

Timber recycles carbon

TIMBER QUEENSLAND MEDIA RELEASE



13 September 2010

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Skills shortages close sawmills: visa exemptions needed to save timber towns

A Federal Government interested in regional issues is positive yet useless until they focus on the real issue killing small towns: the loss of skilled workers to the mining sector and unwillingness of displaced workers to resettle in remote areas.

Rod McInnes, CEO of peak industry body Timber Queensland says sawmills, which are the lifeblood of many small rural towns, are closing at a rapid rate and the only hope for their survival is for Government to look at making visa exemptions for skilled workers in specific regional and remote areas.

"There are simply no workers out West. All the skilled locals have, understandably, been lured to work for multi-national mining companies," said Rod McInnes.

"Forest and timber businesses, who are often the sole employer in small towns, are closing because they can't get competent staff. These towns are also losing essential community services provided by the businesses due to lack of other infrastructure," he said.

"A case in point is the Mungallala sawmill, owned by N.K. Collins Industries, which shut operations two weeks ago. Not only have 12 skilled jobs been lost for that town, but the local fire brigade is now without fuel," he said.

Mungallala sawmill isn't the first and won't be the last operation Sean Gribble, General Manager, N.K. Collins Industries say he will have to close unless this skill shortage is addressed quickly.

"We had to close our Augathella mill over 18 months ago and to be honest the future for our sawmills in Tambo and Mitchell isn't bright," said Sean Gribble.

Mr Gribble said that an operating sawmill can make or break a small community.

"Augathella's a ghost town now, since the mill closed the local club shuts by 6pm – what's the point if there's no one around?" he said.

"In comparison when we opened the Tambo mill so much was injected into the community; the population tripled, the school doubled in size. Now all this looks set to decline since nobody will come and work here," he said.

"It's tough because closing these mills also impacts the viability of continuing our head office operations in Toowoomba which employs 80 people."

Mr Gribble says special considerations are needed to employ foreign sawmilling and processing, harvesting and haulage contractors, wood machinists and saw doctors in his outback operations.

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"The reality is we need some immediate Government action. If we can't get some overseas labour in to help by Christmas, we will be forced to shut all the mills and scale back the Toowoomba processing operation.

"We will just get the timber harvested and then ship it straight offshore for processing and any value-adding."

"Potentially we could employ 220 people but I can see us only having 10 to 15 staff in the New Year."

Rod McInnes said the obvious answer for Queensland forest and timber businesses facing the same predicament as N.K. Collins Industries is to offer jobs to displaced staff from Victorian and Tasmanian timber regions.

"It sounds good on paper but the reality is workers from down South aren't interested moving their families inter-state to extremely remote areas. We've had Industry organisations speaking with and making offers to Victorians and Tasmanians without any success."

"Timber Queensland is calling both Federal and State Government's to recognise that this skill shortage is killing Queensland country towns and to make immediate visa exemptions for appropriate qualifications for specific regional and remote areas."

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