

SouthEastTIMBERassociation

Forestry Related Journalism & Freedom of Information

During 2021, the South East Timber Association (SETA) began to more closely examine the relation between selected journalists and academics. Following a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Australian National University, it became clear that the University will use the full extent of the FOI Act 1982 to keep the extent of the relationship between their academics and Fairfax (9 Media) journalists confidential.

It also appeared that there is a set of unwritten rules that govern the relationship. The first rule was revealed, following completion of the SETA FOI request and a request made by Forest and Wood Communities Australia (FWCA) to the ABC.

Activist rule no. 1 appears to be: If anyone threatens to expose the cosy working relationship between activist cliques, squeal like a stuck pig.

On Sunday 21 November 2021, the Fairfax media journalists, Mike Foley and Mike Perkins, who were subject to SETA FOI request, published a story, that provided an avenue for the Australian National University and Professor David Lindenmayer to express their outrage at the FOI intrusion.

The allegation made by Professor Lindenmayer that the FOI was a process that was trying to "shoot the messenger" is the type of outrage that is used by activist NGOs to hit back at any individual or organisation that dares question what they say or do, so SETA members have not been surprised by his reaction.

It is flattering that the Fairfax journalists and Professor Lindenmayer are so overwhelmed by the FOI request that they have made it a national news story. As every single exchange between the Professor and the journalists has been redacted, what is the point of the story? Is it intended to send a message to anyone considering submitting a future FOI that they will be pilloried if they mess with a favoured media source?

Professor Lindenmayer also said, "This whole process of trying to shoot the messenger - which is journalists - and beating up on scientists is not in the spirit of trying to progress discussions and debates."

Why was the Professor so shocked to be a subject of the SETA FOI request? Was he not aware, that as an employee of the ANU, SETA has a legal right to lodge FOI requests, naming scientists of interest?

The statement by an anonymous ANU spokesperson that "We would be deeply concerned if external forces were attempting to gag our researchers from speaking to the media, especially if it was motivated by a disagreement with the research or scholarly ideas produced by our experts," also appears to be an overdramatic reaction to the SETA FOI request.



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Many SETA members and supporters do have disagreements with some of the opinions Professor Lindenmayer puts forward when promoting his research findings, particularly in relation to fire and timber harvesting.

Nobel laureate and ANU vice-chancellor Brian Schmidt has publicly stated "ANU researchers' ideas needed to be subject to robust scrutiny." He also said "In this age of misinformation, it is also vital that we have a press that upholds the free exchange of ideas, respectful debate, and most importantly, an unbiased reporting of fact, observations and knowledge."

Given the reaction of Professor Lindenmayer and the ANU, it would seem the vice-chancellor's views may not be widely supported within the university.

<https://www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/timber-advocates-use-freedom-of-information-to-access-emails-from-scientist-and-journalists-20211116-p599ee.html>

On 24 November 2021, and the ABC journalist, Michael Sleezak, who had also been subject to a Forest and FWCA FOI request, continued his assault on VicForests, with a lengthy article on steep country harvesting. He promoted this story on ABC news and the 7.30 report.

His report relied heavily on the opinions of Professor David Lindenmayer and Dr Chris Taylor. These were the three persons of interest in the FWCA FOI request. Throughout the attack, these three "victims" of FOI requests made repeated references to their use of the FOI process to fuel their attack on VicForests." References included:

"Now, the ABC can reveal how the ORC made those assessments, in documents laid bare under Freedom of Information laws;"

"The researchers obtained VicForests' analysis of their compliance with the law in the Upper Goulburn Catchment through Freedom of Information laws."

"Despite multiple requests, including under Freedom of Information laws, the OCR have not provided details about what it found at Eddie Would Go."

"We had to undertake a costly Freedom of Information request to get this data."

On the one hand we have academics and journalists squealing when they are subject to FOI requests. Then, when it suits, they are avid users of that process. Is this rampant hypocrisy, or just a day to day part of the activist business model?

Activist Rule no. 2 appears to be: Do as I say, don't do as I do.

Under FOI, Professor Lindenmayer, Dr Taylor and ABC employee Michael Slezak were fully protected from the FWCA FOI, as the ABC decision stated in part: "Access is refused in full to the requested documents." Copies of the ANU and ABC decisions are below.

Are FOI laws meant to protect academics and journalists, who appear to be key parts of an activist campaign against the native forest industry? If the ANU believes many of the statements made by these academics are "scholarly," are our universities the home of quality research or opinionated activism?



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