

OPINION

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GUY BARNETT

Next step in growing state's forest industry

THE Hodgman Liberal Government is working towards rebuilding the forest industry following the disastrous Labor-Green forest deal.

Since we came to Government and ripped that job-destroying deal up, the industry has started growing again, with 33 per cent growth in jobs, exports hitting their highest level in six years, and rising investment on the back of returning confidence.

But there is more to do.

As part of ripping up that deal, we set aside 356,000 hectares, mainly regrowth forest, as Future Potential Production Forest.

The time has come to utilise that land.

Last year, Forestry Tasmania advised that because of the Labor-Green lock-ups, it cannot commercially harvest the legislated supply of high-quality sawlogs. It loses money on more than a quarter of the wood it produces.

This left us with only three options.

First, we could make available only the wood that is commercially sustainable; accepting that the industry will not receive the full 137,000 cubic metres of sawlogs a year from our Permanent Timber Production Zone Land.

Based on Forestry Tasmania's advice, this

would lead to the loss of up to 700 jobs from sawmills and wood processors, mostly in regional communities across the State.

Second, we could continue to underwrite the non-commercial harvesting with public funds - around \$25 million per year.

That is, taking \$25 million that otherwise would be spent in education and health to subsidise Forestry Tasmania, and the industry.

Finally, the third option - and this is the Liberal Government's position - is to make more wood available by unlocking our production forests.

Our Forestry (Unlocking Production Forests) Bill, which will be a priority for the Government in this session of Parliament, is about ensuring the supply of high-quality sawlogs to our mills.

If passed, this legislation will convert 356,000 hectares of Future Potential Production Forest Land to Production Forest Land from 1 July 2018.

This does not include land inside the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area or forest adjacent the Three Capes Track.

Importantly, we are talking about productive forest set aside by the Parliament as Tasmania's wood bank - we are simply

bringing forward access by two years.

Our legislation will make it very clear that forest in this land will only be available for harvesting by the private sector and that they must have third-party certification.

We will lease parcels of land for no longer than 10 years - long enough to harvest and to regenerate - before management is handed back to Crown Land.

Consistent with existing statutory provisions, our Bill will also provide access to special species timber by partial harvesting from October of this year.

None of this will impact on FT's bid for Forest Stewardship Certification because the company will not manage the land and will not harvest the trees.

I want to emphasise - taking wood from this production forest is not compulsory, it's an opportunity.

And I'm not surprised that some business would prefer the status quo, which is taxpayers providing subsidies to Forestry Tasmania to harvest and sell their trees.

But at the end of the day, our Plan is about saving jobs, it's about ending the subsidies, and it's about what's in the best interests of the State.

Guy Barnett is Forestry Minister