
[Australia: Pulping democracy](#)

This week, the Tasmanian Parliament will debate Gunns' proposed pulp mill at Bell Bay in Tasmania. If built, the US\$1.4 billion project would need four million tonnes of logs a year. It would double Gunns current rate of clearcutting in Tasmania's native forests. The pulp mill would produce large amounts of toxins, polluting the air and Tasmania's Bass Strait.

The day before the Tasmanian Parliament started its discussions, Australia's Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced a "draft decision" to approve the pulp mill.

The approval process has become a multi-million dollar sham. In July 2006, Gunns submitted a Draft Integrated Impact Statement on the proposed pulp mill to the Resource Planning and Development Committee (RPDC), an independent statutory body. The Tasmanian Government, meanwhile, spent millions of taxpayers' dollars on a "Pulp Mill Task Force" to promote the pulp mill.

In January 2007, two members of the RPDC resigned, complaining about political interference in the assessment process. When Gunns threatened not to build the mill if they didn't receive approval within six months, Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon met with Gunns' chairman John Gay and told him he would be "working on the process to do his best to make sure the pulp mill is built". In March 2007, Gunns withdrew its application to the RPDC and asked Premier Lennon to change the law on assessing the proposed pulp mill. The next day, the government announced that it would fast-track the assessment process. After meetings with Gunns' lawyers, the government produced new legislation, which was duly passed by Parliament as the Pulp Mill Assessment Act 2007. Under the Act, a decision on the pulp mill must be reached before the end of August 2007. Instead of the independent RPDC assessment process, the Tasmanian Government appointed two consultants to recommend whether Gunns' pulp mill should proceed.

The government's choice of consultants is revealing: ITS Global and SWECO PIC. ITS Global was set up by Alan Oxley, an Australian academic, free-trade lobbyist, and climate change sceptic. Among ITS Global's clients are Malaysian logging company Rimbunan Hijau, whose destructive logging operations and human rights abuses in Papua New Guinea have made it amongst the most controversial logging companies in the world. In July 2006, ITS Global put out a series of reports praising Rimbunan Hijau. Not surprisingly, ITS Global decided that the "net benefit for Tasmania overall" of Gunns' proposed pulp mill is "positive and high".

SWECO PIC is a Finnish consulting and engineering firm. In its report to the Tasmanian government, the company notes that since its creation in 1971, "SWECO PIC has specialised on serving the pulp and paper industry." This is precisely the problem. SWECO PIC is not independent from the pulp industry.

SWECO PIC was hired to assess whether the proposed project complied with Tasmania's emission guidelines for new pulp mills. SWECO PIC found that the proposed mill was in breach of eight of the guidelines, but recommended that "the project can proceed to further consideration by the Tasmanian Parliament".

I asked Rune Franzén, SWECO PIC's Director Pulp and Paper and the team leader for the Gunns assessment, some questions about his company's involvement in promoting this project. I asked Franzén whether his company won the contract after an international bidding process. I asked Franzén whether his team had met any representatives of local communities, environmental organisations or any members of the RPDC. I asked for Sweco PIC's response to Professor Andrew Wadsley's calculations which indicate that Gunns underestimated the emission of dioxins from the proposed pulp mill by a factor of 1,400. (SWECO PIC's report does not deal with the issue.) I asked how SWECO PIC addresses accusations of conflict of interest, since several of SWECO PIC's past (and potential future) clients are working on the Gunns project, including Andritz and Pöyry.

Franzén declined to answer any of my questions. SWECO was hired only to assess the proposed pulp mill, he replied. "SWECO is not involved in any matters of public discussion or debate." Franzen forwarded my questions to Rebekah Burton of the Department of Premier and Cabinet in Tasmania.

I wrote to Burton and in addition to the questions I'd asked SWECO PIC, I asked for a copy of SWECO PIC's terms of reference and asked how much the Tasmanian Government paid for SWECO PIC's assessment. In reply, I received a letter signed by Daniel Leesong, Chief of Staff at the Office of the Premier. Leesong also declined to answer any of my questions.

"In April this year Parliament passed the Pulp Mill Assessment Act 2007 to establish a rigorous and thorough assessment process for the pulp mill proposal," wrote Leesong, apparently oblivious to the fact that the only reason that the Government wrote the Pulp Mill Assessment Act 2007 was because Gunns asked them to do so.

The Tasmanian Government has attached 1,100 pages of permits and operating conditions to the final pulp mill approval motion which Parliament is now discussing. Gunns was allowed to see the draft permits and operating conditions and could suggest changes. On 28 August 2007, Tasmania's parliamentarians will vote on whether to approve the proposed pulp mill. Unlike Gunns, they will not have the opportunity to amend either the motion or the permits and conditions attached.

In June 2007, Matthew Denholm of Tasmanian newspaper the Mercury revealed that Gunns had already signed a contract with construction firm John Holland to start building the pulp mill "in the first week of September". Delay beyond this time will cost Gunns almost US\$1 million dollars a day. Either Gunns knows in advance what Parliament's decision will be, or they are stupid. No wonder Tasmanians call the Government the "Gunnerment".

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Tell Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull not to approve the pulp mill - visit www.wilderness.org.au to send him a message.