

Forest Industry Proactive in South Australian Election

South Australians cast their votes on March 18th to elect the State Government, and this time the forestry industry was proactive in seeking support from the political parties to the pressing issues facing the industry.

The forest industry in South Australia is predominately concentrated in the Green Triangle region in the State's South East represented by the seats of MacKillop (held by Liberal's Mitch Williams) and the seat of Mount Gambier (held by Independent Rory McEwen and current Forestry Minister). It is a major industry in the Green Triangle region contributing to 30% of the GRP of primary industries, and directly and indirectly employing over 8500 people or 23% of primary industry employment. And all this comes from just 10% of total land use!

The major challenges facing the forest sector are neither unique to the region nor unique to the forest industry, but they are pressing issues that will require prompt attention by the elected party. The need for transport infrastructure upgrades, looming skill shortages in the harvesting and haulage sector, plantations and water policy, and support for value adding are the critical issues currently facing forestry in the Green Triangle region.

In late 2005, various forestry representatives joined forces with Timber Communities Australia and AFG to come up with a series of issue related questions to put to the party candidates. The questions covered the four big themes mentioned previously, in addition to questions seeking support for farm forestry expansion; support for the development of a Government Advisory Council for Forestry Investment and Forest Industry in South Australia- to address any potential conflicts between the government as a forest grower (ForestrySA) and the interests of the wider forest industry; recognition of the benefits of wood and wood products in the role of sustainable design and construction; and support for the generation of bioenergy from forest residues. To view the questionnaire and the candidate responses visit the AFG website (insert link)

On March 8th, TCA organised a 'Meet the Candidates' forum for the timber industry. The forum provided the opportunity for industry to learn more about the candidates personally, to hear the various forest policies, and to ask the candidates policy related questions. Of the candidates that had a forest policy, the theme was fairly consistent: support for value adding; acknowledgement of the need for attracting and retaining skilled workers; support for infrastructure upgrades; and the Liberals desire to restructure Forestry SA. Controversial highlights of the various speeches included Labour's Brad Coates accusation that Forestry SA is for sale (which was emphatically refuted), Mitch William's comment that the Adelaide Hills will not be returned to forestry once the trees are harvested, and Rory McEwen and Mitch William's comments that the governance of Forestry SA needs to be restructured.

As the election results started to flow in Saturday night, it was evident early on that the sitting members would be re-elected despite a 20% swing against Rory McEwen and a State wide 10% swing away from Liberal. Mitch Williams made it clear after his win that one of his first priorities for his seat will be to upgrade transport infrastructure to accommodate the increase in haulage requirements and the proposed Penola pulp mill, including support for getting rail back up an running. It is expected Rory McEwen will retain his forestry portfolio despite predictions of a major cabinet reshuffle. Rory also made it clear that this will be his last term in office. In an interview on the local WIN news Rory said "If anyone thinks they can do this job for more than 12 years then they are just wrong" Lets hope he remains committed for the next four years at least.