

Future of our forests – Regional Forest Agreements Submission

Firstly, I have to say that the above statement is a contradiction in terms.

In my opinion there is no future for our forests if we continue down the path of Regional Forest Agreements that enable our public forests to be logged without scrutiny or accountability, and sold off for woodchip, further exacerbating the extinction crisis we have in this State and Country.

Propping up industries that are causing the destruction of our environment and the extinction of unique species to keep a few jobs is vandalism. Whether that be in our public forests or in the support of fossil fuels. We need vision and leadership from our elected members that is in keeping with community attitudes. Leadership that can work in partnership with business and community to create an economy based on ethical investment and shared responsibility.

More work and attention needs to go into supporting industries to be self-sustaining. The legacy of former Premier Geoff Kennett's 1996 legislation to provide timber from public forests pro bono to support the Australian Paper Mills until 2035, is costing our planet and our hip pocket dearly, and creating a false sense of entitlement to an industry that needs to invest in the resources that it wants to harvest.

I have lived in the Otway Ranges for more than 27 years and am lucky enough to call it home. I have chosen this place because of its natural beauty, its biodiversity, and consider myself not so much as a land owner, but a guardian of this precious place and country.

I have seen first-hand the devastation of clearfell logging for woodchip on the biodiversity of native flora and fauna across our catchments. I have seen continuous breaching of the *Code of Practice* by workers in the logging industry in every logging coupe I have visited. (20) These were never policed or held to account through the Regional Forest Agreement, an in effect self-regulatory industry model. I have also experienced personal threats and vandalism to my property carried out by vested logging interests against local residents standing up for the protection of their "local parks".

I have read with horror, but unfortunately not surprise, a report commissioned by the Surfcoast Shire in 2011 on the *Impact of Fuel Reduction Burns on Native Wildlife and Habitat*, and know that the department does little to support injured wildlife in these or others burns following clearfelling of logging coupes.

No wonder community and visitors from across the country and world, who visit our precious forests to explore the biodiversity and life within them, have lobbied governments for decades to have it stopped.

A sustainable forestry industry needs to be developed integrating trees into existing agricultural land for multiple benefits including the end product of high quality sustainable timber. This is ably demonstrated by the Otway Agroforestry Network that has more 300 members. Refer to www.oan.org.au

If the subsidies spent on the current forestry industry and RFA review were redirected towards the above model, an independent and sustainable forest industry would develop very quickly. The knowledge and expertise is already in place and operating on the ground. More financial support would increase the number of farmers and landholders adopting agroforestry across the State.

“The Victorian Government has allocated \$35.9 million over four years to fuel the frenzy of forest consultation. It seems clear that at this stage removing the controversial exemption of the forest industry from national environmental protection laws (the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*), or the *Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act 1996*, which drives the logging for pulp in the Central Highlands, are not yet on the table. It also seems like a lot of our taxpayers’ dollars to prop up an industry which continues to decline.

The danger is all we end up doing is polishing something that just continues to drive ecological decline.” Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA)

Zombie western forests agreements

The WESTERN RFA ceased to have viability once the former Labour Premier, Steve Bracks, declared the Otways a National Park in 2008 and committed to cancelling the Western Regional Forest Agreement as part of his election landslide.

The Victorian Government should cancel it, or stake it: whatever you need to do to stop zombies coming back to life.

The Western Regional Forest Agreement (RFA): largely state-funded, ecologically damaging and obsolete.

The state government funded logging agency VicForests has proposed commercial logging of around 50–60 of forests and woodlands in the west of Victoria. They want

logging of some shape or form in almost 40,000 hectares of what are the most cleared landscapes in the state.

This will be ecologically damaging; financially insignificant (some would say reckless); and does not justify some sort of special treatment under an RFA – especially an exemption from national environmental protection laws

Financially reckless

According to the 2017—2018 VicForests *Annual Report*:

Total revenue from Western Forests in 2017—2018 was \$700,000 (yes, less than \$1 million).

State funding to VicForests managed western “Community Forestry” in 2017-2018 was \$678,000 (yes, that’s a surplus of \$22,000 per annum).

Total volume of timber generated was 21,000 cubic metres, or 1.5 per cent of total state production.

Ecological damaging

Based on our 2017 analysis of proposed logging (*Western Forests and Woodlands at risk*):

- Across western Victorian forests, 70 per cent of the area targeted for logging contains native vegetation types that are either endangered (19 per cent) vulnerable (11 per cent) or depleted (40 per cent).
- In the Horsham Forest Management Area, 54 per cent of the vegetation proposed for logging is endangered.
- More than 20 threatened native animals and 14 threatened native plants were found in or closely adjacent to a third of all proposed logging areas.

Better uses

There is an active Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) investigation in the central west, looking at the future of Wombat, Pyrenees, Wellsford and Mount Cole state forests to fill well-recognised gaps in the representativeness of Victoria’s reserve system.

VEAC has also recommended on two occasions that there are significant gaps in the reserve system in the south-west (between the Grampians and the South Australian border).

Many of these are popular recreation areas, such as the famous Beeripmo Walk.

Obsolete regulatory relic

- In 2010 the *Independent Review on Progress with Implementation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements Final Report* recommended that the Western RFA be cancelled.
- Large parts of the west, such as mid-Murray red gum forests (e.g. parts of Gunbower), aren't even covered by the existing RFA, but still get treated the same.

The Victorian Government should cancel the Western Regional Forest Agreement, or stake it: whatever you need to do to stop zombies coming back to life.

And use existing resources to develop an ethical and sustainable forestry industry, for example, integrating trees into existing agricultural land for multiple benefits including the end product of high quality sustainable timber.

Refer to www.oan.org.au

Written and submitted by:

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