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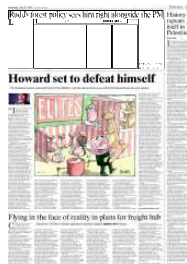
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### **CAN'T SEE THE FOREST**

Dr Judith Ajani ("Rudd's forest policy sees him right alongside the PM", July 25, p13) misses the fundamental point: forest conservation is not mutually exclusive to production, including woodchip export.

Eleven million hectares of public native forests already provide carbon sequestration, water catchment protection, biodiversity conservation and timber. Good conservation outcomes result from good management not through dedicating "new" conservation reserves.

**Peter Langdon, media spokesperson,  
Institute of Foresters of Australia, ACT  
division**



## Rudd's forest policy sees him right alongside the PM Ignorance informs a plan with few green or gold credentials,

**JUDITH AJANI writes.**

**L**ABOR's "forest" statement begs the question: which election is Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd fighting, and on whose side? It reads primarily as an anti-Latham policy, aligning Rudd with Prime Minister John Howard's position going into the 2004 election. It demonstrates little appreciation of the enormous structural change in the wood products industry since Labor governed a decade ago. It fails spectacularly to grasp the very real opportunity for resolving the forest conflict in an economically and environmentally satisfying way.

The statement uses the word "forest" or "forestry" 40 times, but never clarifies that within the "forest" industry there are two fundamentally different forest sectors – one based on native forests and one based on plantations.

Australia-wide, plantation processors now generate 80 per cent of Australia's manufactured wood products – sawn timber, wood panels and the wood used to make paper. Native forests generate 20 per cent, and that production share continues to shrink. Australia's two million hectare softwood and hardwood plantation estate can meet virtually all of Australia's wood needs and support significant exporting of processed wood products. Despite Australia's wood manufacturing moving so thoroughly out of native forests and into plantations, the Government has sent public native forests to the woodchippers.

Today, between 80 to 90 per cent of the log cut from Australia's main native forest logging regions is woodchipped. The choice about forests – native forests – has narrowed essentially to a choice between woodchipping them or using them for carbon sequestration, water catchment protection and biodiversity conservation.

The statement's claim that more than 10,000 Tasmanians are employed in the forestry industry is actually a pumping and then lumping together of Tasmania's plantation and native forest-based employment. Most of Tasmania's

sawn timber is now plantation-based as is most of the state's paper making. None of the associated jobs, or the jobs generated in further processing these products, are at risk in Tasmania's forest conflict.

Despite both major parties' stated interest in forest workers, neither has allocated the funds to separate the official Australian Bureau of Statistics employment figures into plantation-based or native forest-based. I have made a preliminary calculation that indicates about 80 per cent of Australia's forest industry employment no longer depends on native forests but rather on plantation wood growing and logging, plantation processing, paper mills using recycled paper and the further processing of these products.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union's forestry division understands, but does not speak publicly about, this employment reality. Rudd's advisers might like to ask the union for their membership figures disaggregated into the forest industry's two sectors.

What would a good forest policy look like? Such a policy would comprise three complementary parts. First, it would shift all commodity wood production out of native forests and into plantations: to enhance the competitiveness of Australia's forest products industry and to relieve native forests of the ecologically damaging cost-price squeeze inherent in commodity production. Second, it would embrace Australia's plantation resources with a processing industry policy to bring rural wealth and employment. And third, it would unlock Australia's public native forests from export woodchipping so they can return to their bigger job in ecological services.

Instead, Rudd offers a forest industry policy replete with mis-directed minutiae. It allocates funds to help an industry apparently "plagued by skills shortages". The "crisis" lies less with workers and more in the paucity of managers who have the vision to implement and manage the manufacturing process and take the risks. Labor wants to encourage value adding to improve

exports, but fails to identify the plantation sector as the best equipped for this task. Labor wants to "promote world's best practice" yet it remains glued to Regional Forest Agreements that left Australia's most competitive resource and processing sector – plantations – out of the process.

Labor says, once again, it wants to address the forest products trade deficit and, once again, it ignores the fundamental problem: Australia's monopoly producer of printing and writing papers prefers to import these papers through controlled entities rather than invest in new pulp and paper processing capacity.

Labor wants to "crack down on illegally logged timber imports" without stating how much illegal product actually enters Australia. Our imports of sawn timber, veneer and plywood from South-East Asia – legal or otherwise – account for just 2 per cent of our wood consumption. Labor wants to "prepare the industry for the impact of climate change" but fails to grab the carbon sequestration potential of native forests. Labor does however want to assess the capacity of forests "to sequester carbon and develop more sophisticated accounting methodologies that more accurately reflect the emissions and sequestration from the sector": a job Labor would give, strangely, to "industry and other stakeholders" and not to scientists.

Labor's policy to freeze native forest conservation in Tasmania, and perhaps Australia-wide, is staggering. It means Labor values 11 million hectares of public native forests more for woodchip exports than for carbon sequestration, water catchment protection and biodiversity conservation.

The challenge remains for a government, current or prospective, to demonstrate leadership and end the forest wars.

■ **Dr Judith Ajani is a researcher at the Australian National University and author of the recently released *The Forest Wars*, published by Melbourne University Press.**