

NEWS

percentage of hardwood supply has dropped,” he said.

“Countries from overseas can’t say that they have this eucalypt product. This native eucalypt has a couple of qualities from an appearance point of view – a lot of people like the look of hardwood, whether that be in flooring, stairs or in architectural panels.

“The other thing is we use hardwood for its strength properties because it is an extremely strong and dense timber. Imports from Europe or China just don’t have those traits.”

Not surprisingly some Asian businesses are trying to directly access raw Australian native timbers.

“At the moment I get people from China, Indonesia and Thailand wanting to buy our logs or our raw timber – take it over there and remanufacture it and sell it back here,” Mr Notaras said.

“I could make more money doing that but it’s against my principles so I couldn’t do that. I’d sooner shut than do that. Forestry was set up to employ people in the country – a decentralised industry. Now they want to shut it down – it’s madness.”

Environmental groups at the hearing denied their campaigns were

the primary reason for any decline in the local timber industry.

Carmel Flint from the North East Forest Alliance said much of the decline in the timber industry over the past 10 to 15 years has been the result of falling wood supply from over-logging and mechanisation.

“We have seen a lot of changes to the industry and the jobs have declined regardless of environmental outcomes,” Ms Flint said.

“Some people are innovating. Big River Timbers has the veneer peeler and are trying to use smaller logs and plantation logs and that really has to be the future of this industry.

“So we need to see all the mills move to that kind of equipment to allow them to use small logs and plantation logs.”

John Edwards from the Clarence Environment Centre agreed the supply problems for the timber industry were mostly self-inflicted and said more should have been done decades ago on growing native hardwood plantations.

“The way things are going, every harvest, the trees are getting smaller so it is just unsustainable and we have got to accept that,” Mr Edwards said.

“We should have been planting for saw logs years ago. We have missed a real opportunity with the tax rebates that were offered. And for sheer lack of oversight on behalf of the government we have ended up with a debacle.”

He believed state forest supply contracts were also drawn up on overly optimistic estimates of available timber.

“Or they have logged more than they originally intended because they are absolutely desperate now to get the timber out of the forests,” he said.

“They are logging in areas that shouldn’t be logged. We have had evidence of endangered ecological communities being logged, rainforests logged, mapped old growth logged, a complete disregard of the threatened species prescriptions ... that are outlined in the integrated forests operations agreement.

“There are loopholes in the agreement unfortunately.”•

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TAX COMPLAINTS REDUCED

Complaints against the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) have fallen dramatically and tax refund waiting times have significantly reduced since peaking at the beginning of 2010.

ATO chief operating officer Paul Duffus told a special hearing of federal parliament’s Public Accounts and Audit Committee the ATO has been focusing on improving complaint handling procedures as well as minimising overall complaints.

“The number of complaints has reduced by 91 per cent, and we have no current complaints with the Ombudsman,” Mr Duffus said.

The committee decided to increase its scrutiny of the ATO earlier in the year following a spike in complaints about the revenue collector last year, many related to delays in issuing tax refunds.

Refunds were delayed from the beginning of 2010 while the ATO

undertook a large scale upgrade of its computer systems known as the Change Program.

Subsequent teething problems created a knock-on effect throughout the year and into tax time, leading to some people having their tax refund delayed by more than six months.

The ATO says things are now back to normal, with almost 3.4 million refunds issued by August 21 this year.

The improvement has been shown in a drop in complaints on hand from 4,501 at 30 June 2010 to 962 at 30 June 2011.

However while complaints have dropped, the ATO is currently dealing with more than 3,000 cases involving compromised tax file numbers as it enters the peak period for tax return processing.

Around 300 have been outstanding for more than 90 days, although in most of those cases a new tax file number has already been issued.

AAP/ONE



This follows an instance earlier this year where more than 900 compromised tax file numbers were revealed to be outstanding for as much as 12 months.

Tax Commissioner Michael D’Ascenzo (pictured) told the special hearing all of those 900 tax file numbers had since been reissued.

“The average time to reissue a TFN is under 28 days,” Mr D’Ascenzo said. •

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