



PRIME MINISTER

6/95

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP TIMBER INDUSTRY

Cabinet met tonight to discuss the woodchip issue.

As I said last week, the Government is determined to find a means by which the timber industry - a vital part of Australia's economic future and the economic foundation of many Australian communities - will be supported and encouraged in its growth and progress towards ecological sustainability.

As I also said, we are determined to see that our forests are adequately protected for this and future generations.

This is a major national issue, and a complex and passionate one. There is no simple answer which will satisfy the demands of those on the extremes of the debate.

The Government is in no doubt that the vast majority of Australians wish to see the issue resolved in a way which will enable an Australian timber industry and its workers to prosper while our native forests are preserved.

Without qualification, the Government believes its responsibility is to find such a solution in the interests of both our timber industry and our environment.

A solution, in other words, which is in the national interest.

Accordingly, Cabinet has tonight decided that the following assessment process will apply in relation to 509 coupes identified as requiring further consideration before logging should proceed:

- . priority attention will be given to resolving the status of those coupes which meet all three of the following conditions
 - : are currently being logged in accordance with their licence conditions - (ie following correct forest practice, preserving identified endangered species etc);
 - : have licences which were renewed in 1994 (ie were originally issued earlier than 1994); and

- : are not registered as part of the National Estate.

Following consideration by officials from the Departments of DEST, DPIE and PM&C, and consultation with the relevant State Departments, next week Cabinet will consider the status of these coupes, with a view to the statutory decision maker, the Minister for Resources, making a final decision on them.

- . As to all the remaining coupes, the following assessment process will be followed:
 - : a preliminary assessment of the conservation value of each coupe will be made - in accordance with the criteria laid down in the National Forest Policy Statement - by a team of officials from DEST, DPIE and PM&C working with relevant State Departments;
 - : these assessments shall then be the subject of consultation with representatives of the forest industry and unions, and the environmental movement;
 - : Cabinet will then consider the appropriate status of all these coupes in the light of this advice; and
 - : the Minister for Resources, as statutory decision-maker, will decide the final status of the coupes, taking into account this consultative process and Cabinet's deliberations.

In order to reduce uncertainty as much as possible, it is proposed that this process be completed within eight weeks .

This week in Canberra has provided ample and reassuring evidence that Australia remains a robust and tolerant democracy.

By their demonstration outside the national Parliament people engaged in the timber industry have been able to express their concerns, but nothing will be gained by continuing the action.

Certainly, the Government will not allow its decisions to be influenced or enacted in an atmosphere of intimidation.

Cabinet's resolutions will be acted upon immediately and I urge those involved to return to their communities so that this issue can be resolved in their interests and in the interest of Australia.

CANBERRA
2 FEBRUARY 1995