

Submission re EPBC assessment of Gunns' Tamar valley pulp mill

Referral number 2007/3385

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We are writing in response to the invitation for public comment on the assessment of Gunns Ltd Bleached Kraft Pulp Mill, Bell Bay Tasmania (EPBC 2007/3385)

Risks of getting the Commonwealth assessment wrong

The European experience shows that modern pulp mills are likely to be in operation for around 100 years, consequently the Commonwealth should view the assessment of Gunns' proposal as a decision that will impact Australia at least until the next century.

Pollution impacts have not been studied or quantified independently. The 'independent' work supposedly carried out by Gunns fell into 3 main categories: work done by Gunns' consultants under instruction from Gunns; work carried out by the RPDC much of which was later refuted or disputed by Gunns; and public submissions that received no formal attention from any state process.

Gunns' claims about assessments in their referral are disputed in most of the 750 public submissions made in response to their IIS and a number of RPDC commissioned reports.

That the principal means of exposing flaws and omissions in the proposal relies upon unfunded and unsupported public submissions is poor risk management by the Commonwealth and highlights the requirement to carry out thorough independent studies of its own prior to making a final decision.

In failing to carry out a complete assessment with public hearings of Gunns' 'world scale' pulp mill proposal, the state government has also failed to appreciate or understand the impacts of such a proposal on the environment and industry.

In the State Parliament Bill and as Gunns state in their referral "the provisions of any Act, planning scheme, special planning order or interim order requiring the approval, consent or permission for, or regulating or permitting the regulation of, any use or development in relation to the project do not apply to the project" which effectively relieves them of needing to obey Tasmanian law. If Gunns are also relieved of the need to comply with the full provisions of the EPBC Act, then there is no need for them to comply with anything, regulation doesn't apply and they are free to pollute to any level. Since their pollution control equipment will cost in the order of \$400 million, it is likely that they will make significant savings as soon as any approval is given.

Pollution impacts on Bass Strait

Dioxin calculation errors

Professor Andrew Wadsley Adjunct Associate Professor of Petroleum Technology at Curtin University of Technology (WA) has revealed that Gunns' consultant's Toxicos had made a clear cut error in their calculations on Dioxin levels. Toxicos incorrectly set a key calculation as 'dioxin concentrations in the water column' when in fact the calculation should have been 'concentration of dioxin in the water column and sediment'.

The result of this and other miscalculations is that now,

- Dioxin levels quoted in the Human Health Risk Assessment are 1390 times higher;
- Dioxin levels in offshore sediments are 338 times higher;
- Marine Impact Assessment levels are 90 times higher;
- Correct background levels of 670 pg/kg for dioxin were not included in the Toxicos assessment on toxicity.

The miscalculations effectively invalidate all of Gunns ecotoxicological risk assessments and this has grave implications not just for marine ecosystems and human health but also for the Bass Strait fishing industry. Threatened marine species

including cetaceans and sharks, as well as the Australian fur seal colony at Tenth Island, are likely to be affected by long-term impacts of effluent discharge and bioaccumulation in the food chain.

Unknown risks re manufacturing of chemicals on site

Gunns proposes a chemical factory on site manufacturing toxic chemicals to be used in the Integrated Chlorine-Dioxide Process (IDP), a process which Beca AMEC reviewed and said was not accepted modern technology. It appears that the process is not used in a pulp mill anywhere else in the world and actual dioxin emissions from such a process are unknown. As a minimum, Gunns should be required to provide conclusive independent assessment of risks from manufacturing chemicals on site using Australian Standard AS 4360 2004 and enter into guarantee and compensation agreements with potentially affected individuals and industries should risks become reality.

Dioxin sources inadequately assessed

According to Professor Wadsley, Gunns have also failed to adequately consider:

- Air borne dioxin emissions which may be produced in greater volume than those in the mill effluent;
- The leakage into the Tamar Estuary from hazardous landfill;
- Dioxin released from sediment during construction of the wharf facility.

Gunns should be required to provide conclusive independent assessment of pollutants risks.

Threat of pollutant accumulation through limited flushing of Bass Strait

The threat to Bass Strait can be best understood by reviewing Paul Sandery's models (Submission number 32 RPDC website www.rpdc.tas.gov.au) that demonstrate the extremely long 'flush' times for the shallow Bass Strait, which will allow pollutants to build up and threaten marine life in much of the Strait. According to ex RPDC pulp & paper scientist Dr Warwick Raverty (<http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,21441712-921,00.html> March 25, 2007), the particular process to be used by Gunns to manufacture chlorine dioxide for bleaching is likely to create excess dioxins that will breach the Stockholm Convention. This possibility alone should be sufficient to cause the Commonwealth to err on the side of caution.

The shallow nature of the Strait means that dilution of effluent is uncertain, particularly given the long flush times shown by Sandery. Couple these risks with the uncertain and patchy review carried out at the state level and the risk factors compound enormously.

The Commonwealth Government must require Gunns to commission thorough independent studies to elucidate the risks as described in points 1-3 below.

Rational protection for Bass Strait endangered species

A rational protection system includes:

1. a full independent scientific baseline study of the Strait to establish marine community structure and ecological norms;
2. a complete and independent analysis of likely pulp mill effluent outputs, along with their toxicity, that identifies all likely risks and contaminants in respect to changes in growth, development, reproduction, physiology, and behaviour of endangered marine species to ensure that actual mill outputs are included in planning and framing regulations to protect Bass Strait and marine ecosystems;
3. independent baseline studies to determine rates of change and cyclical norms in Bass Strait of marine chemistry;

4. an independent and credible monitoring regime that reports publicly and frequently. It must sample sufficiently often, and at sufficient resolution, to pick up identified contaminants before they become a problem;
5. a credible regulatory regime designed to protect the marine environment from harm;
6. the establishment of pollutant concentration trigger levels (lower than toxicity levels identified in part 2 above) that, when exceeded, trigger rigorous and effective shut down procedures or other strong actions to prevent toxic or excess pollutants entering the Strait.

Each of the steps of the process above is designed to achieve specific goals and should be based on rigorous scientific approaches wherever possible. Variations of the process would need to demonstrate that the same goals would be achieved.

Terrestrial threatened species

Forest dependent threatened species such as the wedge-tailed eagle and giant freshwater crayfish will be adversely affected by logging habitat destruction. Some statements from the draft IIS executive summary are seriously misleading and conceal the real impacts of the proposal. For example:

The pulp mill will process about 3.2 to 4.0 M GMt of pulpwood per year (used to produce 820,000 to 1,100,000 ADt of pulp). This amount is less than Gunns' exports over the past 5 years which have ranged up to 4.8 million GMt per annum.

The pulp mill project is a downstream processing initiative and will not involve any changes to forest access or additional intensification of forestry operations. It is based on diverting woodchips that would otherwise have been exported to the pulp mill for value-added processing.

The statement that there will be 'no additional intensification of forestry operations' is false; the new draft scope determined by Gunns claims 7 Mt of timber/year will be cut for mill consumption and continued exports. The revised scope treated logging as if it were already happening at the scale proposed.

Conclusion

1) For the reasons outlined above, we contend that the proposal should be rejected until all the independent studies are completed, and risks are fully described and independently reviewed to allow a proper assessment by the Commonwealth.

2) At a minimum risks must be well quantified and the Commonwealth satisfied with the level of risk. However, even the best advice from dedicated safety experts and an almost unlimited budget was not enough to stop the space shuttle Challenger disaster. Because of the multifarious impacts of the pulp mill and the large number of individuals and industries potentially at risk, we ask the Commonwealth to include permit conditions that guarantee:

- a) compensation for those affected;
- b) clean up costs for environmental damage; and
- c) shut down clauses that remain in effect till the causes are remedied.

Thank you.

Bob McMahon
Chairman TAP Inc.