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## THE 7:30 REPORT

# Gunns project could spell health disaster: doctors

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**Reporter: Jocelyn Nettlefold**

**The Australian Medical Association says the Tasmanian Government is risking a major public health disaster by fast-tracking assessment of a controversial pulp mill. Doctors say the project fails to meet pollution guidelines and the community will suffer. But the Lennon Government is standing firm.**

## Transcript

ALI MOORE: It's made headlines for political reasons and now it's in the spotlight for health reasons. The Australian Medical Association says the Tasmanian Government is risking a major public health disaster by fast-tracking assessment of a controversial pulp mill. Gunns wants to build the \$2 billion project in the Tamar Valley in the state's north which already struggles with poor air quality and respiratory problems. Doctors say the project fails to meet pollution guidelines and the community will suffer. But the Lennon Government is standing firm. Jocelyn Nettlefold reports.

DOCTOR: Big breath in and blow. Keep going. Keep going.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: Anne Burrows has never been a smoker, yet she's finding it increasingly hard to breathe.

DOCTOR: Still not terrific. But a lot better.

ANNE BURROWS: You get to the stage where you can't do anything. To walk from here to the front door would be an effort.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: Conditions beyond the front door in Launceston on some winter days can be life threatening to residents like Anne Burrows who suffer asthma and other lung problems. Nestled in the Tamar Valley, Launceston becomes choked by winter fog and smoke from the widespread use of wood heaters. A decade ago, the Federal Government recognised it had the worst particle pollution in Australia, and spent \$2 million trying to change home heating habits. While that's led to some improvement, doctors blame the community's high levels of respiratory disease on excessive minute particles.

DR MICHAEL AIZEN, AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION: We know that with domestic air pollution at the

moment we see between eight and 17 excess deaths a year in Launceston directly attributable to domestic wood smoke heating.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: Seeing patients with irritated airways is bread and butter for local GPs like Michael Aizen, who is also the state president of the AMA. Doctors fear that Gunns' proposed pulp mill with its 130-metre-high smokestack will add even more particles and chemicals to the air sheet.

MICHAEL AIZEN: It is almost certain that the Tamar Valley will act as a wind tunnel and actually concentrate and move air pollution into Launceston.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: Concerns about the impact of the mill on public health have intensified since Gunns quit the independent planning process, the RPDC (Resource Planning and Development Commission), and the State Government legislated to fast-track assessment to meet the company's deadline.

MICHAEL AIZEN: It is poor policy. It is poor government, and it is gambling with the health of people in Launceston.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: The \$2 billion pulp mill with its promise of 2000 jobs is touted by the Tasmanian Government as the state's economic saviour. While thousands of local residents are angry about the environmental impact of the proposed mill, others, like Anne Burrows, see it as a welcome development.

ANNE BURROWS: The economy, we need the pulp mill in Tasmania, for economic reasons, but the pollution is a worry for me.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: Premier Paul Lennon insists the government appointed consultant steering the new assessment process will apply the highest environmental standards.

PAUL LENNON, TASMANIAN PREMIER: Any fair understanding of this legislation, any proper independent, unbiased understanding of this legislation, will show that this project will be forced through a robust assessment process by this legislation. What I am trying to do is to keep this project alive.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: But Dr Aizen argues the guidelines being used are three years out of date and the mill fails to meet at least three official air pollution guidelines, on nitrogen oxides, sulphur compounds and engineering standards. It's an unsettling scenario for patient Colin Ross. He'd like to see the mill built to boost the local economy, but already suffers chronic sinus and chest problems every winter.

COLIN ROSS: I think it is a lot more complicated than the proponent and the Government makes out, and I'm not convinced that they are going to be able to give me an assurance that things are going to be OK.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: Neither Paul Lennon nor Gunns' chairman John Gay would speak to the *7.30 Report* about air quality issues. The AMA says the timber giant's assurances to the RPDC were based on inaccurate, incomplete and misleading information. The company's own consultants admit predictions were made with incomplete data. Just how much pollution is already generated from the nearby Bell Bay industrial site remains a secret.

ARON GINGIS, AUSTRALIAN MANAGEMENT CONSOLIDATED: You can see that Bell Bay industrial estate is a major source of this particulate matter of pollution.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: Engineer and environment researcher Aron Gingis uses satellite technology to track fine particulate pollution and believes that further emissions from a pulp mill would only worsen air quality in the valley.

ARON GINGIS: It will be like living at the end of an exhaust pipe. The annual jump in cardiovascular respiratory disease and cancers in Launceston will increase, I believe, at least by hundreds, if not

thousands.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: What alarms health authorities like Professor of Medicine at Sydney University Ray Kearney is that there is no consideration of the potential impacts of ultra fine particulates known as PM 2.5.

ASSOC PROF RAY KEARNEY, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY: When inhaled can travel all the way down into the gas exchange units, dissolve and offload their irritants and, in some cases, their cancer causing cargo.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: While Gunns' own toxicology consultant found mill emissions are very unlikely to cause direct health effects, he acknowledged the emerging information about the impact of these ultra fine particles, noting that "ideally, it would be useful to formally address the risks of PM 2.5 particulates". Angered by what he described as a lack of due process, one of the Government's own MPs, Terry Martin, crossed the floor and risked expulsion from the Labor Party to vote against the new approvals legislation.

TERRY MARTIN, LABOR BACKBENCHER: The fact is that public perception is there is something not right, it is something shonky.

MICHAEL AIZEN: If a major development is going to go ahead, amongst other things the potential for adverse health outcomes has to be taken into account. The highest standard of scientific evidence has to be used to guide the construction of the mill.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: While Anne Burrows remains a supporter of the mill proposal, she's worried that it may jeopardise her fragile health.

JOCELYN NETTLEFOLD: The Premier has promised the highest environmental emissions standards. Do you believe him?

ANNE BURROWS: I would like to believe him. We've got no other option at the moment, but is there any guarantee that we are going to get those controls? I do have a great concern for the atmosphere and what us and our grandchildren and your children, too, are going to breathe.

*NB: This transcript has been edited for accuracy.*

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