



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Tasmanian Pulp Mill

QUESTION

Thursday, 3 March 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Questioner Milne, Sen Christine
Speaker

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder Conroy, Sen Stephen
Question No.

Tasmanian Pulp Mill

Senator MILNE (Tasmania) (2.17 pm)—My question is to the Minister representing the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Senator Conroy. Given that Gunns has had two years, from 5 January 2009 to 3 March 2011, to complete all of its documentation for its Tamar Valley pulp mill project, knowing that a final decision was to be made on 3 March, why did Minister Burke concede to the company's request, made one day before the deadline, for a delay, on the company's say-so that it wanted tougher conditions? Why shouldn't the community conclude that the minister has had the wool pulled over his eyes by a company addicted to delay, failure to meet deadlines and refusal to adhere to the original assessment process because it was too rigorous?

Senator CONROY (Victoria—Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity)—I thank Senator Milne for that question. The Australian government is committed to a comprehensive environmental approval and monitoring process under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 to ensure matters of national environmental significance are protected. Former environment minister Malcolm Turnbull made it a condition of the EPBC Act approval that Gunns must submit an environmental impact management plan for approval. To date, 13 of 16 modules of the plan have been approved. On 5 January 2009 the then minister for the environment, Peter Garrett, set the final date for a decision on the remaining three modules at 3 March 2011. I can advise the chamber that yesterday representatives from Gunns contacted the department and indicated that the company was seeking tougher environmental controls than were contained in the original application. This included tougher controls in relation to the use of plantation timber by the mill and the use of an elemental-chlorine-free light bleaching process. The company further sought that, if approvals were to be given, they reflect these more stringent environmental controls. The department needs to assess these proposed variations for the original pulp mill proposal and allow the independent expert group to examine them. The minister expects this process to be complete and that he will be in a position to consider updated

advice from his department next week. Gunns can begin construction under the approval conditions but it cannot operate the mill unless all 16 modules are approved. (*Time expired*)

Senator MILNE (Tasmania)—Mr President, I ask a supplementary question. I did ask why the minister would believe a company which is committed to delays and not meeting deadlines and standards, but now that the minister has delayed his decision for a week will he immediately make public Gunns's hydrodynamic modelling and final modules for community scrutiny before he makes his decision and will he now go back and toughen all of the guidelines that Gunns has said previously it could not meet? If he is going to go and do what Gunns want, will he now at least let the community see what is going on? (*Time expired*)

Senator CONROY (Victoria—Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity)—The minister understands that Gunns intends to make the remaining modules and related studies, including the hydrodynamic modelling of the pulp mill effluent, available on its website. As to the other parts of your question, if there is any further information that I can get from the minister for you, I will provide it at the earliest opportunity.

Senator MILNE (Tasmania)—Mr President, I ask a further supplementary question. It is not about whether the company will make the material available, because it has not done so to date and clearly will not do it until after the decision. Will the minister release that information now so that the community can look at it before a decision is made? That is the critical question.

Senator CONROY (Victoria—Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity)—As I said, our understanding is that Gunns do intend to make the modules and studies available. As to whether or not the minister intends to release that information, I indicated that we will take that on notice and come back to you with any further information the minister is able to provide.