

Working in the timber industry in Western Australia in the 1990s: A response to Smart

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ABSTRACT: The account by Smart in these proceedings of his experiences working in the timber industry in Western Australian in the 1990s reflect only his experiences and attitudes. As someone who also worked in the timber industry in those years, I offer an alternative perspective.

1 INTRODUCTION

My name is David Mills, and I need to let you know why I am responding to the paper by Bill Smart.

I worked for Bunnings Forest Products in a variety of roles for 27 years. I was responsible for selecting and purchasing logging plant and processing machines for use in production centres and sawmills for many years, and this required regular visits to all mills and processing centres.

In the early 1990s I took over the responsibility for the property interests of the holding company, Bunnings Ltd. I was heavily involved in a period of mill rationalisation, which saw the closing of many mills, and the disposal of surplus mill housing. The company had inherited very run down housing stock from the old State Saw mills (which became Hawker Siddeley Building Supplies), and also from the old Millars operations, which called for a major upgrading of many mill houses, some seventy years old. This programme was initiated in the early 90s and examples of the good results of this programme can be seen today in Pemberton and in Yarloop and elsewhere. Additional housing was brought into Deanmill to cater for an increase in the workforce, and refurbishment of houses at Deanmill was also undertaken.

I would like to correct one chronological error which has arisen as a result of the editing process. In the introduction, the author is quoted as saying that new workers were, **and still are** employed to operate the gate directing wood to the chipper or to the residue table. This statement is derived from a letter which was written in 1990, when the author was referring to the period from 1985 to 1990, with the meaning that this practice was still current in 1990, and not in 2004.

My involvement in the general mill areas and in the mill housing refurbishment programme gave me a very good insight into mill operations and the standard of mill housing in general, and of the expectations of company tenants.

2 RESPONSE

Based on my experience in the South West, I cannot agree with many of the conclusions reached

by the author of this paper. My overall impression is that the letter or letters to the company which form the basis of the paper were written by someone who was motivated with good intentions at a time when the industry was being assaulted by strong conservation opinions, but it also seems that the writer was very disgruntled with the company, and his claims about morale, housing standards and employee unhappiness are an extreme view, which certainly does not represent a true picture of the whole workforce.

I recognise that we need to cast our minds back to a period of great conflict between the conservationists and the saw milling industry. BFP employees were understandably incensed with their livelihood and lifestyle under threat, but loyalty to the company was not an issue, as Bunnings had earned almost universal community respect for its comprehensive concern for employee welfare. Its occupational health and safety policy was long established, and resulted in the lowest accident frequency rates in Australian saw milling, and the comment about managements' uncaring attitude to its workforce and its mill towns is a nonsense.

Allegations about globulus plantations being a monoculture, and something to be hidden are clearly impractical (what about general farming crops and pine plantations, paulownia, olives etc?). While alternative species have been trialed, globulus remains the most suitable species to plant and chip - and in the future to mill also.

The jarrah chip stockpile referred to in the paper was the result of anticipated export markets for jarrah woodchip never emerging. All of this ten year old accumulation was eventually sold for horticultural purposes within WA. It should be noted that no significant reference was made to the supply of jarrah blocks for the Simcoa silicon metal operations. The potential of jarrah waste to be used as a source of high grade charcoal was identified many years ago, and BFP carried out trials to evaluate production of this material. The arrival of Simcoa led to most mills establishing large paved areas to store and air dry small reject grade jarrah dockings, which found a valuable market for a waste by product that was previously chipped to produce virtually unsaleable material.

Woodchipping of sawlogs which did not make first grade was, and remains, an obvious absurdity for any sawmiller when green sawn material fetched several hundred dollars per cubic metre as against less than \$80 for chip. The very prolific marri was the primary species for the hardwood chipping industry together with reject karri logs, and in the past the marri was not well received by the market as sawn or machined product due to the high percentage of gum pockets and other faults. At the present time Deanmill is milling mixed jarrah and marri logs, with about 20% of the annual throughput in marri, which through the selection of clear good marri logs has established itself as an acceptable appearance grade material.

The paper quite properly draws our attention to recovery rates in jarrah milling, and this brings us to the major difficulty with the species, namely the prevalence of gum vein, borers and checking, and the form of the log. Average log size has declined substantially over time, and the sawmill has an increasingly difficult task in cutting small logs to size and length. Docking out defects, and optimising the way in which each flitch is cut is a demanding task, and high speed big mills present the sawyer with little time to make these decisions. However, improvements in sealing and wrapping logs and strip stack material, together with extensive use of large pre-driers, and improved control of the kiln drying process have resulted in much higher recoveries of furniture grade dry product.

This is a very changed picture to the period described in the paper. Annual log input at Deanmill is now 35,000 m³ compared to 80,000 m³, and despite smaller log sizes, recovery is now 40%. The mill is now a very high tech operation, with substantial improvements in seasoning and processing methods, which have resulted in the improved recovery rate. Green structural grade material is no longer the major part of mill output.

The concluding paragraphs of the paper with their allegations of corporate vandalism, greed and incompetence, and pawns only interested in making a quick profit are unhappy phrases to describe a more than a century and a quarter old company with a proud and successful record as a good employer and corporate citizen, which could always be relied on to support local organisations and communities in the SW.