

Forest pledge angers loggers

Geelong Advertiser
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WADE PEARCE

TIMBER workers yesterday blasted Corangamite ALP candidate Michael Bjork-Billings for demanding an end to clearfell logging in Otways native forests.

But the Geelong Environment Council supported Mr Bjork-Billings' stance and called on governments to speed up the timber industry's move into plantations.

Mr Bjork-Billings on Friday released a Saulwick poll of 800 Corangamite voters, which found almost 70 per cent of respondents opposed clearfelling in Otways native forests.

In other developments, Environment Minister Sherryl Garbutt's spokesman Ben Hart confirmed a ministerial advisory group this month recommended phasing out clearfelling in Otways native forests.

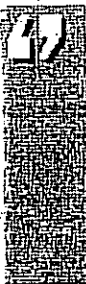
He said the State Government was reviewing Otways logging practices as part of the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA).

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union assistant secretary Michael O'Connor said yesterday that Mr Bjork-Billings' stance on clearfelling was "selfish, self-centred and stupid".

"While this bloke's comments demonstrate that he has little or no understanding of forest issues or ALP policy, he would be of more concern if it came from someone who actually had a chance of being elected," Mr O'Connor said.

"The suggested changes called for by Mr Bjork-Billings will cost jobs or increase the forest area needed to be harvested; degrade the environmental value of the forest and worst of all increase the risk of serious injury and death to timber harvesters."

Mr Bjork-Billings yesterday stood firm on his call to phase out clearfelling in Otways native forests and said moving to plantations would not endanger workers.



The suggested changes called for by Mr Bjork-Billings will cost jobs or increase the forest area needed to be harvested

UNION SPOKESMAN
MICHAEL O'CONNOR

"I won't support the introduction of any practice that would result in the increased likelihood of forestry workers being killed or injured," Mr Bjork-Billings said.

He said the Saulwick poll, commissioned by the ALP Otway Ranges Interest Group, was being used to shore up support within the state ALP for an end to clearfelling in Otways native forests, as well as arguing the case for change federally.

Mr Hart said state government policy recognised clearfelling was safer than selective logging and clearfelling promoted better regeneration of a wider range of plants.

"Our policy also recognises there are some not-so-good things about clearfelling and that is being looked at as part of our review," Mr Hart said.

"We're probably moving towards a more sustainable form of logging."

Geelong Environment Council president Joan Lindros said she was delighted the poll highlighted widespread opposition to clearfell logging.

She said jobs need not be lost. "The large softwood plantations in the Otways are reaching a harvestable age and the mills could be subsidised to transfer to softwood processing and their existing hardwood allocations could be transferred to softwoods," Mrs Lindros said.

"As a bonus, jobs in the recreation and tourist industries would increase significantly."

AEC investigates advertisement

TONY PRYTZ

THE Australian Electoral Commission is investigating whether an advertisement in Saturday's *Geelong Advertiser* breached the Electoral Act.

The advertisement with a logo reading ourforests.com.au ran at the bottom of page 16.

It featuring a boomerang and the message "Managed forests come back" and ran below another half page advertisement authorised by the Victorian Association of Forest Industries (VAFI) attacking Labor candidate Michael Bjork-Billings for his stance on logging in the Otways.

Liberals for Forests senate candidate Suresh Parhy yesterday claimed the advertisement breached the definition of election material set down in the guide for candidates.

He said the ad was election material because it addressed an issue that was part of the election campaign.

VAFI director of public affairs Pat Wilson yesterday denied the association had breached the act.

Mr Wilson said both ads were placed by an agency on behalf of VAFI.

"The top ad is clearly an election ad and therefore has the authorisation from me.

"The bottom one is just a statement

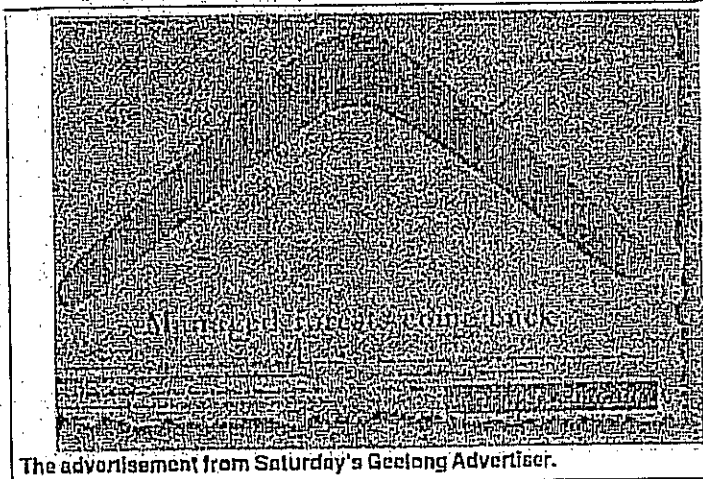
of the true facts that the forests are being managed," he said.

Mr Wilson said he was well aware of the rules regarding election advertising.

"That was why one ad has the authorisation and the other one did not," he said.

Dr Parhy yesterday said the forest industries association was getting desperate because logging in the Otways had become the major issue in the battle for Corangamite.

Corangamite divisional returning officer Vic Barker yesterday said he had referred the advertisement to the deputy Australian Electoral Officer for decision.



The advertisement from Saturday's Geelong Advertiser.

Candidates square off on television

WADE PEARCE

CORANGAMITE MP Stewart McArthur and ALP candidate Michael Bjork-Billings face-off in a television debate tonight on Channel 31 and radio station 94.7 The Pulse.

The Pulse talkback host Denis Scandon, who dubs himself "the Ray Martin of community radio", asks the tough questions in the half-hour debate.

Decision 2001: Corangamite Decides was recorded in Geelong yesterday, canvassing the politicians' views on aged care, the GST, the environment and education.

Mr McArthur, who has held Corangamite since 1984, pins his re-election hopes on the Howard Government's record.

He also stands firm on support for clearfall logging in native forests.

"The forests of the Otways and East Island, under a sustainable policy even incorporating clearfelling, can regrow and can develop timber resources for the benefit of all Australians," Mr McArthur said.

On education, he accuses Labor of

running a "sectarian" argument against extra funding for elite private schools, including Geelong Grammar and Geelong College.

Mr Bjork-Billings, who needs a 4.5 per cent swing to win, appeals to voters to put an end to Mr McArthur's "apathetic" representation.

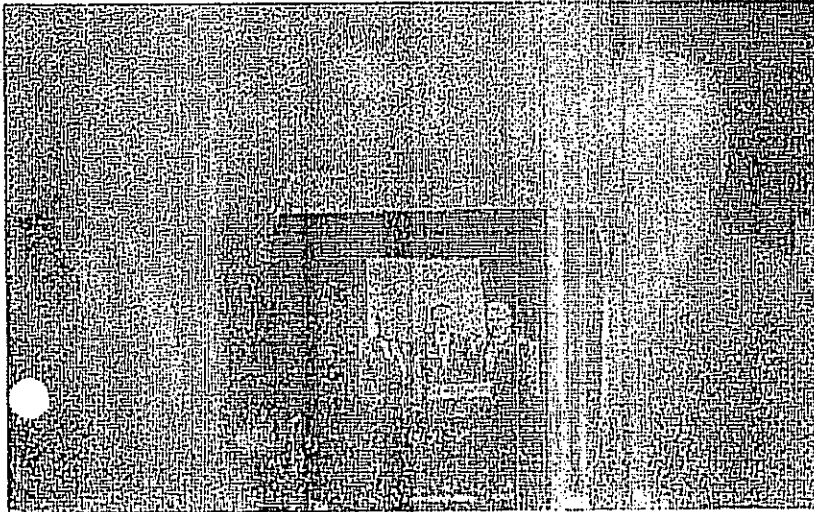
He also outlines his call for an end to clearfall logging in Otways native forests and says his stance is not at odds with ALP policy.

"Labor policy in relation to the operation of clearfelling is that timber harvesting will be in an environmentally and ecologically sustainable manner," Mr Bjork-Billings says.

"What I'm saying is that clearfelling is debatable under that description."

On ALP policy to take away additional funding from elite private schools, Mr Bjork-Billings says has received letters of support from some Geelong College parents — one of the schools affected.

The debate, organised by Geelong production company Quay Beach Media, will go to air at 9pm.



Denis Scandon hosts Liberal member for Corangamite Stewart McArthur and ALP candidate Michael Bjork-Billings. Photo: PHILIP STUBBS

Forum focus on logging

TONY PRYZ

THE issue of clearfell logging in the Otways dominated a lively Corangamite candidates' forum in Colac last night.

The forum, run by the local branch of the Australian Junior Chamber, was attended by about 80 people. Issues as diverse as midwifery services, insurance and refugees were discussed, but it was the logging issue that generated the most heat.

The night introduced a bit of animation into an otherwise staid local campaign and for a while looked like it might become a bash-the-sitting-member night.

But other candidates also had their issues. Two candidates — Labor's Michael Bjork-Billings and Greens Iain Lygo — had to publicly acknowledge that questioners from the floor were in fact members of their respective parties who had failed to declare their connections when they asked questions.

"I'll talk to you about that later, Joe," Mr Bjork-Billings told his campaign worker Joe Taylor who had asked the Labor candidate a question about logging in the Otways.

Mr Lygo had to declare that one questioner, Sally Anne Browne, was a

member of the Greens.

He said it was important that full disclosures were made in public forums, a point not lost on Democrat Robyn Hodge who Mr Lygo criticised early in the campaign for not declaring who she was when she called a Melbourne radio station.

The evening brought some interesting revelations about the candidates.

Robyn Hodge admitted she came from a family where some members "drove around in utes with stickers that said 'Fertilise the forest, doze in a Greenie'".

The revelation prompted Liberals for Forests candidate and psychiatrist Dr Nigel Strauss to offer some counselling for Mr Hodge's "dysfunctional family".

Independent candidate Simon Arundell wished for a return to the days when "men were men". He suggested that anyone who had delivered a calf knew a fair bit about delivering a baby and people had to accept risk in life, quoting a forebear who used to say "Where there's live'uns, there's dead'uns".

One of the biggest crowd responses for the night came when Member for Corangamite Stewart McArthur said he had always tried to look at the

logging issue dispassionately.

"I think it is time you got passionate. This dispassionate stuff has got us nowhere," Dr Strauss answered.

"God forbid you get back into power because your party has just tucked the whole thing up."

He said the word tucked was a reference to (Federal Forestry and Conservation Minister) Wilson Tuckey "but I think you get what I mean".

Mr McArthur said he accepted the scientific evidence and the opinion of many foresters who believed that clearfelling was the best way to encourage forest regeneration.

He said less than one per cent of the Otways was clearfelled each year and wildfire did far more damage to forests than logging.

Several questioners also tackled candidates from the major parties on Australia's approach to asylum seekers and the war on terrorism.

Some of the candidates will be at it again today when they appear on 24.7 The Pulse at 10am with Denis Scanlan.

Green joy at opposition to clearfelling

DANIEL FOGARTY

THE GEELONG Environment Council said it was delighted by the results of a Saulwick poll published in Saturday's *Geelong Advertiser* indicating strong opposition to clearfelling logging.

Council president Joan Lindros said the poll confirmed the community view that the logging of the Otways was unacceptable.

"It reflects the view that the general community wants to conserve natural areas," Mrs Lindros said.

The group said it would support any party at the up-coming federal election which showed it was opposed to logging the Otways.

It said that the Labor Party, Democrats and Greens had so far all indicated their opposition to the logging.

Mrs Lindros said it was developing its own proposal for protection of all the alternative values in the Otways including water production, biodiversity and flora and fauna protection and the significant tourism potential.

She said the group was putting together a report for all levels of government that excludes logging and promotes other commercial activities such as home-grown food and wines.

The Geelong Environment Council plan would involve expanding the Lorne-Angahook State Park up to Benwerrin Road at the top of the Otway Ridge and declaring it a National Park.

The plan would also see the existing Otway National Park expanded to include all Otway catchment areas and would include old growth and rain forest components.

Mrs Lindros said the age of timber logged was getting younger and younger and the effects of this were becoming increasingly more disastrous for wildlife.

"As the Great Ocean Road gets busier and more over-crowded, the Otways provide a real alternative," Mrs Lindros said.

"Why not stop the logging now and promote the Otways as scenic."