

The Institute of Foresters of Australia

ABN 48 083 197 586



25 November 2010

The Hon Julia Gillard MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister Gillard,

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) is the peak body for professional foresters in Australia. It is a not-for-profit organisation mostly run on a voluntary basis. It has approximately 1300 members who work in production forestry, conservation, land and water management, research and academic institutions and its membership is approximately half of the professional forestry graduates in Australia.

IFA maintains its independence by being entirely funded from membership subscriptions. It has a broad membership with differing views. IFA has well articulated policies on forests and forest management in Australia which enjoy the broad support of the membership.

The IFA is extremely concerned with the current situation in Australia with respect to plans for restructuring of the native forest industry and consequent management of native forests throughout Australia. The current situation has received some momentum due to the Tasmanian Statement of Principles which arose out of meetings of industry, Environmental Non-Government Organisations (ENGOS) and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) in Tasmania. These meetings arose out of a "promise" by the Federal Forestry Minister at a meeting in Hobart (May 2010), which I attended, to support a strategy that addressed commercial issues pertaining at the time, largely to do with market downturn related to export woodchips to Japan. At that meeting the Minister also stated the ongoing commitment of his government to Regional Forest Agreements.

Gunns Limited, the largest forest products company in Australia and certainly the largest consumer of native forest products in Tasmania, decided to make a business decision about this time to exit the native forest sector. Their stated rationale was that the construction of the Tamar pulp mill was their only priority and they needed broad community support for a mill based entirely on plantation resources. IFA respects the right of Gunns to make a business decision that supports their business strategies and reflects the wishes of their shareholders. However, the decision of one company should not precipitate a complete overhaul of well-established inter-governmental agreements and policies such as the Regional Forest Agreements.

The Tasmanian Statement of Principles was promoted as a means to commence serious negotiations about the future of Tasmania's forest sector and forest management in general. However, the Tasmanian Premier is already referring to it as an "agreement" and several mainland State and federal politicians are talking about "Tasmanian style solutions" to their forest sectors.

Independent professional foresters were excluded from the negotiation of the Tasmanian Statement of Principles and there is no indication as yet, that professional foresters will be involved any further part of the process. This situation would not be tolerated in any other sector in the Australian economy, where the professionals in the field were entirely ignored in favour of vested interest, industry, union and ENGO participation.

Recently the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated, "In the long term, a sustainable forest management strategy aimed at maintaining or increasing forest carbon stocks, while producing an annual sustained yield of timber, fibre or energy from the forest, will generate the largest sustained mitigation benefit." The IFA views this as an endorsement of sustainable forest management in native forests, complimented with a plantation resource to meet specific markets. Indeed many of the leading conservation-based ENGOs around the world favour sustainable forest management in native forests compared with plantation developments. Sustainable forest management in native forests, when practised appropriately, assists conservation outcomes by providing income for management of high conservation values. Australia must continue to take its place in the world as a responsible manager of its natural resources.

IFA is concerned that long-term management of Australia's native forests, with a balance of environment, social and economic outcomes is being ignored. Over the past 30 years there has been significant restructuring of State Forests in all States. As a result of RFA and other decisions, significant areas of State Forest have been transferred to National Parks and conservation reserves, such that Australia is a world leader in this area. The IFA applauds this, where appropriate and substantial investigation of scientific, conservation and cultural heritage has led to these reservations. However, many reservations have resulted from political pressure, usually exerted around State elections. The reservation status of highly productive forests is often over-represented whereas the woodlands and poorer production areas are under-represented. The influence of professional foresters in State and Federal governments has been severely reduced and recent decisions appear to reflect the lack of quality professional advice.

IFA is similarly concerned that an exit from production activities in native forests will be accompanied by significantly reduced or no ongoing management of those forests. While the forests will continue to provide ecosystem services such as clean water, biodiversity and carbon storage they will not provide tangible income to State or Federal governments. Instead of forests providing some income their management will rely on funding directly from government. The IFA has been concerned for some time about the lack of funds and resources provided to already over-stretched National Park and conservation area managers, without any considerable increase in additional area.

In addition, the IFA is concerned about the lack of good fire management practices occurring in large areas of National Parks and conservation areas, and the subsequent impact on both the community and the forest ecosystems. Professional foresters have extensive knowledge and experience in fire management, and with-drawl of such expertise and management practices from native forests would inevitably lead to avoidable catastrophes such as those seen in Victoria over recent years.

IFA is also concerned that an exit from native forest production merely transfers demand for timber products to imports and environmentally unsustainable alternatives, where locally grown plantations cannot produce substitute products. This is the case in high quality hardwood timber which is used in joinery, furniture, flooring, structural and decorative veneers. There will be an inevitable increase in imports of hardwood timber, placing undue pressure on our near tropical neighbours, where most of the supply comes from, who generally have poor forest management practices.

Alternative products such as steel, aluminium and concrete, consume vastly greater amounts of energy to produce and are obtained from non-renewable resources. Thus local expediency gives way to poor environmental, social and economic outcomes both in Australia and other countries.

Australia has experienced widespread community backlash against plantation developments. The first backlash occurred when native forests, mostly on State and Federal lands were converted to softwood plantations in the 1960s through to the 1990s. More recently widespread expansion of eucalypt plantations on cleared agricultural land has met with widespread opposition. The irony is that softwood plantations now support a thriving pulp, paper and sawmilling sector in Australia and are viewed in a positive light by ENGOs. Now it appears the some sections of the ENGO movement are happy to accept hardwood plantations, which the same groups vehemently opposed, in the hope that it will precipitate an exit from native forests.

Professional foresters are trained to think in time horizons that span centuries, because that is the nature of the native forest resource they deal with. Native forests in Australia have only been subject to professional forest management for less than 100 years. They continue to provide environmental, social and economic benefits for Australia. Many of Australia's native forests have provided sustainable resources and regional employment for generations. Some previously "exploited forests" are in such good health that they are now considered worthy of "national park" status (Eg: River red gums in Victoria and NSW, millions of hectares of wet eucalypt forest on the eastern seaboard and south western WA and Cypress pine forests in NSW and Queensland). This is testament to professional foresters taking account of conservation values while considering resource use needs of humans.

IFA members live and work in the forestry and forest conservation sector throughout Australia. Our members live in rural communities, regional centres and capital cities. We, our families and communities are directly affected by changes to forest management. Professional foresters have high level academic and practical skills concerning forest management and changes in forest policy. Just as medical professionals are consulted about health, economists about the economy etc, so should foresters be consulted about forests.

I implore you to ensure that, in any restructure of Australia's forest sector, to insist on the inclusion of independent and eminent professional foresters on any inquiries, panels and implementation groups. The IFA is willing to assist in this process. Please contact our organisation to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely



Peter Volker
National President
Institute of Foresters of Australia

