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## Australia: Tasmanian farms which fed people replaced by farms which feed woodchip mills

Preolenna, in NW Tasmania, has dramatically changed from what it used to be just five years ago (see WRM bulletin 36). Under the Federal Government's plan labelled Plantations 2020 Vision (<http://www.plantations2020.com.au>), this former farming community has seen their farms which used to feed people replaced by farms which feed woodchip mills. The pattern of large-scale monoculture tree plantations has swept through more than 35 farming towns in the North West hinterland from Circular Head to Wilmot.

Two long-term residents --Colleen Dibley and Evelyn De Vito-- have denounced before a national review committee that from 1997 to 2001, thirteen houses and eleven dairies were bulldozed to support tree farming as farms were sold and families moved on. Ms. Dibley told the committee that 187 jobs had been lost in the North West in the last five years as farms were converted to monoculture woodchip driven plantations.

In 1995, 26 people were directly employed by the dairy industry on 16 major cropping and dairy properties in Preolenna and Meunna. This year no people are employed on such farms. There were also five farm labourers employed but these jobs have also gone. Over the same time the number of people employed in the plantation industry, which has expanded greatly, has remained stagnant. The once-bustling productive rural community of Preolenna had become a silent, weed infested landscape owned primarily by two forestry companies and "is now a dormitory community, where people either work outside the district or rely on welfare."

In line with the changed economic conditions, Telstra has removed its mobile phone tower and the electricity grid has been pulled back. And Ms. Dibley said it was not land unsuitable for agriculture which has been targeted by the timber companies, but class three and four, or prime agricultural land. Ms. Dibley told the committee that while the forestry companies Gunns and Forest Enterprises had consistently claimed prime soils were not being targeted, its investment scheme publicity painted a different picture. "Gunns conducts a rigorous site selection and assessment process. The sites are located on rich fertile soils with high and reliable rainfall". She said Meunna, except for two houses, no longer existed, but was instead a big industrial monoculture plantation of *Eucalyptus nitens* which provided only occasional employment for gangs of forestry workers.

In 1999, Waratah-Wynyard and Burnie areas had the most plantations of any Tasmanian local government area and planting has intensified since early 2000. But unemployment in these areas is among the highest in the State and the population continues to shrink. Mrs Dibley told the committee that Waratah-Wynyard Council had lost about \$4m a year due to the destruction of dairy farms alone.

However, the changes did not happen quietly. Despite division was created between neighbours, in 1999 and 2000, Preolenna was the subject of numerous newspaper articles as the dwindling group of residents, including farmers who sold out very reluctantly, saw the implications of the destruction of the community's economic basis.

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In turn, the Australian senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Reference Committee is looking at impediments to the plantation industry. Submissions closed at the end of August and the committee is examining, among other things, what impediments there are to achieving the aims of the 2020 vision and if the strategy should be altered. "If Preolenna is an example of what happens when there are some impediments to the timber industry in place, imagine what would occur if impediments were removed," Ms. Dibley said.

Article based on information from: "Fighting wave of change at Preolenna", Helen Kempton, The Advocate, Saturday Extra, October 19, 2002,