

Senator the Hon. Anne Ruston
Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources
Address to Australian Forest Products Association gala dinner

It's a pleasure to be here tonight because I just love this industry.

Greg, can I acknowledge your board – you never ever give up and, I think tonight bears testimony to the effectiveness of AFPA as the forest industry's peak industry and advocacy body.

I think one of your greatest achievements has been that you employed Ross Hampton – another was stealing my forestry adviser.

But, as everyone in this room should know, you're only as good as your staff.

And the fact that so many politicians are here tonight I'm going to attribute to – at last – everyone is realising just how great forestry is and the huge role it can and should play in this country's future.

And everyone here tonight has a role to play in making sure that we realise this industry's potential.

I'm a little bit disappointed that Bill Shorten wasn't able to make it here tonight, because my message to Bill would have been the decision of the Victorian Government regarding the renewal of the Central Highlands and East Gippsland RFAs are absolutely critical to that state's forestry future.

And I need everybody in this room, particularly those of you who come from Victoria to do what you can to impress on the Victorian ALP that they must renew their RFAs because more than 7000 Victorian jobs rely on it.

To Barnaby, wherever you are, I was actually a little concerned when I found out that Barnaby was coming tonight, because he is going to realise what a fantastic good news story forestry really is and he might decide as my lead minister that he is going to take back responsibility.

But seriously, thank you for very much Barnaby for the support that you continue to give me so that I can continue to give it to you.

To Josh Frydenberg, Josh gets the tough bit of forestry, he gets challenges like the Leadbeaters possum. But the reality of the Leadbeaters possum story is that has actually turned into a good news story. Because the more we look for them, the more we seem to find.

And the RFAs prove that you can actually walk and chew gum at the same time – we can actually protect threatened species and actually have a forest industry at the same time.

And to Joel Fitzgibbon and Tony Pasin the Co-Chairs of Parliamentary Friends of Forestry.

An unlikely couple as they may seem, but the one thing I would like to say is they remain united and committed in their belief in this industry, so I thank them for that. And to Joel, he never once has deviated from taking a totally non-partisan support to forestry and he has absolute living proof that it is amazing how much more can be achieved when you actually work together.

To my mate Fiona Nash, the Deputy Leader of Nats, she is the Minister responsible for everything regional development and forestry equals regional jobs and regional jobs equals regional development.

To Senator Rice, the Ag spokesperson for the Greens, call me an optimist but I will never give up trying to convince you that there is a place in Australia for the native timber industry.

And it's the RFAs that will allow this shared resource to be able to be managed for the benefit of everyone.

To other Ministers in the room, members and Senators. Can I also particularly acknowledge the interest of the cross-bench here tonight, Party leaders Senators Hanson, Gichuhi, Lambie and Leyonhjelm and from the lower house, Cathy McGowan.

But partially can I once again thank Rob deFegely for your absolutely incredible support over the last two years. As the Chair of Forest Industry Advisory Council you and your team have delivered a blueprint for the forestry industry's future.

In a minute I hope you that you and all your colleagues will be rewarded for the extraordinary hard work you've done and I look forward to working with your new FIAC to deliver on whatever commitments are made tonight.

But there are so many different facets of forestry – it's a complex and it's an innovative industry.

Who would have thought that you could salvage long-lost logs from Lake Pieman in Tasmania. And these are just any old logs, they're celery top pines, they're Huon pines, they're Myrtle Beech. And that's thanks to the innovation of people like Andrew Morgan and Hydrowood.

And to Fiona Simson from the NFF, I have a little challenge for you – farm forestry. It has such huge potential. But if we have got to crack this nut I'm going to need your help.

And then there are the building products of the 21st century – both structural and appearance.

Can I acknowledge Hyne timber for their new cross laminated timber plant in Albury. In fact, there was a whole heap of important things I was going to say about appearance grade timber, but Ellen, you've already gone and said them all, but the one thing you did forget to mention was the pillars in the front foyer as you come in here, symbolise the forests of Australia.

But it will be the RFAs that enable all Australians to continue to enjoy this beautiful renewable appearance grade timber.

So it was with great pleasure that I joined the Prime Minister, the Tasmanian Premier and the Tasmanian Minister for Forestry and my Senate colleagues Jonno Duniam and David Bushby for the signing of the Tasmanian RFA renewal a couple of weeks ago.

That secured the jobs of 3600 Tasmanians who work in the local forestry industry. But don't get me wrong, we've still got some challenges.

I mean, ask Ian McDonnell from Mt Gambier in the room tonight – if extreme energy costs weren't enough - access to saw logs is the real kicker.

But probably the greatest challenge we face as an industry is investment in new plantations. And in the room tonight there are probably many people who can help us answer that question.

I don't know, David Brand, Linda Sewell – what is the trigger to stimulate confidence and investment in our forestry sector?

But we also have to convince our children that the forestry offers a career – high paying quality jobs in regional Australia.

The modern face of forest products is engineers and its biochemists – I mean, just ask the guys from Visy and Australian Paper, they're the kind of people that you're employing now.

The future of forestry is absolutely bright but the foundation of this industry is not a new phenomenon – trees have been around forever and they just keep growing.

If you were given the challenge of inventing the ultimate renewable, recyclable, carbon positive thing – I'd bet you'd invent a tree!

The future of this industry rests with everyone in this room. As the past Forestry Minister Ian Macdonald, keeps reminding me, so much has changed and yet so little.

But among so many true believers there is no greater champion for your industry than your Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.