

SUBMISSION No. 91
Inquiry into the Australian forestry industry

**Submission To The House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry**

Introduction:

This submission is made recognizing that the original deadline of 25 March 2011 has passed but an extension until the 29 April 2011 has been granted to some stakeholders. If this late submission is accepted the author would like the opportunity to be involved in any future public hearing on the Australian Forest Industry.

Scope:

The scope of this perspective is limited to personal experience and knowledge accumulated over the period 1960 to the present and does not purport to be a definitive technical appreciation of the subject matter.

History:

There is widespread acceptance that the aboriginal inhabitants were very responsible stewards of the Australian flora and fauna for millennia before European settlement and that regular burning figured prominently in that process. Squatters and subsequent pioneers used timber for construction of domestic and industrial buildings and for fencing. Subsequent realisation of the value of certain species lead to wholesale harvesting of large volumes of Red Cedar, Hoop Pine and many rainforest soft woods.

Establishment of the NSW Forestry Commission set the scene for the evolution of extremely high standards of stewardship and management of our timber resource.

This agency used regular fuel reduction burning, timber stand improvement programs and advancing silviculture science together with cyclic selective harvesting to preserve and enhance the timber resource and the forest environment in general. A vital part of this work was the establishment and maintenance of a huge network of road and bridge infrastructure.

Timber, of course was the primary building material during this time and many sawmills were established in areas with large native forest resources (some 17 mills within 30 kms of the village of Woodenbong. These sawmilling enterprises sustained many smaller villages and contributed substantially to the economic health of bigger towns such as Kyogle and regional centres. Interestingly there was much less focus on environmental outcomes during this time, but the use of timber from sustainable forest reserves (the only building product that is renewable and actually locks up carbon) was the product of choice.

Additionally, local farmers also benefited from the timber industry by being able to sell logs to saw-millers and or gain employment in the timber industry during bad seasons or periods of economic hardship.

Establishment of a myriad of new National Parks from what were generally well managed sustainable native forests in our local government area meant an immediate downturn in the timber industry and therefore the socio-economics of local communities. Many mills closed and communities vanished. Smaller towns experienced a severe downturn with many businesses closing, this also impacted upon larger towns and regional centres. During social impact consultations, predictions were made that tourism would bring more jobs and generate more wealth than the timber industry had provided. This has not eventuated.

Present Situation:

Unfortunately, these very well managed native forests which, after up to four cycles of logging over eight decades were considered by the conservation movement as being in pristine condition, and worthy of protection, are now severely degraded, with high levels of fuel, noxious weed infestation, die back and diminished public amenities.

The dramatic reduction in the available native forest resource has put additional and intense pressure on the remaining forest asset to enable Forests NSW to satisfy its log supply agreements and remain viable. Consequently younger and inferior quality logs have been harvested, negatively impacting on the sustainability of our native forest asset. An interesting but disturbing side effect, is that Australia now spends in excess of \$2 billion pa as a net importer of forest products, much of which comes from the ecologically fragile rainforests of third world countries. Harvesting in those countries often has a disastrous impact on the local human population of endangered flora and fauna, and contributes markedly to greenhouse gas emissions.

The Federal Governments 2020 vision was intended to make Australia self-sufficient in forest product by the year 2020.

A great initiative, it introduced tax incentives which resulted in huge expanses of hardwood plantation being established using funds from managed investment schemes. Sadly, oversight of this initiative was lacking in that most (about 60%) of the plantations established under this program in the Kyogle Local Government Area are of the Dunii species which is ideal for use as paper pulp but little else, we have no pulp mill and no access to viable export facilities. So, having displaced traditional food production forms of agriculture, artificially inflated the price of farmland and further undermined the socio-economics of smaller communities, we now have approximately 80,000 ha of hardwood plantation timber much of which is ready for thinning or harvest, but without a market.

Disturbingly, the four biggest private forestry companies are now in receivership which has further impacted on these rural communities.

Another distressing aspect of this situation is that under this Federal initiative the State Government regulated plantation approvals and development to the total exclusion of local government and therefore local communities.

Conclusion:

There is a need to review the validity and wisdom of having huge National Parks which are largely neglected and deteriorating. Perhaps selective logging of National Parks could be investigated. At the very least we need regular fuel reduction burning of these forests and increased weed control.

Additionally the Federal tax incentives for plantation forestry need to include some accountability for the value of the end project i.e. species planted, survival rates and market potential. Local Government should also have a role in the approval process to ensure prime food production land is preserved for that purpose; and bushfire, water quality and other environmental issues are given adequate consideration.

To promote the promised boom in tourism public amenities, maps, signage and media promotion needs to be put in place so there is reason for tourists to visit these areas, otherwise this is just another con-job, another unfulfilled State Government promise.

SL Passfield
Councillor, Kyogle Council
Vice President, National Timber Councils Taskforce
29 April 2011