

## Regional forestry investment workshops: A three-year project concludes

**Take seven workshops, 400 people, add a good amount of Ministerial support and stir. Wait 2.5 years for the process to end, and then 'Voila'—the *Forest Investment for Regional Development* partnership is born.**

Four years ago, the Australian forest and wood products industries accepted the premise that, as a nation, we would never attract large-scale investments in processing. Our international future—such as it was—went no further than exporting unprocessed wood products?

The common belief was that:

- Australia had uncompetitive business and regulatory systems
- New Zealand's wall of wood would swamp the softwood market
- South American eucalypts would dominate the hardwood world.

And that did not include the 'J' curve and myriad other prophecies and urban myths.

They were myths Minister Macdonald (federal, not NSW), the Forest and Wood Products Council, and the Forestry and Forest Products Committee were keen to change. And they passed on to DAFF the responsibility for meeting the challenge.

Our first step was to look for information. But we had little luck there. The sector's contribution to rural and regional communities was often unknown, downplayed or misrepresented. After all, it was not an important sector—or so people believed.

So, how do you change industry pessimism and community antagonism?

You do what all good policy people do. You hold workshops.

Everyone enjoys workshops. They provide the chance to talk around tables, meet up with old friends, discuss diverse issues, eat good food, make new friends and achieve very little.



**Photo:** Right to left: Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald, Australian Government Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation, the Hon Kim Chance, Western Australian Government Minister for Agriculture and Forestry and Dr Paul Biggs, General Manager, Forest Products Commission, W.A., Regional Investment Workshop, Katanning, W.A. October 2003

But the Forest Industries Branch of the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) didn't stop at one workshop. We held seven. And, despite my earlier remarks, we achieved a lot.

Over the past three years, the Forest Industries Branch has organised one national and six regional workshops across Australia's major forest-growing regions.

The workshops clearly showed Australia was ready—nationally and regionally—to support industry development and investments in new processing capacity.

The National Forest Investment Workshop (Canberra, October 2002) identified actions industry and all levels of government had to take to provide a more attractive investment environment. It clearly showed the strengths of Australia's forest and wood products industries—strengths we could leverage to increase investments, promote industry development and develop new markets.

Issues raised included the need for resource security, consistent political support, unambiguous approval guidelines and policy, and to document existing infrastructure and identified gaps. Participants, including many captains of industry, agreed many of these issues could only be addressed at the regional level.

The national workshop's success was the catalyst for regional workshops in each of five major forest-growing areas across Australia. We held them in Portland, Victoria (April 2003), Katanning, Western Australia (October 2003), Morwell, Victoria (August 2004), Grafton, NSW (September 2004), and Mackay, Queensland (March 2005).

The last workshop (Hobart, April 2005) brought together participants from the previous workshops to review their outcomes and messages. But the Hobart workshop focused on impediments to investment and sought to identify potential policy interventions that addressed them.

The regional workshops provided a positive environment for cooperative actions at the local level. They also clearly identified the issues local stakeholders see as important to a future vision of the forest industries. While there are common themes across the regions, specific actions identified reflect the individual circumstances of the regions.

There were three concrete outcomes from each workshop:

1. An agreed set of characteristics/issues participants saw as important to the sector's future development—effectively providing the basis for developing a forest sector **vision** for the region.
2. Identification of **impediments and opportunities** for growth, development and investment in each region's forest sector.
3. A list of **actions** to address issues relevant to promoting forest sector investment in the region.

Informal working groups, including all levels of government, organised the workshops and local Private Forestry Development Committees coordinated them.

Each one-day workshop attracted 60–70+ participants with representation from a wide range of stakeholders, including forest growers and managers, forest product processors, non-government organisations, catchments management organisations, infrastructure providers, and local, state and Australian governments.

One of the ongoing benefits of the workshops has been cooperation and better Australian, state and local government, and industry understanding of regional forest investment needs.

And let's not forget they also provided an opportunity to talk around tables, meet up with old friends, discuss diverse issues, eat good food, and make new friends.

Following each workshop, a **vision and action statement** summarising the workshop outcomes was prepared and circulated widely among stakeholders. The papers have provided a real outcome for stakeholders involved in the workshops and have received favourable comment. They also created a benchmark to assess progress.

There are several examples of positive outcomes from the actions identified at the workshops. Achievements reflect the time between each regional workshop, with the Green Triangle and Western Australian regions implementing many of the actions agreed to at their respective workshops.

The high level of participation and enthusiasm the workshops generated clearly indicates the pessimistic mood of three years ago has swung 180 degrees to one of optimism.

The outcomes from the Tasmanian workshop—combined with material from the other workshops—provided the foundation for the *Forest Investment for Regional Development* partnership. This is being finalised and will be presented at the Primary Industries Ministerial Council (PIMC) meeting in October 2005. The initiative will be critical in progressing the work of the previous national and regional forest investment workshops.

The initiative has identified priority actions governments can influence to promote investment and regional development. It has six parts:

- **Recognising the environmental values of forests and forest products** directly contribute to sustainable regional development
- **Developing world-class infrastructure and encouraging economic development** that will benefit all regional industries
- **Providing comprehensive resource information and resource security** for investors
- **Continuing development of an educated and skilled workforce** that maximises productivity and provides opportunities for regional communities
- **Providing comprehensive information, communication and community participation** that promotes strong links and clear understanding between communities and industries
- **Undertaking research and development** that delivers innovation and sustainability consistent with the latest technological advances and ensures results are disseminated and understood.

The partnership will complement the work on the development of the *Wood and Paper Industry Vision and Growth Strategy* (refer to another article in this edition of *In Focus*) that aims to provide an overarching framework for cooperative activities governments and industry can pursue to support the forest and wood products industry. It is also consistent with existing policies, such as the *Plantations for Australia: The 2020 Vision* and the *Farm Forestry National Action Statement*.

Everyone who attended one of the seven workshops will receive a copy of *Forest Investment for Regional Development* after the PIMC endorses it.

In conclusion, the regional forest investment workshops have helped support an \$18 billion industry that employs over 130,000 people and has attracted over \$11.7 billion in investments in the past eight years.

Australia's forest resource is also generating investment in processing capacity, such as Australian Paper's \$500 million upgrade in Victoria, Gunn's \$1.2 billion pulp mill proposal in Tasmania and Lignor's \$180 million engendered strand lumber mill in Western Australia.

The workshops have helped focus attention on the benefits a strong forest and wood products industries can provide to rural and regional economies, and the communities in which they are located.

If Australia is to realise the full range of benefits from a strong forest-based growing and processing sector, action will have to be taken. And the *Forest Investment for Regional Development* partnership identifies these actions.

The next stage will be up to governments, industry and you.

**PS.** *Thanks to everyone involved in the process. In particular, Mark Kelly, URS, and Facilitator and Chair of the seven workshops; the Private Forestry Development Committees for organising the workshops; the Forestry and Forest Products Committee for funding them; and all participants who made the workshops more than a 'greet and eat' affair.*

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