
Australia: Eucalyptus natural forests under threat

The federal government has handed over the regulation of forests to the state of Tasmania in the country's first state-wide Regional Forests Agreement (RFA). Export woodchip quotas have been abolished in a package giving an unprecedented legally binding guarantee against federal interference in a state's forests. North Limited, the biggest woodchip exporter has already announced plans to raise production from Tasmanian native forests, that currently reaches around 3,4 million tonnes annually.

In exchange, some 50,000 hectares (123,550 acres) of land will be added to National Parks, but it includes few "icon" areas sought by environmentalists to extend the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Officials defend this decision and stated that general criteria were met, for setting aside 15 per cent of each forest community, 60 per cent of old growth forests, and 90 per cent of wilderness. However, Tasmanian environmentalists say the reservations provided only small patches of additional reserved trees. The very tall eucalyptus forest of Beech Creek in the island's centre has got trees exceeding 80 metres in height, what makes them some of the world's tallest flowering plants. Beech Creek was assessed by scientist advisors to the RFA as possibly the best global expression of the species. Nevertheless, only one third of the proposed reservation was set aside.

A US\$95 million compensation package is to help the industry move out of some reserved forests to plantations and forest thinnings. Industry leaders consider that the agreement would lead to hundreds of new jobs. According to the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania, the RFA would give the industry 20 years of stability and resource security, and would mark the end of constant battles with "the Australian Heritage Commission and a host of other (federal) government points of interference."

The Wilderness Society instead states that the industry is being given money and unlimited woodchip and log exports. The new reserves mainly consist of areas already rejected by loggers.

Source: Andrew Darby, Forest deal sets new rules for Australia, Envirolinks, 21/11/97.