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Trouble at mill: resignations add air of pollution to pulp project

By Andrew Darby

THE architectural sketches for Australia's biggest forestry project show a clean-lined sprawl on a verdant Tasmanian river bank. Industry goes bush.

The sky is summer blue above the smokeless stack and production lines, which are mostly painted a drab green.

Gunns calls its \$1.4 billion baby "the world's greenest pulp mill", and it has much more in mind than the paint job. Supporters, including both major political parties, say it is the industry's best chance yet to reduce Australia's timber imports.

But opponents of the project say this mill's green is just that: skin deep. They believe it is a liquidator of native forest life in Tasmania, and a polluter of Bass Strait.

As reliably as a swallow returning in spring, a big environmental issue is looming in Tasmania in the lead-up to the federal election. Gunns' pulp mill, already mooted to be completed in three years, is reaching critical hurdles in regulatory approval.

There are blunt criticisms from a Tasmanian Government department about potential dioxin pollution in Bass Strait, and Australian Medical Association concerns about the mill's effect on local air quality.

Now the assessment process itself is in question with the sudden resignation on Thursday of two of the four members of the panel set up by the regulator, the state Resource Planning and Development Commission.

There are many reasons why Greens senator Christine Milne is against the project — not least her long-held opposition to pulp mills. But she is unequivocal. "I think it is doomed," she said.

The mill would be built on Gunns land beside the Tamar River at Bell Bay, north

of Launceston, next door to one of its three export woodchipping plants.

The largest private sector development in Tasmania would employ thousands in construction and almost 300 directly in operation.

About 80 per cent of its 3.2-million-tonne annual feedstock of timber would come from native forests and only 20 per cent from plantations. Woodchip exports, now running at about 4.4 million tonnes per year, could also continue.

Powered by wood waste and using an "elemental chlorine free" process, the mill would produce up to 800,000 tonnes of pulp for paper annually, and pump about 73 million litres of effluent into Bass Strait each day.

It would be the state's single largest private sector investment. It also represents a long-held ambition for Gunns executive chairman John Gay, and others including Gunns director Robin Gray, who was premier when the Wesley Vale project failed under attack from a campaign led by Christine Milne in 1989.

Since then, federal pulp mill guidelines have tightly restricted any pollution potential. Gunns has also spent \$11 million to put together a 7500-page integrated impact statement for the Resource Planning and Development Commission on the social, economic and environmental effects of the mill.

The Howard Government gave Gunns \$5 million to ease the assessment task, and the Tasmanian Government has spent millions on a project cheer squad called the Pulp Mill Task Force. The two governments agreed after the last election that the Regional Forest Agreement was the linchpin for the state's timber industry. But the battle over the mill's environmental effects on Tasmania's native forests is not over.

Gunns has given commitments that no old-growth logs will be used, and there will be no "intensification" of its use of native forests because more plantation timber will gradually be used. The Wilderness Society expects woodchip exports to continue, and is arguing for greater analysis by the

commission of the mill's effect on the forests.

Just before Christmas the commission refused this request, and Wilderness Society campaigner Paul Oosting said the organisation was looking at further action. "Whether we make a Supreme Court challenge or continuing talking about it with the RPDC is yet to be seen," he said.

The courts have just set up another hurdle for the mill with Greens leader Bob Brown's landmark victory in the Wielangta case. The Federal Court found the state agency Forestry Tasmania, which supervises logging on public land, failed to take account of its effect on three endangered species in the Wielangta forest.

Premier Paul Lennon was alarmed by the decision, which he said directly threatened the whole industry's stability. He sought the urgent help of Prime Minister John Howard. "If we can't restore certainty that the the RFA promised, then they'll be unable to conclude commercial arrangements for a pulp mill either," Mr Lennon said.

The state is contemplating an appeal, but Mr Lennon said that could take years. Instead, the two governments may have to try to legislate to close the gap that the court found in their protection of endangered species.

The prospect of a lengthy legal battle was the reason that Melbourne forestry scientist Warwick Raverty gave for quitting his sensitive post on the panel assessing the mill for the commission.

A principal research scientist with the CSIRO subsidiary, Ensis, Dr Raverty's role came under scrutiny last year from the Greens. The party claimed CSIRO publications showed there was a "reasonable apprehension" he had prejudged some key environmental issues involving the mill.

"I am speaking personally, but I refute in the strongest terms that either I, the CSIRO, or Ensis is biased in any way, for or against the proposal," Dr Raverty said.

"However, I have been advised that had I chosen to fight in the courts, it could well have taken two years and could have

gone to the High Court. Therefore in the interests of the project being heard I have decided to resign."

At the same time the panel's chairman, commission executive commissioner Julian Green, announced unexpectedly that he was also resigning. Their departure opens up half of the places on the pulp mill assessment panel at a critical time.

The Lennon Government has the task of appointing a new executive commissioner and the state's Greens leader, Peg Putt, warned they must be seen to be independent.

"This Government has a list as long as your arm of mates in top jobs," Ms Putt said.

"We saw that most recently with the appointment of the head of the Pulp Mill Task Force, Bob Gordon, as the new chief executive of Forestry Tasmania. If they put a mate in for the pulp mill assessment, any shreds of credibility will be completely gone."