



5 July 2019

Modernising the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs)

Submission from the Towong Plantations Committee.

The Towong Plantations Committee is a community based committee formed 20 years ago in Towong Shire in North East Victoria. It has membership from Landcare, the North East Blackberry Action Group, local plantation managers, wood processors and Towong Shire Council.

One of the objectives of the committee is to foster communication between farmers, plantation managers and community to better understand the challenges of managing land for diverse productive uses including plantation and agricultural enterprises. These land uses can cause tension between each other and the community and if not sustainably established and managed can have long term, adverse impacts on the catchments in which they are located, especially on water quality. Towong Shire is a designated potable water Catchment in the environs of Lake Hume in North East Victoria.

The Plantations Committee is focused on encouraging good land management practices by all land managers and has a special interest in sustainable timber production, from plantations or public native forest, to supply the domestic market.

Members of the Plantations Committee also work with farmers and other private land managers in their community roles as residents, community group members and employers to encourage and support sustainable land management practices through education and training programs.

The first Government plantations were established at Shelley in Towong Shire in 1962. The method of establishment gave little consideration to impacts on the environment and to the effects of large scale clearing of native forest. Over time, and with the introduction of the Code of Forest Practice for Timber Production (1989) and the inclusion of private land forests (1993) there is a greater awareness and appreciation by forest managers of the need to manage forests within sound ecological limits. This has led to greater acceptance locally of the role played by the timber industry, in particular, in providing jobs, producing timber products from a renewable resource and managing land to its capability.

Theme 2. The long term stability of forests and forest industries.

2.2 Support the development of a forest dependent industry.

1. How could the RFAs better address industry sustainability.
2. How could the RFAs encourage investment and new market opportunities for forest based industries (including the forest and wood products industry tourism, apiary and emerging markets such as carbon)

The area of plantation forestry in Towong Shire has decreased substantially in recent years with the final harvest of small private plantations, established through various Government incentive schemes more than 25 years ago. In the last 5 years 149.4 ha has been transitioned to other land uses. Another major plantation owner has 1560 ha which have not yet been replanted.

The reasons for land use change and no new plantation establishment are complex. The Plantations Committee understands, from its own research, that this is due to the high cost of land, the high transaction costs (including planning) involved in establishing a plantation and the relatively poor returns available for the risks involved.

In general a problem with Victorian Planning Schemes appears to be that while the rural planning zones (FZ, RAZ,RLZ) are supposedly 'as of right' they rarely are, in reality. Overlays (ESO, SLO, BMO) and the Guidelines for Removal, Destruction or Lopping of Native Vegetation are perceived to be extremely complex and are applied differently to Forestry and Grazing.

As a consequence, when buying a grazing property in Victoria for plantation development there is no way of knowing what area is available for planting until after purchase and working through the lengthy planning process which can take several years. These arrangements are not conducive to investment in plantation forestry and seem to be an active deterrent to establishment of new plantations.

By way of contrast, in New South Wales there is no planning risk because the Plantation Reafforestation Act gives true 'as of right' and certainty, before land is purchased, as to how much land is available to be planted. The NSW Department of Primary Industry do the assessment (at the prospective buyer's cost) and within a reasonable timeframe.

In order to address industry sustainability a review of Victorian arrangements could be undertaken with the objective of facilitating plantation establishment in a timely way. Reducing uncertainty is critical and by examining the process in New South Wales an assessment could be made of the advantages or otherwise of a streamlined approach. The same protections provided by the overlays would remain in place if the NSW model was adopted.

The Committee has also heard from the operators of the hardwood sawmill in Corryong that certainty is also an issue for them regarding the renewal of their TRP not being advised in a

timely way. Their business employs 24 people in a small town and processes low grade logs into pallets. The resource they use is carted 400km and their product supplies an ongoing demand.

While the issues around native forest harvesting are complex, we raise this as an example of a business which invests heavily in its own sustainability, processes low grade logs and is a large employer in a small town. If industry sustainability is to be a prime consideration of the RFA renewal there may have to be a different formula for deciding timber allocations.

Encouraging investment in new market opportunities eg tourism, depends on sustainable management of the forests. The condition of forests in the Upper Murray, which we are familiar with, and forests in other parts of Victoria, which we have feedback on, has deteriorated considerably in the 20 years since the first RFA. This is despite an objective of the RFA to improve ecological sustainability and monitor the results every 5 years. This has been an inadequate process.

We hear regularly from fishers, hunters, bushwalkers and other forest users about the increasing area and density of blackberry infestations which limit access to streams and tracks and engulf plant communities.

Research into a viable and community acceptable biocontrol for blackberry is an urgent task which should be supported by both State and Federal Governments. The public land estate which has severe constraints on methods of weed control due to steep terrain, would benefit by an effective biocontrol. The research into septocya ruborum (purple blotch disease) which is active in shady areas, was halted in 2012 before a definitive point was reached. It can be started again at any time with a commitment of Government investment and could be included in the reformed RFA.

Wild deer are destroying vegetation, inhibiting seeding as they browse, eliminating their preferred species, for example, gynatrix pulchella, locally, and ruining soaks and swampy areas. There is little investment in maintaining healthy forests and Parks and unless the RFA process can address the fundamental issues affecting the forest environment the opportunities or desire for passive recreation or tourism will diminish in all but the most accessible and well resourced Parks and public areas close to Melbourne.

On the other hand 4 wheel drives continue to spread weed seed and pathogens throughout the forest and are a major biosecurity risk. Some of the 4 wheel drive clubs are a valuable asset, maintaining mountain huts and repairing tracks and have an interest in long term sustainability of the forest. They could have a greater role in education programs on how to use the forest with minimal impact and would have to be suitably resourced to do so.

A focus on delivery of education and information by responsible forest users such as the High Country Huts Group, the Australian Deer Association, Bushwalking Clubs and others who are all volunteer organisations would engage those who benefit the most in the stewardship of public land. They could be contracted to provide education and other services including supervised

weed control programs and maintaining access. Policies which are risk averse are stifling involvement by those who have the most to offer and a review of this approach could be undertaken.

Education about the role of sustainable timber in everyday living and highlighting the products which are produced and what they are used for is important so people understand what a renewable resource is. A major education focus on both public land forest and plantations is critical to maintain the social licence by increasing understanding of sustainable forest produce and products and to counter messages to the contrary.

New thinking on how forests are used could introduce other industries not currently permitted to operate. Commercial harvesting of wild deer could be established as a forest industry in all public land with appropriate safeguards. This industry, currently operating on private land in Victoria, removes large numbers of deer, provides jobs and supports business with the certainty that they won't exhaust the resource and are able to seek export markets with confidence.