

SUBMISSION 5.1

Inquiry into The Australian forestry industry



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Dear Sirs

Address to Inquiry into Australian Forestry Industry

The Clarence Environment Centre believes that to understand the opportunities and constraints facing forestry today, there has to be a realisation that what is currently occurring in NSW is not sustainable.

With the signing of the Regional Forests Agreements, Forests NSW's overestimation of the amount of available timber, led to unrealistic wood supply contracts, which has resulted in over-logging of state forests that in some cases can only be described as clear-felling. This urgent need to meet contract commitments has seen illegal logging of protected communities and forest types, and a total disregard for threatened species prescriptions.

At the same time, Forests NSW is already logging plantations that were supposed to meet demand for timber when current contracts expire in 2023, and have also been logging private property for years in an attempt to make up the short-fall. And we still have 12 years of these contracts to run.

With that level of pressure already on our forest resource, inflicting other exploitative industries upon them is out of the question. However, high on that agenda is biomass, burning wood to produce electricity. In a warming world, that has resulted from the burning of fossil fuels, the last thing the world needs is another polluting fuel source. The scary fact is that a 30 MW WFPS requires around 470,000 tonnes of fuel annually, which is more than the total combined annual saw log production from the Upper North East region.

CO2 is not all that WFPS emit, there are dioxins, furans and toxic metals, formaldehyde, phenols, benzene, naphthalene, chlorine, and several other poisonous substances, not to mention particulate matter which impacts on human respiratory systems. Toxic sludge recovered from the scrubbers is another byproduct that has to be safely disposed of.

The other technology eyeing off the forest resource is biofuel, which has already seen competition for use of prime agricultural land, lifting food costs beyond the reach of the world's poor, and has contributed to mass clearing of tropical forests. The moral perspective of using scarce resources to generate fuel to keep rich people in cars, while the vast majority of the world's population are struggling to survive, should be sufficient to limit this technology to the use of true waste material only.

Value adding

We believe value adding of all natural resources should be a priority, but that the Government's non-protectionist policies makes that difficult if not impossible.

Plantations

Plantations have a critically important role to play, and a decade ago we were handed a perfect

opportunity to capitalise on a booming economy, which allowed the government to provide tax incentives for tree-planting. Unfortunately, through a lack of oversight, governments allowed the entire process to be hijacked by the woodchip industry, and some fly-by-night operators that went belly-up when the global financial crisis struck.

Both State and Federal governments refused to heed warnings about the fragile nature of the Managed Investment Schemes that sprang up to take advantage of this deluge of tax-payer funded investment. I think it was Senator Heffernan that described the entire industry as an approaching train wreck. But no one listened to him, or organisations such as ours that identified a range of environmental concerns, and the fact that the trees being planted could not be used for saw logs.

I should point out that this Committee's term of reference: **“the development of win-win outcomes in balancing environmental costs with economic opportunities”**, is exactly the same argument that the government used to promote the tree-planting tax concessions in the first instance.

A change of direction.

The Northern Rivers region of NSW is internationally recognised as a biodiversity hot-spot which, combined with the region's wilderness and national parks estates, brings in billions of tourist dollars annually, far more than any other sources of revenue. Tourism and the hospitality business provide more jobs than any other sector, so the natural environment must be protected from over-exploitation.

The NSW Government's Biodiversity Strategy identifies the fact that ***“The quality of life of present and future generations is dependent on conserving biological diversity and using natural resources sustainably. Biodiversity is important both for its intrinsic value and the ecosystem services it provides to society.”***

What are those “ecosystem services”? What dollar value do they represent? What would it cost, for example, to mechanically purify all our ground water, or how much would it cost to remove carbon dioxide from the air and replace it with the oxygen which is needed to sustain all life on earth? These are services that nature currently provides us absolutely free, but we still harvest forests at a financial loss even though none of the ecosystem services are costed into the equation.

Whatever ideas come from these hearings, the health of our native forests must be the primary concern, and the status quo cannot be allowed to continue.

John Edwards
Honorary Secretary
Clarence Environment Centre.



Old-growth Rainforest logged in the Clarence Valley.