

Disbelief as CSIRO Boss Backtracks

Last month's report in *Australasian Science* (p.13) on CSIRO's intent to privatise "ensis", its joint forestry venture with a New Zealand government-owned company, has raised hackles among CSIRO staff.

According to CSIRO's Staff Association President, Dr Michael Borgas: "The Association was taken aback by your reports on the interview with Dr Geoff Garrett [Chief Executive]... We have been following the 'ensis' joint venture even though we haven't been consulted about it at any stage. Staff have been given assurances that there were no plans to privatise ensis and adopted a wait and see approach. We met with Dr Rick Ede, the Chief of Forestry & Forest Products when he was acting director of 'ensis', and were told unequivocally that ensis wouldn't be privatised."

Following a Staff Association letter, Garrett emailed a "mea culpa" to CSIRO staff in "ensis" on 4 August. Quoting

selectively from his interview with *Australasian Science* (August 2005, pp.13, 39-42) Garrett admitted: "I was inaccurate in my use of language and I must apologise for any concern this may have caused. What I should have said was that 'ensis is an unincorporated joint venture and there are no plans to form a company' ... the joint venture agreement has another two years to run in its initial term, with both parent organisations reviewing it at that stage. Possible restructuring of the agreement can take place then, and incorporation and company formation is just one of a number of options for any joint venture."

Yet, the recording of the interview shows Garrett speaking directly and unambiguously in interlocking ways that a company was planned.

GG: It's an established a joint venture.

AS: As a company? **GG:** It will be a company in due course. **AS:** So, CSIRO will hold shares in the company?

GG: We will hold shares in a company. That's correct. **AS:** Equally with the New Zealand outfit? **GG:** That's correct. We have got a Board structure. [Later] My view is that earnings should be re-invested to grow the business, but as an owner of that business.

Dr Borgas reacted: "Our understanding from members from the former Division is that they don't believe the retraction but are feeling that it is all out of their power or control. There are mixed feelings among members and from site to site around the Division. But members are pretty tired of being kept in the dark on these important matters.

"They are not speaking about the situation openly though, which says a lot about the climate in which they are working. Too many decisions are being made on the fly, without staff understanding what is going on. There have been two rounds of job cuts so far this year from the Division and we have big concerns about the talent and capability that is being lost."

Peter Pockley

Australasian Science Prize 2005

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