

Burke's Backyard: the new face of greenwashing in Australia.
By Lauren Caulfield

"The greatest threat to the world's environment is the conservation movement." – Don Burke

After 17 years proffering tips to gardening enthusiasts on *Burke's Backyard*, Don Burke is spearheading the new face of anti-environmentalism in Australia as chairman of the Australian Environment Foundation (AEF).

Far from the conservation-based ideals the name is intended to conjure up, the AEF is a conglomeration of pro-logging, pro-nuclear, pro-GM and other resource industry interests, with links to well-funded conservative think tanks.

Purporting to provide the voice of "practical environmentalism", the AEF marks a change from the single-issue front groups epitomised by the work of logging industry lobby group Timber Communities Australia (TCA, formerly known as the Forest Protection Society). Instead, the AEF represents a new level of collaboration between industries and across issues, seeking to claim back the ground gained by the environment movement.

The formation of the AEF was first mooted at the 'Eureka Forum' organised in December 2004 by the conservative think tank the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). The AEF was formally launched on June 5, 2005 - World Environment Day! The key policy positions of the IPA include advocacy for privatisation, deregulation, reduction of the power of unions and denial of most significant environmental problems, including climate change.

The IPA is also known for its attacks on the charity status of several high-profile environment groups on the basis of their 'political' work. This stance is ironic given the AEF's own charity status and the acknowledgement of the AEF executive director Max Rheese that: "The AEF is not involved in any on ground work for the environment ... we're advocating for change in policy on environmental issues."

The AEF website address and phone number were initially those of the Victorian TCA. Australian Securities and Investments Commission documents list Mike Nahan, the former executive director of the IPA, as one of the AEF directors. The documents also list AEF's registered place of business as the IPA office.

AEF conferences are sponsored by industry bodies, including the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania – the body overseeing controversial industrial logging and woodchipping in Tasmania, multinational agricultural biotechnology corporation Monsanto, and Murray Irrigation Limited.

However, these links are not always acknowledged by the AEF. Speaking out against accusations of being a front group for industry on the basis of the shared business details with TCA, Max Rheese told Triple J radio: "At one

point in time that would have been the case ... neither of those are the case now [sic], because we don't need that to be so."

In his role as AEF chairman, Don Burke has been vocal in a range of areas, including his support for the logging and nuclear industries, and in opposition to 'draconian' native vegetation legislation to curtail broadscale land clearing.

The organisation draws other core staff from the ranks of some of Australia's most controversial extractive industries and conservative research groups. Dr Jennifer Marohasy is a founding director of the AEF, as well as the director of the 'Environment Unit' at the IPA. Marohasy, a vocal climate change sceptic, is also the listed registrant of the AEF's website.

AEF director and corporate lawyer Tom Bostock is also a director of the Lavoisier Group, the conspiratorial industry front group dedicated to denying the reality of anthropogenic climate change.

The AEF Board has also included former ALP environment minister Barry Cohen, and a Timber Communities Australia manager.

Max Rheese writes: "AEF has been upfront and on the public record from day one regarding its links ... Every commentator connected with AEF has been meticulous in declaring their affiliations." Whilst there is some acknowledgement of these industry ties by the organisation, these are downplayed publicly as the personal side projects of individual members.

For example, Rheese writes that "director(s) of the AEF [are] involved in other groups. AEF membership is only open to individuals." Similarly, in covering the group's launch, *The Age* reported that while Jennifer Marohasy is the group's chairwoman, "Dr Marohasy said she acted as the group's leader as an individual and not part of the IPA."

Other interest groups represented on the AEF Board by 'individual members' include the Landholders Institute, Timber Communities Australia and the Bush Users Group, groups which represent the logging industry, four-wheel drive users, recreational hunters and shooters.

AEF activities

The AEF has hosted a national tour of a pro-mining documentary *Mine Your Own Business*, which in the words of the film-makers "exposes the dark side of environmentalism". The film tour was also an opportunity to distribute the fact-free Lavoisier Group publication, *Nine facts about climate change*.

The AEF conference in September this year resulted in a series of press releases promoting nuclear power, launching an AEF 'taskforce' to investigate Victorian Environmental Assessment Council recommendations for increased environmental flows to the Murray River, and promoting the recently-approved Gunns pulp mill in Tasmania. Don Burke said of the pulp mill: "This is best-

practice pulp production. We believe it is essential to support the best-practice industries."

At a time when environment groups across the nation are united in the effort to protect Tasmania's forests from logging and export woodchipping, the AEF has been publicly supportive of notorious Tasmanian woodchipping giant Gunns Ltd. Indeed, the AEF presented the company with the AEF 'Award for Environmental Excellence' in 2006. The award was given for the company's management of grasslands near Burnie.

The AEF represents an important development in anti-environmentalism in Australia, in line with international trends. It denotes increasing levels of sophistication by industry, the public relations industry and the political Right in seeking to combat the impact of environmentalism.

As the AEF indicates, the pro-industry agenda no longer constitutes mere public debate with environmentalists, but rather a developing network of strategies and messaging, scientific support and coalition building, together with 'grassroots organising', incorporating some of the traditionally successful strategies of the political Left.

More information:

Sourcewatch

<www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Australian_Environment_Foundation>

AEF

<www.aefweb.info>

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