

Forest-based tourism has been a win-win outcome for our region, which both protects the environment and provides economic opportunities. Self-drive and guided 4-wheel drive tours, bushwalks, bicycle rides, and other forms of eco-tourism have contributed substantially to the regional economy and provided flow-on business to regional business, in particular services and accommodation.

Energy production from the forestry sector seems to us to be a last ditch attempt to create a market for woodchips where one no longer exists. While biomass advocates present forest woodchips as a "renewable" resource, we disagree. Trees do, indeed, grow back: but old forests do not, at least, not for many hundreds of years. Here in far East Gippsland, woodchips are produced by the clearfelling of forests many hundreds of years old. In the course of woodchip production, understorey species, including shrubs, vines, groundcover, etc., are all cleared as well as the trees. The trees that are woodchipped are often very old, senescent trees with hollows that provide crucial habitat for arboreal species. The complex interaction of flora and fauna that makes our forests a uniquely biodiverse environment is lost when they are cleared for woodchips; only

the particular species of trees seeded in the aftermath grow back. So, again; while trees themselves may be "renewable," our forests are not.

As we explained above, our community depends on our forests as a living resource. We strongly disagree of the squandering of this resource in the production of biomass.

Our forests as they stand, however, are an excellent carbon sink. In fact, the old forests of our region store more carbon than has been previously thought. Where the International Panel on Climate Change values forests at a default 90 tonnes per hectare in carbon storage, our old growth holds 2,000 tonnes of carbon per hectare, according to research by Prof. David Lindenmayer of the ANU. In light of the coming regime of economic recognition of the value of carbon storage, our forests must be left standing.

It is too late for the federal government to act to support the forestry industry and to maintain our communities' dependence on it. Times have changed, and our community has already changed with them. What we need now is government support to maintain the forests themselves, on which we now depend.

Thank you

Signed:

Susanna Bady Shelley Nundra

Goongerah Landcare Group, Rena Gaborov, President.

Goongerah District Arts Employment and Education, Anita Davis, Treasurer.