

The Institute of Foresters of Australia

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30 September 2010

The Editor
The Daily Examiner
Grafton

Dear Editor,

How ironic that in Wednesday's edition of your paper which decried the loss of 100 or so Telstra jobs from Grafton, your correspondent John Edwards used your opinion pages to slam the timber industry and protest any move towards regional processing of plantation timber. Grafton has been a timber processing hub for decades, yet the steady transfer of sustainably managed native forests into the National Park estate over the last 15 years has seen many more local jobs lost from that industry than has recently been lost from Telstra.

The Regional Forest Agreement process for northern NSW arrived at a position where tens of thousands of hectares of productive public forest was put into reserves and yet the log volume cut was not reduced proportionally. The adopted government strategy was to cut the remaining forest area above sustainable levels for 20 years, at which time the log production would drastically reduce and industry log inputs would need to be primarily met from timber plantations. Consequent to these decisions, logging operations on private property have come under intensive regulation, which has resulted in a significant reduction in that resource also.

The NSW North Coast and Grafton in particular is uniquely placed to benefit from the potential for the established plantation resource to contribute to an expanded processing industry with more jobs. Whatever your views of the MIS based Forestry companies and their demise, the fact is that the trees are in the ground, and in most cases they are growing quite well.

The realities of plantation silviculture mean that from the 1000 or so trees per hectare that are planted, only between 100 and 200 of the best are left for the final harvest. In the meantime the remaining trees have to be removed as thinnings so as to concentrate the growth potential of the site on the selected final crop trees. Plantation thinnings, especially the first thinnings, are small low quality logs that can only be used for woodchip based products.

So if we want our timber plantations to provide the necessary resource to support a viable local timber industry, it is imperative that we thin them in order to grow sawlogs in the shortest possible time. To do that there has to be a local market for woodchips. We can either process them at a regional centre or ship them (and the jobs) offshore. In my view that is a "no-brainer" decision.

For too long in NSW the forestry debate has been ruled by rhetoric and emotion. Far reaching political decisions have been made without the benefit of any clear industry strategy for the State and the forests have been treated like a giant “magic pudding”. If our society wants to preserve the native forests, then we need to maximise log production from plantations. And that means either local processing or export of woodchips. The only other solution would be to close down our timber industry altogether and import all of our timber requirements from some other country, another “no-brainer” decision.

Yours faithfully,

John Ball RPF
Chairman, Northern Branch
Institute of Foresters of Australia.