



PRIME MINISTER

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

Today's front-page report in The Sydney Morning Herald deliberately distorts the process of consultation undertaken by the Federal Government to develop a National Forest Reserve System.

Yet again, the Herald's environment writer has either failed to understand the process, or deliberately misrepresented it in an effort to derail the constructive process now underway.

Statements claiming that some areas proposed for interim protection were either not forest or had previously been logged, are mischievous and misleading.

The criteria for identifying which areas should be set aside were developed by a panel of eminent scientists and endorsed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

It is important that the criteria be properly understood by the relevant interest groups, and by those reporting on this issue.

The main criteria relate to protecting old growth, wilderness and biodiversity values of forests.

Under the old growth criteria, 60 - 100 per cent of all remaining old growth forests would be protected, with the appropriate level of protection for each forest type dependent on its comparative rarity. This means that for some forest types, 100 per cent of old growth would be protected, with a minimum protection level of 60 per cent for forest types with extensive old growth stands remaining.

The wilderness criterion, however, does not relate just to forests. Wilderness is not related to vegetation type. "Wilderness" embraces measures of remoteness, naturalness and lack of disturbance, regardless of the composition of the vegetation.

Accordingly, the approach taken by the Commonwealth is to identify high quality wilderness, regardless of vegetation type, consistent with well-established methodology and then to give it interim protection. Any forest areas within those wilderness areas are therefore also given interim protection. This approach has resulted in an estimated 99 per cent of all remaining wilderness in Tasmania being given interim protection. The Commonwealth criterion aims to protect 90 per cent or more wherever practicable.

Under the biodiversity criterion, the Commonwealth is committed to protecting 15 per cent of the pre-1750 distribution of each forest community. Meeting this benchmark will inevitably lead to the protection of significant areas of previously logged forest, simply because it would be impossible to meet this criterion for many forest types if only unlogged areas were considered. This would result in a significant reduction in the total area of forest set aside for the reserve system.

While it may have been possible to establish a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system without including previously logged areas one hundred years ago, this is unfortunately no longer possible.

The Government is making the most serious attempt ever to balance the many competing interests involved in the forests issue, and it will not be deflected from an objective application of its policy

We have always said, however, that the reason for having a public review period was to allow issues to be raised so that we can be sure that the final decisions are correct. We are as keen as the various interest groups for the material presented as drafts by Commonwealth and State officials to be fully tested and we will ensure that any doubts about the veracity of the methodology used by the States to apply the Commonwealth criteria are resolved before final decisions are made.

This is a matter of immense importance to all Australians. The Government wants to strike a balance which will best serve the interests of the whole community. This includes establishing a world class forest reserve system. It is important that the process leading to the establishment of this system be reported conscientiously.

CANBERRA
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