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Politicians must level forest playing field, report finds

An in-depth study released today outlines how Tasmania tilts the legal and regulatory playing field towards the forestry industry over community, tourism and environmental interests. The report, authored by independent expert consultants CSDev Associates*, urges politicians to level the playing field and find a solution to the forest conflict in Tasmania.

“At the moment, a number of factors tilt the playing field away from conservation. Forestry Tasmania is tangled up in conflicts of priorities and wood supply obligations, whilst also wielding exceptional power and being disproportionately involved in government decision-making,” said Dr Russell, the report’s main author “The regulatory system is filled with exemptions, and politicians often appear captured by industry.”

To level the playing field, the report recommends the re-structuring of Forestry Tasmania to remove its conflicts of priorities and curtail its sweeping powers, as well as the removal of its minimum wood supply obligations.

The report is welcomed in a foreword by former Supreme Court Justice Pierre Slicer “*Levelling the playing field* is not a moral judgement but a statement of necessity. An outcome of the report might be, as some critics might claim, a change in the aims and duties of a public authority, Forestry Tasmania, and, if so, it would be a desirable outcome.”

In researching the 50+-page report, Dr Russell and her colleagues uncovered a pattern dating back more than 10 years. Among the major findings were:

- Tasmania’s forestry governance environment tilts the playing field towards the logging of State forests, against conservation and potential or existing other potential non-extractive uses such as tourism and recreation, and away from effective community engagement
- At the government body level, bureaucratic power is skewed towards Forestry Tasmania
- An unhealthy bias appears to remain towards the corporate expansion plans of Gunns Ltd
- At the legal and regulatory level, the web of exemptions and special legislation surrounding forestry creates an impression among many of “one law for forestry, another for the rest of us”

The report does not paint an entirely bleak picture, also commending the forest industry for better community relations and responsiveness on issues like 1080 poison. But the report’s main authors, who have worked on three continents on conflict, governance and corruption related issues, were blunt in their criticism of the pulp mill approval process. “If this happened in a developing country, many aid donors would call it corruption,” Dr Russell said. Researchers also were struck by the number of individuals who feared adverse consequences if their criticisms of forestry practices or governance became known.

“Tasmania needs a state Forest Policy that will lay out what we hope to achieve in our forests, how we hope to do it, and how we intend to measure success – and every Tasmanian deserves a say in its formulation,” concluded Dr Russell.

Environment Tasmania Director Dr Phill Pullinger believes the reports recommendations provide practical solutions for a timber industry increasingly searching for certainty and a social license; “This offers some important pathways forward to re-build Tasmanians’ trust in how our forests are managed and to get our timber industry out of endless conflict,”

The report can be found on Environment Tasmania's website from Monday: www.et.org.au, and Environment Tasmania is seeking feedback & public comment on the report which will inform a supplementary report.

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* The members of the expert team that has conducted the research for this report (Wynne Russell BA, PhD), Lesley McCulloch (BA, PhD), and Naomi Wakelin (BSc, LLB)) have significant experience in research related to the nexus between governance and social conflict – including in relation to forestry – in international settings ranging from Aceh to Azerbaijan, as well in Australian environmental law through work with the EDO in Queensland and Tasmania.