

FWCA received a request for information for a story which will be published in Michael West Media, which is known for its activism sympathies. For the sake of putting the details on the record, below is the email received and our response. We will see what kind of story results...

Dear Forest & Wood Communities Australia,

I am a journalist with Michael West Media and I would like to put the following enquiries to you as part of an article I am currently working on.

On your website you state that "we are a grassroots organisation and actively avoid conflicts of interest with corporate influence to ensure we speak for the workers" - however an ASIC search has revealed that your directors have ties to the corporate forestry industry (outlined below).

The ASIC records show our foundation board which set up the basic structure of the organisation. Our new board is detailed below.

1. Would you please explain how you can purport to be a grassroots organisation when your directors have such close ties to corporate industries?

Anyone who is involved in forestry has some tie to industry, so I don't understand what you're driving at. Malcolm McComb is no longer a director. He was gracious enough to use his considerable experience in constitutions and board structures to help us get started as a foundation director, but stepped aside at our first election.

Our current board is Steve Dobbys, Peter Rutherford, Kelly Wilton (third generation timber family but not employed in the industry), Cr Karen Stephens (Glenelg Shire Council Deputy Mayor and Timber Towns Victoria President) and Queensland lawyer Tom Marland.

We have also installed a 16-member Advisory Council (comprising grassroots forestry people, academics, forestry supporters, users of specialty timber and partners of forest workers) as a layer of governance below the board to ensure that we remain focused on issues which directly affect our members.

2. Can you provide proof that you have members who are in fact "concerned timber workers"? If so, how many members do you have?

We are quite new and our membership is growing, but have more than 350 financial members and around 1000 non-financial members who come from a variety of backgrounds including the majority who work in the forests or who are spouses and partners of forests workers. There are more than 100,000 concerned timber workers and forestry supporters across several social media groups and our work is shared among them as well.

As for proof, what proof do you want? We would not divulge our membership list as our members are rightly concerned about the harassment they receive from activists. Perhaps a look at our Facebook page, which is followed by more than 1000 people will give you an understanding of our member profile.

3. Please feel free to correct any of the below statements about your directors that I have put together based on research.

Steven Dobbys is the owner of Jamax Forest Solutions, a forestry consultant business, as well as current Director and Vice President of Timber NSW, the peak body representing the

timber industry in NSW and which works “shoulder to shoulder” with the state-owned Forestry Corporation of NSW.

- Are you suggesting Forest Corp is a sinister organisation that should be shunned by Timber NSW?

Malcolm McComb is the principal of timber marketer Pentrarch Forestry, which exports timber to China, South Korea, India and the Middle East, as well as chairman of the Pentarch Group of companies and Director of the Allied Natural Wood Exports and the United Forestry Group, a joint venture between Pentarch and Chinese local government owned logistics group Xiangyu Group.

- I do not know all of Mr McComb’s background but I do know that the last point is no longer the case.

Peter Rutherford, Secretary of the South East Timber Association, which represents the interests of people working in harvesting operations in South East NSW and East Gippsland, and contributor to Australian Forests and Timber News.

- Peter’s response:

SETA membership includes people who have never worked in the forest industries but support forest industries. The major focus of SETA is forest and fire management and related environmental issues. You could check the SETA submissions to the bushfire inquiries.

SETA members are strongly committed to ensuring public forests are available for a range of commercial and recreational activities and expect land management practices will maintain environmental values in the long term.

SETA expects the government to commit to ensuring forest and related policies strike an appropriate balance between social, environmental and economic outcomes, while minimising adverse impacts of policy changes on regional communities.

Justin Law is the fourth director listed on the company’s ASIC extract and also the group’s Managing Director. Law has a professional background in journalism, public relations and communications. According to his LinkedIn profile, his previous job before taking up the position of Managing Director at Forest & Wood Communities Australia was as a Communications and Advocacy Consultant for Native Timber Industry.

- Do you have any affiliations with state government bodies, VicForests or with unions?

- No we do not.

- Have you received any kind of funding or monetary donations from VicForests, a government source, industry or unions?

- As mental health is a primary concern for our members, we are currently exploring government grant options.

I have a deadline of COB Thursday 20 May - if you could please provide a response before then that would be much appreciated.

Many thanks,

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Natasha May

Journalist

Michael West Media

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natasha@michaelwest.com.au

Hi Natasha

Thank you for your enquiry and attempting to clarify the purpose of your article in our phone conversation, although I remain cynical.

A quick scan of your work and the media organisation you work for indicates that you are sympathetic to anti-forestry activism and the tone of your enquiry would suggest that the purpose of your article may be to discredit our association, so I suspect that an opinion has been formed and no matter what response you get, the narrative won't change. However, I'll endeavour to answer your questions.

Firstly, Forest & Wood Communities Australia does NOT represent business or commercial interests. FWCA is set up as an organisation to represent the people in forestry and forest communities who are tired and frustrated by the work of cynical activists and their sympathisers in the media who seem incapable of following the one guiding principle of fair and balanced reporting when it comes to forestry issues. That said, the frustration of being constantly bombarded with anti-forestry media bias has been a major driver of our membership, so perhaps we shouldn't complain.

I was a journalist before I had any interest in the plight of forest communities and when I became curious about the battle between the timber industry and activism, I took the time to spend a day out in the field with each side (Log Jam, published in the Eden Magnet in 2011 – I can forward a copy of the original if you like). It was my understanding of the journalistic process and it afforded me an informed opinion, which was that activism is the dishonest party in this particular arena. I mean, how do you hide forestry? They are public forests. You only have to go into one to see the various stages of disturbance and regrowth, and the animals which happily exist within them.

It is lamentable that there does not seem to be a willingness to report forestry's minimal environmental impact (6 trees in 10,000 harvested and regrown by law – 4 in Victoria) or to take the time to properly understand the forestry process. Instead there is a hard-line ideology that forestry is some criminal blight on the environment and anything said in support of it is "industry spin". Generations of experience in the forests is ignored as "outdated thinking" while desktop modelling and activist-funded academic opinion is lauded as the undeniable truth.

We've even heard Australian forestry compared to some Dr Suess fairy tale in a sneering inference that Australian forestry is irresponsible and uncaring of the environment. It's my understanding the trees don't grow back in The Lorax – they do in the real world and it's the one fundamental aspect of forestry which is rarely mentioned, especially when the motivation of the journalist is to attack rather than report the facts. All native timber harvesting in Victoria, for instance, is conducted in forests which have been previously harvested or disturbed naturally, but is now, according to activism, pristine, wildlife habitat

which needs saving. The hypocrisy is staggering. And that lazy reporters (not suggesting you are one of them) swallow this nonsense says much for the state of journalism in Australia.

Perhaps there is an urge to hold up corporate activist organisations such as the WWF or the Wilderness Society as beacons of environmental virtue. But have you considered that their funding model is based on catastrophising forestry to create outrage to attract donations? Do you know how much money they rake in as a result? Do you know how much of that money goes into funding studies which create headlines, more outrage and more revenue? Could it be that they are manipulating the media as a cog in their financial modelling?

What do these activists actually do for society? Do you know what percentage of their multi-million dollar incomes they actually spend on improving the environment? What communities do they support? How many shops do they keep open in regional towns? How many regional families benefit from their work? Who does benefit from their work other than themselves and the academics and lawyers they pay? Where are they on feral cats which kill 75 million native animals a night!?

I'd suggest you do not know the answers to those questions because there is more interest in jumping on the crusade against an industry whose motivation is to supply renewable timber and contributes to society in multiple ways, as has been independently proven. We are low-hanging click-bait fruit.

You may not be concerned that anti-forestry media articles add to the mental stress on people who are proud to contribute positively to our environment by reducing our reliance on plastic, steel and concrete. They are the people who defend our forests in times of crisis and who care for our forests to ensure they continue to regrow and provide our one truly renewable resource. They are the real conservationists in this narrative.

One-sided anti-forestry media articles influence the ignorant and consequently the government which results in short-sighted lock-it-up-and-let-it-burn policy. What is baffling about all this in Victoria is that the government has announced the end of native timber harvesting in the state, yet activism seems to have doubled its efforts.

If activism succeeds in its well-funded and well-coordinated attack on sustainable, world-certified Australian forestry, then you may want to consider what you have really achieved by supporting it.

The end result is towns shrink, communities suffer, families lose everything and some end their lives. This is why we were formed. To give them a voice.

Justin Law

FWCA Managing Director