

MEDIA RELEASE

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Towong Plantations Committee celebrates 16 years

Towong Shire's Plantations Committee, the first Committee of its kind established in Victoria, recently passed its 16th anniversary, an especially notable achievement with several of its founding members still actively involved on the Committee. Chairperson, Lyn Coulston, who has been a part of the Committee since its inaugural meeting back in 1998, reflected on the circumstances which led to its establishment over 16 years ago.

"While plantation forestry in Victoria has a long history dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it has only been in recent decades that concerns were raised about the loss of agricultural lands to service expanding plantation targets," said Lyn. "These concerns were raised during a time when the community was becoming increasingly aware of issues and practices that impacted the environment".

"It was thought that the management of some plantations was adversely affecting the local environment and that plantation owners were unresponsive to these concerns and consequently the plantation industry in the Towong Shire came under greater scrutiny. Following the privatisation of the government owned plantations in the 1990s there was an ongoing perception that these forestry operations continued to cause adverse offsite environmental impacts".

Back in the 1980s, plans to establish new plantations or expand existing plantations were met with vocal resistance from the local agricultural community. This angst reached a peak in 1989, particularly in the Towong Shire, when the government plantation land purchase policy was challenged which led to the Victorian Government's review through the *State Plantation Impact Study*. The Towong Shire has about 17500ha of pine plantations but has negligible processing capacity, hence opportunities to drive employment and receive the flow-on benefits within the local economy are limited, especially when compared with some of Towong Shire's neighbouring local government areas. More recently the collapse of a number of plantation investment companies has again raised negative sentiment about the plantation industry in some areas.

In 1989 the first legislated Code of Forest Practice identified local government as the agency with the responsibility for its implementation in private plantations. Following community pressure the then Commissioners of the Towong Shire agreed to accept these statutory responsibilities and subsequently commenced auditing compliance with the Code. But what could the Council do to break down the barriers between the community and plantation owners and assist the agricultural and forest industries to co-exist peacefully into the future?

In 1997 Towong Shire Commissioners accepted the request from the Upper Murray land care groups for ongoing community engagement and agreed to establish the Towong Plantations Committee, a first for local government in Victoria, to encourage open and ongoing discussion between community representatives and the plantation industry. An immediate action of the Committee was to lobby the Shire to appoint a part-time forest officer to monitor the ongoing compliance with the Code of Practice by local plantation owners. In 1998 David Buntine was appointed and he continues to work with the Committee, local community, plantation owners and Council.

Generally the term community engagement is defined within the forest industry to describe the involvement of stakeholders in exchanging information to improve understandings and hopefully negotiate some mutually acceptable outcomes on contentious issues. This in turn leads to greater trust between parties, open and transparent line of communication and greater acceptance of forest industry activities. Disagreements will still occur but should be able to be discussed in an atmosphere of openness and trust. Has the Towong Shire Plantation Committee been able to achieve this?

The Committee's original purpose was to open up dialogue between various groups interested in sustainable management of the plantations and monitor environmental compliance with the Code of Practice. From the very first meeting, it was clear that having industry and community representatives in the room at the same time made the industry more reactive to community concerns and the community more understanding of plantation issues.

"Barriers to discussion broke down as the plantation industry responded to the concerns of our local community and the Committee provided the right environment for concerns to be both aired and addressed," recalls long serving member Alex Hill. "Instead of just knowing names, individuals from both sides got to know each other as real people; community members and plantation representatives began to talk directly and reach a mutual understanding about issues. The community now had a forum to promote discussion, learn about plantation issues and receive responses to their concerns".

Membership of the Committee is made up of representatives from HVP Plantations, private plantation owners, landcare groups, forest managers and Towong Shire Council. In its formative years the Committee focussed its attention on the implementation of the Code of Forest Practice, and now it also considers the more diverse aspects of plantation management in addition to hearing reports from the Council, the community and plantation owners.

"This is a great indication of the beneficial role the Committee plays not only as a Code of Practice monitor but also as a forum to promote a holistic approach that encourages best practice forest management," said Mr Hill.

The Towong Shire Plantation Committee is unique not only because of the length of time it has been in existence, but also because of the commitment of its members. The Committee's success clearly demonstrates that issues can be defused and usually resolved if they are discussed in an open, inclusive environment between all interested parties. At its biannual meetings the Committee's agenda now covers a range of topics including blackberry control, fire season preparations, the impact of timber traffic on roads, school plantations, timber road funding, wild dog and deer control, significant vegetation protection and environmental training for operators.

The Towong model has received wide acceptance from plantation owners and local interest groups. There is now a better level of understanding of land management issues and the requirements of the Code and local planning scheme for which the Committee can claim at least some of the credit.

About Towong Shire: Towong Shire is located in far north-eastern Victoria; wilderness areas, lakes, rivers and streams create diverse landscapes that are enjoyed by around 6,000 residents and many more visitors across an area of 6,600 square kilometres. The economy of the region revolves around a rich agricultural sector, tourism and timber production.



Lyn Coulston with members of the Committee