
Tasmania and the Gunns Pulp Mill

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Introduction

The Bell Bay pulp mill – or Gunns pulp mill – has been one of the most widely debated project-related environmental disputes in Australian political history. The proposal put forward by Gunns Ltd involves the construction of a \$1.3 billion pulp mill at Bell Bay on the Tamar River north of Launceston. If built, it is likely to generate significant economic benefits for Tasmania, but these will come at a cost to society and the environment through continued pressure on Tasmania's forest and water resources and the emission of solid, liquid and gaseous pollutants. The questions of whether the project should be allowed to proceed, and how to weigh the associated costs and benefits, have divided the Tasmanian community and ignited passionate responses from around Australia.

The reasons for the public interest in the pulp mill are complex. Tasmania has a long history of forestry-related disputes and the mill has incorporated much of the concerns and animosity associated with this broader issue. However, the prominence of the project in Australian political consciousness has, to a large extent, been a product of the State and federal environmental assessment processes.

The initial framework for the assessment was sound. A joint federal-State assessment would be conducted under the guidance of the Tasmanian Resource Planning and Development Commission (RPDC). The assessment would be inclusive and transparent, with members of the public having several opportunities to comment on the process and project documentation. At the completion of the assessment, the responsible Tasmanian and Commonwealth ministers would independently decide whether the mill should be allowed to proceed and on what conditions.

This process was not allowed to run its course. From the outset, the Tasmanian Government obstructed the RPDC by aggressively promoting the mill. Then, frustrated at how the assessment was being conducted, and fearing the RPDC would make adverse findings, Gunns terminated the assessment and threatened to withdraw the project. This triggered a chain of events that turned both the federal and State assessment processes into a

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