

Transcript

McCubbin Interview

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Reporter: Airlie Ward, ABC Stateline

AIRLEY WARD: Canadian engineer, Neil McCubbin, has been in Hobart at the invitation of APPITA, which is the Technical Association for Pulp and Paper Industries of Australia and New Zealand. Mr McCubbin has spent most of his working life in the pulp and paper industries, specialising in pollution prevention measures, including environmental risk analysis. I spoke to Mr McCubbin about Gunns' proposal this afternoon.

Neil McCubbin, thanks for joining us on Stateline. First of all, elemental chlorine-free; does it still contain chlorine?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: There are chlorine compounds used, primarily chlorine dioxide, which is made from sodium chlorate, which is made from common salt.

AIRLEY WARD: So it's a chlorine compound?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Yes.

AIRLEY WARD: Chlorine dioxide. You've described that as "pretty benign" in terms of effluent. What does that mean?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: It means that the products from chlorine dioxide bleaching contain fairly relatively small amounts of material that's easy to treat in the waste treatment plant of the mill, whereas the older style chlorine bleaching produced some nasty compounds which are much more difficult to treat. But this mill, of course, will be not using chlorine. Most of the industry around the world has given up using chlorine.

AIRLEY WARD: Not using elemental chlorine, but this chlorine compound?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Yes, yes. They've given up using elemental chlorine, but almost everyone uses the chlorine dioxide.

AIRLEY WARD: Are there any dioxins or organochlorines discharged?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: There will be nothing measurable. I'm not going to say zero because there is no zero in this game; but there is nothing measurable. There are a good number of mills around the world, probably, oh, 100 at least, using this kind of process, and you won't measure dioxin in any of the discharges.

AIRLEY WARD: If it's so miniscule, not measurable, why is it necessary to have a 4-kilometre long pipeline into Bass Strait?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Dioxin is only one minor issue in pulp mill effluent. The stuff will be about probably the colour of beer. If you drink it, it won't taste very good. You could drink it without coming to any harm. It's probably cleaner than the water in your fish tank. People don't like to see it. If you go out - you certainly don't want to put it down on the beach because if something does go wrong in the mill and (indistinct) material, why should people be inconvenienced? Normal practice today is put them into an underwater outfall, and then they will, of course, mix with the sea water and you'll never see it or find it, even if you were looking for it.

AIRLEY WARD: What about water usage? Pulp mills are, sort of, well known as, sort of, being pretty big guzzlers of water.

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Well, they don't use water, they borrow it and put it back. Now if the pulp mill is on a little creek in a desert, that might be a problem. But the quantities they are using are tiny in relation to what's available in Tasmania. The mill has got no interest in taking out of a river and leaving it short; what happens in dry weather? They'd run out of water.

AIRLEY WARD: But this mill then wouldn't exactly be borrowing it, would it?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Well, okay, they're transferring it from the river to the sea, you're right. Of course, when they do the Environmental Impact Statement, and you've another word for it here, these kind of things get looked at. Obviously if it's going to deplete the river it's coming from, to the point of affecting it, it shouldn't come from there, it should come from somewhere else. But I can't imagine in Tasmania you've a problem with water shortage.

AIRLEY WARD: You'd be surprised.

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Well you don't put a mill where it's taking so much water that it has an impact.

AIRLEY WARD: Moving on to air pollution; what's in it? What's going to come out of the chimney stack?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Mostly carbon dioxide, the same as from your domestic home heating furnace. One thing is that the mill burns mostly its own waste, the ligneous part of the wood that you can't sell, it burns. This burns in the boiler (indistinct) so there is no sulphur discharge, so it's much cleaner than burning oil. If you look at the stack as it's running you won't see anything. What you will see are quite a lot eventually is steam, because when you make paper it's made as slurry, then you have to dry it. So you put three or four tonnes of water into the air for every tonne of paper you make and you see huge steam plumes rising.

AIRLEY WARD: If there is not a problem with it, why build Tasmania's tallest stack?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: No, it's not crystal, it's not perfectly clean, it's an industrial discharge, you don't want to put your head in it. So you normally want to make sure it's well dispersed.

AIRLEY WARD: So what's in it?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: You'll get a slight trace of hydrogen sulphide, you'll get carbon dioxide, of course, and nitrogen. Particulates you'll get, perhaps at a mill this size a few 100 kilograms a day of this fine particulate that's so small you'll never see it.

AIRLEY WARD: So you don't want to stick your head in it, you said?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: No, no.

AIRLEY WARD: What sort of impact could sticking your head in it have on a person?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: It's hot enough that it will remove your hair if it doesn't kill you. You don't stick your head in the chimney, do you, in your house at home?

AIRLEY WARD: I'm not being flippant.

NEIL MCCUBBIN: No, no, no, sorry. What's in it is the hot gases from combustion.

AIRLEY WARD: So what sort of impact could all of those different compounds have on human health?

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Well that's why you build a tall stack, so that it's distributed, and Mother Nature can handle it perfectly well. Whereas, for example, your domestic home heating furnaces will have far more impact in the surrounding air. Your car is far worse in terms of forming smog than any pulp mill will be.

AIRLEY WARD: Neil McCubbin, thanks for joining us.

NEIL MCCUBBIN: Okay, thanks.