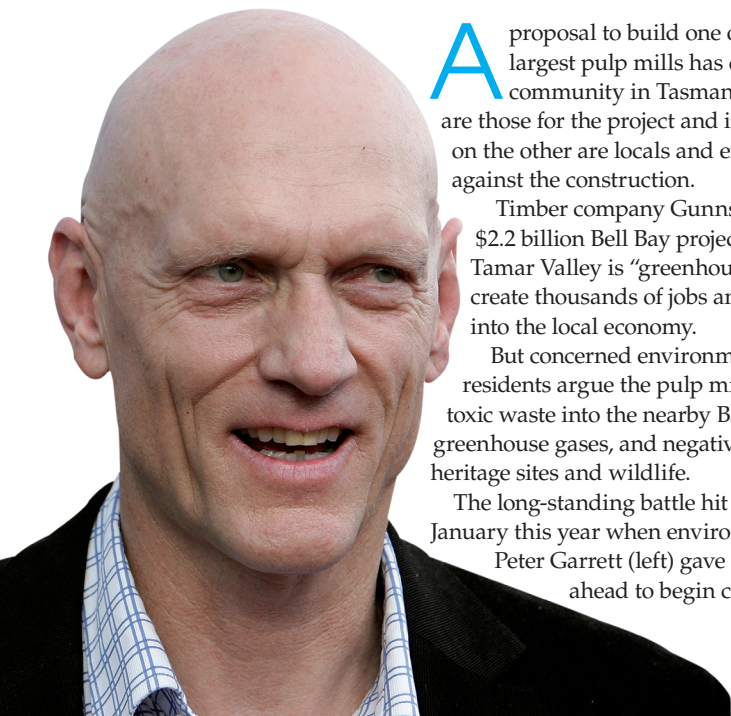




# PULP FRICTION

The Australian Government has given the go-ahead to construct one of the world's largest pulp mills in Tasmania, but opponents say the fight to block the project isn't over yet WORDS CHANTAL ABITBOL



A proposal to build one of the world's largest pulp mills has divided the community in Tasmania. On one side are those for the project and its promise of jobs, on the other are locals and environmentalists against the construction.

Timber company Gunns Limited says its \$2.2 billion Bell Bay project in Tasmania's Tamar Valley is "greenhouse positive", will create thousands of jobs and inject millions into the local economy.

But concerned environmentalists and residents argue the pulp mill will dump toxic waste into the nearby Bass Strait, emit greenhouse gases, and negatively impact heritage sites and wildlife.

The long-standing battle hit a new mark in January this year when environment minister Peter Garrett (left) gave Gunns the go-ahead to begin construction of

the mill before final approval was in place.

Signing off on most of the project's conditions, Garrett withheld final environmental clearance pending further studies on the project's impact on marine life.

"The fact is I inherited an approval from [former environment minister] Malcolm Turnbull," Garrett said.

"My task has been to work in the most effective way with the conditions of approval that [he] put in place. I've given this matter thorough consideration."

## ENVIRONMENTAL BACKLASH

But Wilderness Society campaigner Paul Oosting said: "We believe the minister was within his powers to stop Gunns' pulp mill proceeding", while Greens senator Bob Green called the government's decision "a body blow to Tasmanians ... [which] puts the pulp mill



View towards the proposed pulp mill site in Tasmania's Tamar Valley

## WHAT IS A PULP MILL?

A pulp mill is a manufacturing facility that converts wood chips by mechanical or chemical methods into a thick fibreboard, which can be shipped to a paper mill for further processing.

Gunns' Bell Bay project isn't the first time a pulp mill discussion has divided the Tasmanian community.

In 1989 the Wesley Vale pulp mill was considered, but didn't get built because of its use of chlorine.

squarely on the 2010 federal election agenda".

It appears many Australians feel the same way. In a recent poll, 62 per cent of those surveyed across all states said they believed it was wrong to allow construction to begin without final approval.

High-profile figures such as celebrity chef Kylie Kwong, former tennis star John Newcombe and *Packed To The Rafters* actress Rebecca Gibney have also joined the fight.

Gibney, who owns a home near the site, said she would sell up and leave if the mill went ahead.

"It would be heartbreaking, and I'm hoping we won't have to," she was quoted as saying in Australia's *Woman's Day*. "The fight is not over. We're still hanging in there."

## THE TIMBER COMPANY'S RESPONSE

Gunns spokesman Matthew Horan told *TNT* that mill protesters were misrepresenting the facts, and said the outflow produced by

“ At this time we should not close the door on the single biggest investment in Tasmania's history ”

the mill would "easily meet the water quality standards approved by the Government".

Horan also dismissed claims the mill would use old growth timber from indigenous forests. "No more trees will be cut down to feed the

mill. All that's going to be happening is the wood chips we currently export will be processed in Tasmania, rather than sending them offshore to mills that don't have the same strict environmental controls."

At least 2000 jobs will be created and millions of dollars injected into the local economy, he added.

## ECONOMIC TIMING

The Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI) has also voiced support for the project.

"At a time of immense economic uncertainty we should not close the door on the single biggest investment in Tasmania's history," TCCI chief executive Damon Thomas said.

But given the current economic downturn, Gunns may yet face hurdles in attracting funds for the construction.

"We are proceeding with negotiations with both a banking syndicate and potential joint-venture partners," Horan said. "We remain optimistic."

To date, however, no deal has been lined up.



Rebecca Gibney

## THE BATTLE

### OPPONENTS SAY

- ☛ The project will dump 64,000 tonnes of toxic pollution into the Bass Strait each day.
- ☛ It will impact on important Aboriginal heritage sites and threaten local wildlife, including the Tasmanian wedge-tailed eagle.
- ☛ It will use 26-40 billion litres of fresh water each year - a strain on public water supply.

### GUNNS LIMITED SAYS

- ☛ The project will create more than 2000 jobs and provide \$1 billion for community services.
- ☛ It will produce surplus green energy for the national electricity grid, replacing energy derived from coal and gas.
- ☛ It will be "greenhouse positive", leading to a reduction of more than 1.1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere.