

# Tasmania's forests now a defining national issue

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**Tasmanian forests were supposed to be "saved" by a landmark agreement between the warring pro-conservation and pro-logging parties last year, but a new government has pledged to "tear up" the agreement. Is this game on, or game over? Andrew Darby clears the wood from the trees.**

## ■What's happening with Tasmanian native forests?

People have been fighting about trees in Tasmania for a generation. Last year it was briefly thought the conflict might be over when industry and green groups struck a government-backed peace deal - the Tasmanian Forests Agreement. Now the battle map is being reshaped again as the new federal and state Coalition governments have come to power promising to make their mark by "tearing up" the agreement. The fight is so prolonged, the politics so vexed and the stakes so high that Tasmania's forests have become a defining national environmental issue.

## ■Is harvesting of old-growth and pristine forests about to resume?

Not just yet. Agreed conservation reserves are coming back into play for logging, including areas of pristine growth. In the past, these ancient public forests disappeared into million-tonne woodchip exports, and the industry, mainly reliant on saw milling and veneers, maintains it needs to export "residues" to be viable. But Premier Will Hodgman said during the March election campaign that the local forestry industry was unlikely to be "dependent" on large-scale wood chipping. Instead the government says it wants to expand saw milling, as well as encourage the expansion of veneers and new-technology laminated timbers. It also wants to boost the use of unique Tasmanian timbers for high value craft and wooden boat building.

## ■Will tearing up the peace deal reignite the forest wars?

This is the heart of the matter, and both sides are readying for a fight. In many Tasmanian valleys and farms are battle-hardened Green families three generations old. One of their arch enemies is new Resources Minister Paul Harriss, who ran for office partly on his passion for the destruction of the forests agreement.

And immediately after his overwhelming election win, Hodgman's first election promise was for new laws "cracking down on illegal forest protest". But while the forces might be arrayed, it is not clear that the agreement will actually be "torn up", as Hodgman promised. Certainly, the \$338 million of federal taxpayers' funds that have, or will, come Tasmania's way to support the deal will not to be handed back.

The state government's initial move has been to finesse the deal. It unveiled plans to legislate the removal of 400,000 hectares from conservation reserves designated in the agreement and place them in a "future logging" zone, with a moratorium of six years. How much further the Harriss legislation will go is yet to be unveiled.

## ■Will there be a market for the timber from the resumed logging?

No market, no logging. In an attempt to ensure customers come back to Tasmanian timber, the Hodgman government is a convert to the international sustainability benchmark, Forest Stewardship Council certification. The state agency, Forestry Tasmania, is undergoing a preliminary FSC audit for about 900,000 hectares of production forest under its control, as it eyes lost markets now demanding this standard for the timber they buy.

The 400,000 hectares in conservation reserves is likely to remain under the control of the Environment

Department, thereby quarantining it from the FSC process, according to Harris.

Critics say this is a move designed to fool the FSC by gaming their rules. But the final decision on certifying new forest areas for sustainable logging will be in the hands of the FSC, which is an organisation as keen on carrots (coaxing towards full approval) as it is on sticks (the threat of withholding it).

Arguments that there is an environmental nexus between the two forest parcels may also complicate the government's attempt to consider them distinct. This may require a ruling from the FSC global HQ.

■What about federal government plans to enable logging of World Heritage listed forests?

The wild card in this game is held not in Hobart, but in Canberra. The flagship conservation gain in the forest agreement was the World Heritage listing last year of 120,000 hectares of land, most of it old growth. The Abbott government's unprecedented bid to scrap 74,000 hectares of this listing comes before the World Heritage Committee in June. These forests were assessed by the world's foremost scrutineer of natural heritage, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, as worthy of their current status.

In the build-up to June, campaigns are under way from both sides. Expect to see more emotional rallies in the forests, and embellished federal claims of their worthlessness.

The former chief executive of Forestry Tasmania, Bob Gordon, said as he stood for election for Labor at the March state poll that, once slated as World Heritage, a forest would never be purchased by any timber customer if the protection was removed. "Everyone would know I was not enamoured with the agreement," he said. "But the agreement is done. We've got to move on."