

ISSUE 2313

# "In Support of Progress" Newsletter

Of fire and forests

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State of the State

Of recent times there have been three public statements which, although separate, are linked, and should be of some concern to us all..

The first is that an El Nino weather pattern is on its way. I covered this matter in some detail in #2216, but I note again the following:

*From the Bureau of Meteorology, the following facts emerge:*

*An El Nino event causes warmer and drier weather in eastern Australia, and occurs when the water temperature in the eastern Pacific is cooler than normal.*

*A La Nina event causes cooler and wetter weather in eastern Australia, and occurs when the water temperature in the eastern Pacific is warmer than normal.*

*Such temperature fluctuations cause changes in atmospheric conditions, and such can be measured. The Southern Oscillation Index (or SOI) measures the difference in air pressure at Tahiti and Darwin. A lower pressure in Tahiti will lead to a negative SOI, and is an indicator of an El Nino event. Conversely, a higher pressure in Tahiti will lead to a positive SOI, and will be an indicator of a La Nina event.*

In other words, we are facing the real prospect of a hotter and drier summer. We should prepare now, removing undergrowth, and conduct as much hazard reduction burning as we can manage. Otherwise smoke will be the least of our worries.

The second is the very public resignation of the fire chief, over the transition/merger of the fire service into a larger Police and Emergency Service Department. IT would be moot to suggest the government has not handled this matter well, and it will need to be resolved quickly, not just in the appointment of a new fire chief, but to also consider whether large bureaucratic structures are in fact more effective. They do not seem to have worked well elsewhere in the public service, where service delivery should be the driving force.

With fire, one needs to hit it early, and hard. Fire will not wait while a bureaucracy determines what to do. Fire readiness is everything.

The third is a call to end all native forest harvesting. Victoria has now joined Western Australia in closing down its native forest harvesting industry and the hounds are now baying that Tasmania should follow suit. Many reasons are being tossed around, but they are at their heart myths that have been allowed to become perceived truths. A perceived truth is still not a truth, no matter how eloquent or passionate its presentation. From a fire perspective alone, a wild fire is far more damaging to wild life, or climate change, than managed burns. The argument promoted by some academics that a young forest is more vulnerable to fire than an old forest is challenged, but both burn.

Sustainable Timber Tasmania (STT) is a government agency, a Government Business Enterprise (GBE). It is in fact Forestry Tasmania given a new name, and in my view an inappropriate one, because it is about so much more than just timber production.

It is at its core a land management agency, responsible for managing more than 800,000 hectares of public land, (termed "Permanent Timber Production Zone" land) of which only about half (435,000 ha) is classified as production forest. The remaining hectares are either areas in informal reserves (around 130,000 hectares) or areas otherwise designated as non-production areas. These latter areas contain forest and/or natural vegetation but are not accessible or commercial for eucalypt forest harvesting.

Forest Reserves and non-production areas still need to be managed, for such things as road maintenance, weed control, fire suppression and public access, all of which fall under the category of "Community Service Obligations" and for which a payment is made by the government. In fact STT resources are also available for fire management outside of STT land.

It needs to be noted that that payment would still need to be made no matter which agency managed that land. So it is simply illogical to regard such payment as an industry subsidy.

In fact STT harvests less than 5,000 hectares each year, which it regenerates, spends over \$100m each year within Tasmania, makes a profit on its management of production forest and returns a dividend to the government. Not widely known, but truth.

To the question as to whether plantation wood is a suitable substitute for natural timber, the answer is NO. Plantation hardwood is young wood, it is springy and splits easily. Good for fibre, and for a quick turnaround, but it is a different species of eucalypt and it does not have the characteristics of older wood. Plantations are actually managed to do just that – to produce fibre. It is like comparing apples with oranges, or potatoes with peas.

As an aside, it is interesting to hear those opposed to native forest regeneration have no answer to sourcing an alternative wood supply, (if not from here, where?). Other than from plantations (which is simply unsuitable) and in doing so extol the virtues of monoculture, which is what a plantation is. As I said earlier, crazy stuff!

### **The State of the State**

It would be fair to say that State parliament at the moment is in an unstable state.

The government can no longer boast stability or majority when it loses votes on the floor of the House. And Ministers are not helping the cause by not being over their briefs during budget estimates, or being totally banal in their responses.

This state of affairs can only last so long. The economic signals are not good - the Statistics Pack on Thursday will show two quarters of negative growth in State Final Demand, which is a measure of the domestic economy – and signals from the Reserve Bank would suggest there are still more interest rate rises to come.

Government is caught in a bind. On the one hand the distraction of a sports stadium and the farce which is Macquarie Point has blinded it to more pressing questions of social concern, such as the crisis in health and homelessness, while on the other hand it is facing mass resignations from the public service at a time when it needs all hands to the wheel.

Ideology or pragmatism? The answer to the latter is that government needs to foster private-public partnerships. It obviously cannot resolve these serious matters in isolation, nor does it seem to have the skill sets or the drive to do so. One can only hope that its blinkered vision has not blinded it to what needs to be done, and quickly.

In the meantime, candidates, get ready! It could happen any time from now.