

Introducing Timber Workers for Forests: What we are, what we do, why we are important and how we want Tasmania’s forests to be managed.

Timber workers for forests is an Incorporated Association, formed in 2001 to represent the interests of timber workers who believed that their interests were not represented by Timber Communities Australia, or by the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania.

We represent the interests of a large number of Tasmanians who run businesses that depend on Tasmanian special timbers for their livelihood, such as craft-workers, furniture makers, wood-turners and wooden boat-builders, shingle splitters and restorers of heritage buildings. This means that we constitute a political threat, rather than an economic threat to the current forest management regime, which seeks to misrepresent us. So we want to make it clear to Tasmanian voters and the Opposition Parties, that there are some popular descriptions that don’t fit us at all.

We are not:

- A Green front group
- A branch of the Wilderness Society. While the TWS is concerned with the single issue of preservation, we are concerned with the long- term management of production forests so that **all** their present products, and the present **quality of the timber they contain**, will be undiminished in the future.
- We are not any of the things we have been labelled by those who seek to discredit us, such as “doctor’s wives”, “latte drinkers” and so on. We are not aligned to any political party and we are not interested in the voting habits of our members, or in what other organisations they may belong to.

We are as we say, **timber workers**. We are an independent collective of timber workers established because our interests are not represented by Timber Communities Australia, neither by the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania, nor the Trade Union Movement.

We often get our materials from the forest directly as well as from the few remaining small saw-millers because salvaging timber that would otherwise be burnt is often the only way we can get it. This makes it impossible for us to be unaware of the huge waste of good timber that is part of the present regime.

From salvaged timber and from timber we buy from the few remaining specialist Tasmanian sawmillers, we make high value goods such as solid furniture, children’s playground equipment, picture frames, shingles and fencing materials, turnery, wooden boats. Some of us *are* specialist sawmillers, foresters, builders and carpenters.

But instead of being recognized as fundamental contributors to the Tasmanian economy, we have been described by the Premier as “The Usual Suspects” and are lumped in with

the Greens. At the same time we are used, somewhat cynically, by the Labour party and Forestry Tasmania in their public relations strategy to glamorise the perceived ugliness of an industry focused increasingly on pulp production and re-growth saw logs of relatively low quality. We support the management of our native forest for all its values, not just as a source of timber. We oppose the continued expansion of the plantation industry because it will lead to the increased production of low value commodities when the industry in Tasmania should be concentrating on high value products.

Some of us invest in the timber industry. Others teach and practise woodworking or boatbuilding. **We therefore support the timber industry, but want our forests managed in the interests of all of us, now and forever, not for the heavy end of the industry at the expense of the rest of us, and in a way that deprives all of us and will diminish the inheritance of our children.**

Why we are important

Tasmania's specialty timber industry has a turnover approaching \$20 million per year. It creates an estimated 650 full-time equivalent jobs and is a significant generator of downstream processing initiatives. It also fosters the development of fine wood skills and the creation of uniquely crafted products that are an important ingredient of our culture and a complement to the Tasmanian tourist industry.

Without us, our Tourist industry would suffer severe damage. Without shingle splitters and specialist tradesmen and the timbers they need you could not maintain Port Arthur. You could not have a Wooden Boat Festival or a large part of the Salamanca market.

According to an industry audit of the Furniture Designer's Association, items of Tasmanian woodcraft top the list of discretionary expenditure by visitors to Tasmania, after the essentials of food, transport and accommodation have been met. Without our work tourists would not be able to cherish their Tasmanian memories of the forest and the people it supports, by feeling in their hands the bit of woodcraft they bought on the way to the airport.

What we stand for.

- We **oppose the clearfelling** of our remaining old growth and high quality regrowth forests in the timber production areas, especially in mixed wet forests that contain special timbers of great value found nowhere else in the world, and which sustain our own industries, together with the honey industry of Tasmania which enables bee-keepers to survive, and in turn provides pollination services to the apple industry and horticulture. The diversity of these forests underpins much of what makes Tasmania distinctive and so it is a major support of the Tourist industry as well. We **support the selective logging** of old growth forests in the timber production areas, but only at a rate and by methods that will retain their bio-diversity at coupe level and will not diminish the ability of the forest to continue to provide timbers of present quality and variety for ever.

- Above all we abhor waste, especially the waste of the timbers that are irreplaceable and unique to this island, and which take up to 400 years or more to reach commercial size or productive maturity. We mean **Celery Top Pine, Sassafrass, Leatherwood, Myrtle** as well as very special timbers like **native olive, cheesewood** and others that are burnt to be replaced for practical purposes by a short rotation eucalypt regrowth monoculture.
- It is not generally known that Celery top pine, which is only found in Tasmania and can live for up to 900 years is currently being trashed or, in the case of immature samples, being sold for **less than the cost of firewood**, (e.g. \$55.00 a ton). When left to grow it becomes a prized and beautiful timber, one of the best boatbuilding timbers in the world, also used for joinery, craft and house building. Myrtle is less durable but can live for up to 500 years. It is in demand for flooring, furniture and joinery. **We also oppose the waste of mature eucalypts which are split and used for pulp, and will never be replaced because of the short rotations of regrowth plantations.**

Despite the recent Community Forest Agreement, we still have a problem. We use timbers that are often over 300 years old – timbers of this age are not being replaced under current forestry practices.

Why we want the Opposition Parties to listen to us.

We have tried to influence Forestry Tasmania, not only by protesting and explaining our problems to individuals at all levels, but also by doing some serious research over the last three years on the quantity of irreplaceable resource that is wasted, on the real effect of present policy on job retention. We have made positive proposals for policy change based on research **and wide consultation within the industry**, and we have asked Forestry Tasmania to read our work critically and consult with us prior to publication, but they have chosen to refuse to take us seriously.

That is why we want the Tasmanian majority to understand our position. We have tried to work with the Government. That hasn't worked. So because we believe in democracy, we are seeking the support of the Opposition and all Tasmanian voters and working for a change of Government. We are encouraged by the recent stand of the Liberal Party on Ralph's Bay. It was not the attitude of that party to the particular development that impressed us but the fact that it saw that the wishes of the Tasmanian people appeared to be becoming subordinated to those of the Premier and his favourites, and chose to take a stand on democracy. While we have problems with some of the objectives of the Greens they have a well-established reputation of respect for democratic principals, and are not controlled by the heavy end of the timber industry.

We realise that the complexity of our forests and the history of their management has made it easy for the Government to divide the Tasmanian community over the issue of

how they should be managed. We believe this strategy is not in the interests of Tasmania, and we want to explain the individual components of the problem we have to deal with, so that we can provide a clear picture of how the Opposition Parties can help us, and we believe, their chances at the next election.

Our argument and concerns

First: the nature of the wet mixed forest that we are concerned with and the impact of present policy on the Tasmanian economy.

The timbers on which we depend grow in both pure rainforests, like the Tarkine, and also form the understorey in the remaining wet mixed forests, (Eucalypt canopy and Rain-forest understorey) that constitute the natural state of much of the Southern forests, and occur in small areas throughout Tasmania. It has been the policy of Forestry Tasmania to clear-fell these forests in the south, burn the residue, and to replace them with fast-growing eucalypts only.

The regime of clearfell rotations of between 30 and 90 years gives no chance for these rain forest species to reach maturity, since Celery Top Pine, for example require 400 years to produce clear sawlogs, and Leatherwood needs 150 years to achieve good honey production. Relatively stable eucalypt timber also requires much longer periods of growth than those currently allowed.

Clear-fell burn and sow is thus a recipe for ecological transformation, not for the regeneration of the original *Forest*. J.M Gilbert, on whose 1958 PhD thesis this strategy is based, was wiser than his modern disciples. Unlike them, he foresaw the problems of the method, i.e. the destruction of special timbers that might be valuable in the future, but recommended it as the best method of *eucalypt* regeneration half a century ago in totally different social and economic circumstances from the present.

Now, it wastes timber in two ways: Immature special timber trees are cut, never to reach their full value, and so create a glut, while the rest is burnt. Forestry Tasmania claims to be “getting out of Old Growth Logging” but by 2010 there will be none left to log in the timber production areas of the southern forests if they go on as they are doing. When we have voiced our fears to Forest industry Executives, they have told us that we need not worry. The R.F.A. only lasts until 2017, and there are plenty more special timbers in the reserves! This is the understanding of “Sustainability” that Tasmanians are up against.

The Regional Forest Agreement and the Community Forest Agreement

The Regional Forest Agreement guarantees the sustainable production of special timbers, but does not explain how this is to be achieved. It assumed, against all the reasonable evidence, that the Tarkine would be a major source of these timbers.

Timber Workers For Forests recognized the divisive nature of this strategy, and foresaw that whichever party won the last Federal election the Tarkine would be removed from the Timber production area, in spite of the fact that the majority of the Special Timber Management Units lay within it. This would reduce the area of Special Timbers Management Units by at least 50%. We therefore detailed alternative sources of special timbers throughout the rest of the state. Minister Bryan Green, who presided over an industry that had so misread the international market that it planned to increase woodchip production by millions of tons, claimed that we were being “greedy”. The truth is that the total needs of our industry amounts to about 20, 000 m³ per year, and supports around 650 jobs directly throughout Tasmania.

Product Development and Branding

We believe that the present emphasis of the Tasmanian Forest industry on bulk commodities like woodchips, pulp, and relatively immature saw-logs **makes it the wrong kind of forest industry for Tasmania**. As the recent fall in Gunns’ shareprices indicates, competition with other producers of the same commodities in a global market can easily find us at a disadvantage, especially if we deliberately destroy sustainable alternatives.

Visitors to Tasmania are frequently horrified by the sight of smoke-filled skies, roads littered with dead animals and devastated forest landscapes, and find the efforts of Forestry Tasmania’s Public relations department to persuade them that there is no alternative unconvincing. It contradicts the “Intelligent Island” and “Natural State” impression we would like our visitors to take away with them. This is not to say that we should produce no woodchips, or have no pulpmill, but we remember the days when we were told that the woodchip industry was to be a means of utilizing waste, not causing it. **The balance needs to be restored so that the image of intelligence, natural beauty, and difference from third world bulk commodity production, and the destruction of local cultures can be convincing.**

The Trouble with Forestry Tasmania and why it is so frustrating to deal with them.

At a local and personal level we get on well with F.T. This has been the pattern for decades, and we believe that in the context of the Community Forest Agreement, local foresters support our aims. The trouble comes at the higher levels, where we are seen as a political threat precisely because we do speak from within the industry and we know what we are talking about. As Terry Edwards famously explained last year “It’s as if you’re pissing on our tent from the inside”.

So we are up against an expensive team of public relations people, letter writers and spin doctors who seek to discredit us, and refuse to listen to our proposals. This creates an opportunity for the Parliamentary Opposition because we know from our experience at Agfest, the Woodworking shows, the Wooden Boat Festival, the Huon Show, discussions with other groups like the bee-keepers, and the hundreds of local, interstate and international tourists who visit our workshops that a very large proportion of the voting public agrees with our aims, and sees us as holding a middle ground between Preservation and Destruction. We are seen as a way forward from the dysfunctional effect of political polarisation. Forestry Tasmania is forced to spend ever increasing funds and energy defending itself, and doing this makes it impossible to foresee the need to change, as shown by their failure to anticipate the loss of the Tarkine to timber production.

Forestry Tasmania never seems to realise that if it took us seriously, it would interfere minimally with its industrial policy, and it would remove the need to defend itself. If you do good things people will give you credit for it. As it is, Forestry Tasmania has become an electoral liability to the Labour Party.

What we would like the Opposition Parties to include in their election strategy.

We would like to have all remaining **production** old growth put into specialty timber zones & splitters reserves to genuinely cater for the needs of timber workers such as us, and re-establish the credibility of the forest industry. This will not cause a decline in employment in the timber industry because it will ensure a reliable future supply of timber for the most labour intensive end of the industry instead of the job-shedding end.

Industrial forestry’s needs can still be met from the balance of re-growth and the maturing of the plantation resource because even with no new plantation establishment, an estimated 6,500,000 m³ of plantation timber, primarily hardwood, will be available annually from 2015, an increase of 170% on the current volume of 2,500,000 m³. “Phasing it out” is code for completing the process within the next ten years so that each year it can be claimed that a larger *percentage* of old growth forest is preserved. The

claim that alternative methods will be trialled is a mere palliative while the clearfell frontier drives on remorselessly to the world heritage boundary.

The new “Aggregated Retention” method is a cosmetic improvement, but is really a less efficient form of clearfelling. It will not help the production of quality special timber saw logs because 80% of the forest will still be clearfelled.

We need to *stop it now*, before we “go blind” and our last opportunity is gone. Then we need to work out the best possible methods of management in each small area of forest that contains the timbers we are talking about, and to retain sufficient area to ensure that we can harvest lightly enough not to reduce the capacity of the remaining forest to provide special timbers **forever**. That is what “sustainable” means.

The present Government has fallen into the trap of confusing leadership with defending its patch, which it increasingly identifies with “booster” development. Real leadership is enabling the best aspirations of the community to achieve fulfilment, and for Tasmanians that includes the enjoyment and celebration of those things that make Tasmania unique, including our Special timbers, the things we can make with them, and the creative culture they embody.

Timber Workers for Forests Inc. November 2005