

The Institute of Foresters of Australia

ABN 48 083 197 586



15 March 2010

Ms Leanne Wallace
RFA Review – Submission
Department of Sustainability and Environment
PO Box 500
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Victoria's Regional Forest Agreements - 10 year Review

Dear Ms Wallace,

The Institute of Foresters of Australia is a professional body with over 1350 members engaged in all branches of forest management and conservation in Australia. The Institute is strongly committed to the principles of sustainable forest management and the processes and practices which translate these principles into outcomes.

The membership represents all segments of the forestry profession, including public and private practitioners engaged in many aspects of forestry, nature conservation, resource and land management, research, administration and education.

The RFA process was a milestone in the social, economic and environmental assessment of forests and their usage and subsequent design of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve system. The IFA has supported this process from its inception and refer to it in a number of our policy statements.

We are disappointed to not see the first 5 years review undertaken but are pleased the 10 year review is now being completed. While the Scoping Agreement provides that the five Victorian RFAs will be reviewed simultaneously, and that the review will cover two periods, this is not within the spirit or intention of the RFA process. Political decisions at the time of elections have also meant many commitments within the RFAs have been broken and this is reflected in our comments

Yours sincerely,

Michael Ryan
Chair IFA Victorian Division

Regional Forest Agreements – 10-Year Review

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There was a decline in the availability of timber resources over Periods 1 and 2. This decline resulted from:

- a review of timber resource availability in 2001 which determined that harvesting levels at that time were above that which could be sustained in the long term
- landscape scale fires in 2003, 2006-07 and 2009 which burnt over 2 million hectares of eastern Victoria, significantly impacting the availability of timber resources into the future, and
- the phase out of timber harvesting in the Otway State Forest. Victoria recognised the objectives of the West Victoria RFA could be best met through a transition from the native forest timber industry in the region, to a plantation-based timber industry. The conversion of the Otway State Forest to the Great Otway National Park and Forest Park significantly reduced the availability of native forest timber resources in the West Victoria RFA region. The Victorian Government supported the industry and affected communities during this transition.

Comments:

Second dot point: The area of public lands burnt by wildfire in 2003, 2006-07, and 2009 was greater than 2.7 million hectares.

Third dot point: It is wrong to claim that Victoria “recognised the objectives of the West Victoria RFA could be best met through a transition from the native forest timber industry in the region to a plantation-based timber industry.” Nevertheless, it is true that the Labor Government made this false claim when announcing the closure of the Otways hardwood sawmilling industry during the 2002 election campaign.

For this to have been the case there would have had to have been a genuine transition from harvesting hardwood sawlogs from State Forest to harvesting sawlogs from a developing hardwood plantation estate. However, the hardwood plantations in the region were being grown (and continue to be) largely for harvest at 12-15-years for pulpwood. There is a small scale farm forestry industry but this is also very much in its infancy. As there was (and is) no sufficient developing hardwood sawlog plantation estate, the government’s decision to end State Forest harvesting in the Otways has led directly to the closure of the region’s main hardwood timber mills with an estimated loss of over 100-jobs.

Further points: Several other political decisions have reduced the availability of Victorian native hardwood timber resources in recent years. These include:

- the decision to exclude timber harvesting in the Goolengook Forest Block in East Gippsland which was announced during the 2006 state election campaign, despite the area being subject to a partially-completed VEAC investigation at the time;
- the decision to trial Community Forest Management in the Wombat State Forest announced during the 2002 state election campaign. Ultimately, this trial led to the slow strangulation and eventual closure of the region’s hardwood sawmilling industry, although one tiny mill reportedly survives on some private land sawlogs.

- The decision to exclude timber harvesting from the Cobbobonee State Forest near Portland and turn it into a conservation reserve. This included a buy-back of sawlog licences from local sawmill/s.

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In addition to funding initiatives to support the timber industry, Victoria invested in a variety of tourism and recreation initiatives in each of the RFA regions during Periods 1 and 2. In 2008 (Period 2), Victoria released the *Nature-Based Tourism Strategy 2008-2012* (Tourism Victoria 2008) which provides direction to guide the sustainable and prosperous growth of Victoria's nature-based tourism industry.

Comments:

While, the Institute of Foresters of Australia is supportive of genuine tourism ventures and a nature-based tourism industry, we believe this should complement rather than replace existing rural industries.

We are highly sceptical of oft-aided claims that eco-tourism can replace regional employment lost by closing timber industries, and would like to see the reporting of tourism figures in the RFA regions in order to demonstrate the measurable socio-economic impact of changes to public forest tenure away from multiple use State forest to National parks and/or other conservation reserves.

It should be noted that the Otway Fly Treetop Walk, which is often referred to as one of the new tourism ventures in the Otway's region, is situated on private land which is largely comprised of 1983 and 1939 logging regrowth. This venture has therefore operated quite independently of public land tenure and has not tangibly benefitted from the conversion of the Otways State Forest to National Park. Indeed, it has reportedly had three owners since the Government first announced its plan to create the Great Otway National Park during the 2002 election campaign.

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Obligation

The Parties:

- (a) acknowledge that this Agreement is expected to provide 77 900 m³ per annum of D+ sawlogs from the West Victoria region comprising:
- (i) the Midlands FMA (40 000 m³ per annum subject to Clause 00),
 - (ii) the Otway FMA (27 000 m³ per annum),
 - (iii) the Portland FMA (10 000 m³ per annum) and
 - (iv) the Horsham FMA (900 m³ per annum)
- but recognise that timber supply levels in Victoria are subject to change based on periodic review of Sustainable Yield and that Sustainable Yield estimates are based on the full extent of FMAs

These ongoing commitments were met during Periods 1 and 2 notwithstanding additions to the national parks and conservation reserve system in the West Victoria RFA region (see clause number W- 69 in Section 5.11). Regenerated activities were conducted in those areas, but not for the purpose of future timber production.

Comments:

It is outrageous that it can be claimed that these commitments were met when they were clearly not met due to the effective cessation of timber harvesting within the Midlands Forest Management Area from 2001 to 2005, and the phased reduction and eventual closure of timber harvesting within the Otway's FMA from 2002 to 2008.

A review of sawlog licence levels should have been done as part of the RFA process in the first place. The concept of a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserve system created an urgent imperative to carefully review reserve design. However, instead of this, political announcements were simply made during election campaigns and this has been the basis of the recent expansion of the reserve network.

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Harvested stands that do not meet the required standards following the first regeneration treatment must be re-treated until that standard is achieved. *Monitoring Annual Harvesting Performance in Victoria's State forests 2006-07* (DSE 2008b) reported that:

- 4 690 hectares of forest is known to require re-treatment to achieve successful post-harvest regeneration. A further 2 501 hectares is predicted to require re-treatment to achieve successful regeneration, making a total estimated area requiring re-treatment of 7 191 ha, and
- an additional 19 000 hectares of forest is estimated to be overdue for regeneration surveys, with 63% of this area occurring in the East Gippsland FMA.

Comments:

The Institute of Foresters of Australia believes that addressing the backlog of poorly regenerated areas should be a high priority for the Victorian government. We are concerned that it no longer is. We also support the Monitoring and Harvesting Performance Reports noting that they must be reported in a timely manner and that they are currently behind schedule.

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1. *The Government will:*
 - *Undertake hydrological studies on the impact of logging on water yield of catchments in State forests supplying water to Melbourne;*
 - *Develop options aimed at improving the water yield, including potential changes to management practices and phasing out logging in these areas;*
 - *Assess the feasibility of establishing plantations outside State forests to offset any reductions in timber availability. This will be informed by the results of modelling and mapping work on high, medium and low hydrologic impact zones for plantations; and*
 - *Investigate the economic, social and environmental benefits and costs of these options.*
2. *Once they have been completed the Government will report on the findings of these studies and begin consultation with the timber industry, the community and other stakeholders to develop a long term plan that will improve water yield outcomes for Melbourne's catchments, while continuing to meet timber supply commitments.*

DSE undertook a Harvesting in Catchments project to implement the commitments set out in Action 2.21. Victoria completed the studies required as part of the project in 2008 which included a water quality review, hydrological studies and a timber substitution study. These studies provided the basis for the development of management options and an assessment of the relative impacts of various options on water yield and timber supply, within Melbourne's catchments. The studies are available on the *Our Water, Our Future* website (www.ourwater.vic.gov.au).

A sustainability assessment which investigated the economic, social and environmental costs and benefits of the various management options identified was completed in late 2008. The Victorian Government will consider its release once there is a better understanding of the impacts of the February and March

Comments:

The IFA believes that work done to date and made publicly available in response to the *Our Water Our Future* White Paper has overall been excellent. It has been comprehensive, peer-reviewed and balanced and has made genuine science available to the public on this important issue. The scientific teams involved in this work should be commended.

The importance of fire was well recognised in these reports and the projected consequences of catastrophic fire have been borne out with the severe impacts of the February 2009 wildfires on a number of Melbourne's water supply catchments.

The Institute of Foresters of Australia supports the genuine use of science and balanced risk assessment in the management of natural resources. We also support the exploration of active management techniques in regrowth forests for both water and other values. We believe some further active management in water catchments will be required once large areas of fire regrowth begins substantially impacting on water supply into catchments.

P. 60, 61 Research

The commitment for public availability of government funded research, where possible, is supported. The IFA also supports the publishing of scientific research in peer reviewed journals such as the Australian Forestry Journal. This demonstrates Victoria's commitment to peer reviewed science and publication of such science.

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