



28 June 2019

To Whom It May Concern

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Modernisation of Victoria's Regional Forest Agreements and Forest Management System

Thank you for the opportunity to make comment on the current review of the Victorian RFAs. We acknowledge that this is a comprehensive and complex process to attempt to achieve a balance of outcomes taking into consideration environmental, economic and social considerations that reflect current thinking and practice.

Who are we and what is our purpose?

ATHRA (The Australian Trail Horse Riders Association) was formed in 1972 for people who enjoy horses, our heritage, the outdoors and camaraderie, all encompassed within a non-competitive leisure horse environment.

The association has grown significantly over the years and is recognised by Government at all levels and the Equine Industry as Australia's Premier Representative Body for Trail Horse Riders.

ATHRA has a national structure that supports the needs of clubs and members in all states and territories. Being part of a national body means that its members have the ability to ride anywhere that permits horse access and with any affiliated club Australia wide. This effectively opens up the whole of Australia to members, so that wherever they travel with their horse, they are sure to be welcomed by the local club.

As such our members ride throughout Victoria in all regions covered by the RFAs.

Environmental care and responsibility

ATHRA takes its responsibility for sustainable environmental use very seriously and has been proactive in developing a Code of Conduct for its members which includes 16 'Environmental Rules' to minimize potential impacts on the natural areas they access. Both clubs and individual members are expected to plan, host and conduct horse trail rides in a safe and environmentally responsible manner as key priorities. ATHRA encourages members to respect all natural environments and to follow the requirements of the relevant land managers whether on public or private land.

Respectful access for all

ATHRA encourages consultation and collaboration with all road/track and trail users, other forest users and land managers for the mutual benefit of everyone. We believe in and practice engendering respect, courtesy, consideration and goodwill towards others while out enjoying our respective pursuits.

We also strive to preserve all horse riders' opportunities for reasonable access to public lands (whether members or not) to ensure they are not disregarded and/or disadvantaged by other trail user groups and/or in public land management and resource planning.

All ATHRA Members carry 24/7 Public Liability Insurance through their membership of the organisation, which is very reassuring for both private land owners and public land managers where horse riders are accessing.

Personally, I have worked for over 30 years to preserve and protect some of Greater Melbourne's most intact Green Wedge areas in the North East and am a contributing member of a significant bushland reserve management committee in my shire. I have significant knowledge of and deeply value the natural environment and biodiversity in my region and Victoria generally. I have also spent several decades planning, implementing and managing sustainable shared trails in various regions of Victoria.

Key issues to be addressed

We acknowledge the vital importance of forests for their biodiversity values, preservation of threatened species, the maintenance of ecosystems, addressing climate change mitigation and the maintenance of water catchments.

However, we are pleased that for the first time, the Victorian RFAs will recognise ALL forest values, not just for conservation of forest biodiversity and timber production. This is a significant and progressive step in the right direction and supports the contemporary understanding that healthy forests have intrinsic value.

As a participant in the two workshops held for Commercial and Recreational User Groups in October last year and just this week, it is clear that for all the organisations that attended, the **key issues for Recreational User Groups are:**

- ongoing access with increased certainty
- greater access not less access
- meaningful, inclusive and ongoing face to face consultation with user groups
- transparent dialogue between user groups and agencies and well communicated outcomes
- that recreational user groups feel squeezed between all the regulatory layers for environmental 'protection'
- land management decisions that affect access must have a substantiated basis in science – rigorous, evidence based decision making that has logic, is accountable and consistent
- the recognition of the social and community values of forests
- the desire to preserve forest areas for everyone's future enjoyment
- that authorities and agencies need to acknowledge the experience and capable knowledge of recreational users who are 'on the ground' and our capacity for useful input versus 'desktop decision making'
- the importance of ongoing education of recreational users of forests – guidelines and best practice - to assist compliance

- Better recognition, valuing and 'accounting' of forests for recreation, health and wellbeing, regional visitation and nature based tourism
- Recognise the existing benefits to local and regional communities of recreational forest users and encourage opportunities to expand these
- mutual benefits for all rather than the exclusion of users
- regulations and protocols that help recreational user groups to succeed, not fail in trying to balance their use with preservation and conservation of natural areas
- help us be part of the solution, not the problem

Why support people's access to our forests?

Forests and natural environments (usually public land) are integral to community vitality and the health and wellbeing of Victoria's residents. With recent findings that 66% of Australian adults and 25% of Australian children are overweight or obese, any decision that either significantly reduces access or locks out recreational user groups from forests entirely, would be a detrimental step and will have significant implications on the public purse in health care. Forests are critical for public recreation and the sustainability of the local and regional towns, their residents and visitors from Greater Melbourne and beyond.

In simple terms, forests have significant social capital.

From my experience, there is a correlation between the amount of time young people spend in nature and the strength of their conservation ethic later in life. For kids to enjoy the outdoors by having the opportunity to ride and camp with their horses in our state forests, reserves, conservation parks and national parks, this builds a genuine love of the natural world and often nurtures the desire to see it preserved and protected as they grow older. **The youth of today are our environmental custodians and caretakers of tomorrow.** As Professor Catherine Pickering from the Environment Futures Research Institute at Griffith University comments, *'If we don't have kids experience nature, in 20 years we're not going to have a generation of people supporting conservation. As an environmental scientist, I'm pretty keen on us continuing to support nature.'*

Nature based visitation/tourism and the visitor economy – increasingly, residents of Greater Melbourne and visitors from other regions of Victoria, interstate and overseas want to ***experience, enjoy and immerse themselves in outstanding natural environments like forests***. Whilst visiting, they spend money in local and regional townships and in a myriad of small and large businesses. The social and economic impacts of removing and/or constricting the access of recreational users would have huge impacts on the visitation and therefore the regional economy of Victoria, including employment.

We acknowledge the current attempt to quantify the \$ value to local and regional economies and communities versus the contribution of the native forest timber industry. Recreation and nature based visitation is beginning to be identified as a major contributor versus resource extraction i.e. timber harvesting historically.

While protection of our valuable natural areas and biodiversity are important, ongoing and expanded access to shared tracks, trails and camping in forest areas by recreational users is also vital. The current process should ultimately be about achieving a balance that does not lose sight of community, connectivity to natural places, health, visitation and enjoyment of that environment, and the livability of our rural towns.

Horse riding is a compatible / complimentary recreation in our Victorian forests and an important pursuit in the country communities of all Victorian regions.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you wish to discuss this submission or any other matter relating to ATHRA.

Yours sincerely,

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Australian Trail Horse Riders Association

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