

To: Editor, Weekly Times, 28 May 2010

Opinion piece a factual desert

“Opinion” pieces are usually the domain of people qualified to talk about a subject or with a background in that subject. So, what are Leslie White’s credentials?

This poorly researched and ill-considered article (It’s just pulp fiction, WT 26 May) reads like a cut-and-paste compilation of media releases from anti-timber movement activists.

It misleadingly portrays an image of all native timber being used for woodchips and makes no mention of the sawlog industry of which chipping is a by-product. It demonstrates either a loss of memory or lack of knowledge about plantations by the writer as prior to the mid-1990’s much of Victoria’s timber plantations were owned by the crown. Or, as he puts it, the taxpayers.

Governments were pretty much the sole growers of plantation timbers prior to early versions of MIS plantations being established to capitalise on the growth of paper and softwood products. Tax breaks were, and still are, necessary to encourage private investment in an industry with high risk establishment costs and long waiting periods for initial returns.

The writer states that plantations “should be left to grow longer to produce sawlogs and furniture rather than just pulp”. That would be OK if it weren’t for the fact that he does not distinguish between hardwood and softwood that make the bulk of Australia’s plantation stocks. Most of the hardwood plantations in south east Australia is *eucalyptus globulosa* (blue gum) – faster growing and ideal for pulp but not necessarily sawlogs.

Establishment and maturity times necessary for furniture and appearance grade hardwood plantations has, to date, been a major disincentive for private investment. FEA had established other hardwood species plantations prior to going into receivership. This is one of the reasons why state governments traditionally grew and managed timber plantations. Mr White’s solutions are simplistic in there extreme.

Mr White extols the treated pine house frames and roof trusses as reason to abandon native forestry. He must assume all houses will have concrete slab or particleboard flooring, no feature walls or exposed timber features and aluminium windows. Mass produced homes of this type are being churned out all over the country. Discerning home owners usually want more for their money and this is found in our sustainably grown and managed native forests.

Does Pete Seger’s song “Little Boxes” ring a bell?

Again, the current “glut” of wood chips is temporary, the writer’s assumption a folly when companies such as South East Fibre Exports has a full book of orders for the coming year and Gunns has securing means of certifying their exports through their customers. It is too late to say there is no demand when clearly there is.

In the past year huge volumes of dead and dying timber has been salvaged from bushfire devastated areas in Victoria. While a lot of this dead timber has gone for pulp (white paper) huge volumes have been stockpiled under sprinklers as sawlogs around the state. Fires are the primary reason behind last year’s financial loss by VicForests. It is a pity Mr White didn’t verify this fact.

In fact loss and damage to Victoria’s native timber resources through landscape changing wildfires in 2002/03, 2006/07 and 2009 has contributed long-term damage to Victoria’s timber industry. Mr White chose to overlook this. Take away the availability of resources in any primary industry and it is difficult to make a profit

as VicForests continually finds. He makes no mention of the Global Financial Crisis; most industry sectors have struggled the past two years.

He wrongly alluded to lack of competitive processes for the pricing and allocation of logs; a totally wrong statement about Victoria. VicForests manages competitive tender processes for the sale of all timber resources under its stewardship. If anything this process has been another reason for participation shrinkage in the Victorian native forestry as tendered prices paid continue to rise.

Forestry SA may profit through its plantation as it has ready made markets for its product in the Green Triangle and has not been affected by bushfires in recent times. Yet Kimberley Clark, a major customer, continues to cry foul over dumped imports on the Australian market. If this company were to suffer a major downturn it would also impact on Forestry SA's bottom line.

Mr White's naivety is demonstrated with his statement "there is nothing we get from native forests that we could not get from plantations if we planned for it". Planning is one thing, doing it is another. Advocating plantations being established without tax incentives is fanciful at best.

He simply overlooks what we already have through a vibrant native forestry industry – communities. Towns and communities don't just happen overnight and many rural communities have their prosperity underpinned by businesses that service it and the countless families the industry supports.

That such a trite article could be published in a journal such as the Weekly Times brings its editorial standards into question. Then again, the same editor took a vicious swipe at the very plantation industry that his own report promoted so strongly in this article. Readers in rural communities must be mystified at times as to what the paper now stands.