



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

The Hon Tony Burke MP Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

Gunns approval - ABC Hobart with Leon Compton

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LEON COMPTON: We welcome your calls this morning on the pulp mill approval granted yesterday by Environment Minister Tony Burke for the Tamar Valley.

By common consensus, all that now stands between the Tamar and a pulp mill for Gunns Limited is to find the money to build the two-billion dollar project; final tick has pretty much been given.

I caught up with the Environment Minister a little earlier this morning. I started by asking him if once he saw the science behind the project, if the decision to grant environmental approval was ever in doubt.

TONY BURKE: Well the thing that we've got to remember is we've ended up with an approval that goes even further in environmental protection than what the law was necessarily demanding.

So I'd already received advice from my department; I hadn't made a decision on it. But I'd received advice from my department recommending approval before Gunns came back to my department saying, we actually want to enforce some tougher conditions.

So it's all gone a step forward in terms of getting a much better outcome for chlorine into the Bass Strait and of course the major change that people are talking about, the commitment that everything that goes through that pulp mill will be from the plantation.

LEON COMPTON: So even a week ago, when you were ready to make an approval before the tougher conditions, you would have given it a tick?

TONY BURKE: Look, I can't tell you what I would have done with advice I hadn't finished working through. All I can tell you in terms of the legality of it, the department was recommending to me that I approve it. Before I had made a decision, the company came back to us and said, we actually want you to revise whatever it is you've prepared for the minister, because we want you to enforce tougher conditions on us.

LEON COMPTON: That strikes me as a strange move from Gunns. Do you know why they did that?

TONY BURKE: Look, I do understand the levels of community concern and people have raised publically it's one thing that Gunns are saying they'll only use plantation, but how do we know, you know, if there's a change on the board, that those rules will change further down the track. I know that's been a community concern. I suspect Gunns were wanting to be able to provide the absolute guarantee which is, it doesn't matter who owns Gunns, it doesn't matter what board changes happen in the years to come, it's simply a condition.

It's the law on this pulp mill if it goes ahead; you have to use the elemental chlorine-free light technology; you can only use plantation timber. That's something where I added an additional condition because often companies come back to us during construction wanting to change things here and there and I added an extra condition myself which is: if you want to change anything from here on, it can only result in an environmental outcome that is just as good or better. There's no steps backwards from here.

LEON COMPTON: You say it doesn't matter who owns Gunns. What about the prospect that Gunns might have a foreign owner in the not too distant future as it tries to find the two-billion dollars for this project?

TONY BURKE: Look I'm raising that as an issue people had been raising publically, I've got no knowledge as to what the individual commercial relationships that the board's making. I've been focusing on the environmental outcomes.

LEON COMPTON: You have no knowledge of any plans from Gunns to sell itself to somebody else to get this project done?

TONY BURKE: Nothing more than what I've seen in the papers. So I'm not sure that there's any new insight I can bring to any of that.

LEON COMPTON: Environment groups, Minister, say you should have taken a more precautionary approach, that you're the Environment Minister. Yet there's not a so-called environment group in Australia that thinks you've made a good choice here.

TONY BURKE: Well if you look at what the environment groups were saying yesterday, they were putting out statements, calling on me to reject the application. One of the reasons was that the original application was not demanding this elemental chlorine-free technology. Well it's now a condition that that technology has to be used.

Similarly, one of the demands that was being put was I should reject it because of the impact it would have on native forests. Well every tree that goes through this pulp mill will be from the plantation.

Now I'm not pretending that everything that the environmental groups had sought, has been part of this approval. But the major items that they saw as weaknesses in the original proposal for the pulp mill are no longer part of what the pulp mill at Bell Bay would be.

LEON COMPTON: And yet they also see that a lot of the process in their view that led to the mill even being on your desk in the first place were corrupt, particularly as it went through the State Government to level of the initial approval processes.

TONY BURKE: I don't think you'll ever find a situation where environmental groups were being asked, do you want a mill in this location or not and they all became wildly enthusiastic about it. I'm not going to be so naïve as to pretend that something like that would happen.

But at the same time, from the perspective of environmental groups, the major objections that they had to a proposal four years ago have now been fixed.

LEON COMPTON: What if this mill smells? What if it pollutes Bass Strait?

TONY BURKE: Well certainly the decisions I made yesterday, the issue that you make about odour, the State Government's got responsibility for that. That's not within my legal powers.

On the issue of the Bass Strait, the outcomes that we got yesterday were much better than the original proposal and even better than what the department was recommending for approval only a week earlier. So I've been very conscious. The Bass Strait issue is an issue where you're

dealing with national waters as well out there. It's a very strong responsibility that I have.

The science came back, with the technology that Gunns had volunteered they wanted to use, has allowed us to set some really strict conditions that that original pulp mill proposal never would have been able to jump over these hurdles. But what the rules are now, commit Gunns to having to use the environmental best practice principles that they've been saying of late they will.

LEON COMPTON: Environment Minister Tony Burke is my guest this morning on Mornings around Tasmania. Minister what role did politics play at a local level? Were Tasmanian politicians demanding you approve this project?

TONY BURKE: Can I start first of all, the decision's not taken by the Government. On this one, legally, it's by me and me alone. So we don't talk these issues through in Cabinet as to which way I'll go on an approval. This decision was straight reflection of what are the legal responsibilities, what's the environmental outcome, that's all I took into account.

LEON COMPTON: Have you been to the proposed Bell Bay site, Minister?

TONY BURKE: Yeah, I have. I've been through that area. I've met with some of the community groups who are opposed to it. You might remember about three years ago we had a community cabinet in Launceston as well, so I'm very much across the different views and I made sure I spend what time I can hearing people with the full range - the full range - of views on this. Then ultimately when I make a decision, I've got to make a decision as Environment Minister.

LEON COMPTON: That's Environment Minister Tony Burke. We caught up with him a few moments before going to air this morning on the subject of approval getting granted yesterday, pretty much the final tick. All that stands between here and a pulp mill for the Tamar, is for Gunns Limited to find the money.

1300 222 936 is the number if you'd like to give us a call. Gunns share price rising yesterday on news. I wonder if property prices, as forecast, will follow. I wonder if spirits will rise, timber communities around Tasmania, as a result.

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