



Victoria's Forests

November 2023

Forests provide all Victorians with multiple benefits and are important to the cultural, social, environmental and economic fabric of Victoria. The following statistics are drawn from Victoria's State of the Forests Report (Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability 2018) and Australia's State of the Forests Report (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry 2018). This information is provided to inform Forestry Australia members and others about the current situation for Victoria's forests when engaging in discussion with colleagues, family or friends.

Native forests cover 7.8 million hectares - almost 35% of Victoria's land area, including:

- 3.51 million hectares (45%) in National Parks and other conservation reserves
- 3.16 million hectares (41%) in multiple-use State Forest, which are managed for conservation, recreation, cultural heritage, forest products, and other social and economic values. In 2022/23, approximately 0.38 million hectares of multiple-use state forests was designated as potentially suitable and available for commercial timber harvesting. That was around 12% of State Forests, and <5% of total native forests in Victoria; with actual annual harvest areas representing a much smaller proportion of these designations. However, these designations will change with the State Government's policy decision to cease timber harvesting in public native forests from 1 January 2024.
- 1.03 million hectares (13%) is privately-owned.

Forest plantations cover 0.42 million hectares and consist of mainly two species, Radiata Pine (softwood, 50%) and Southern Blue Gum (hardwood, 50%).

Criteria and Indicators of sustainable forest management are assessed by the Government and reported in Victoria's *State of the Forests* report, which provides authoritative guidance on key indicators of the condition of Victoria's forest types. Trends for indicators with good or fair quality data are set out below:

Stable or improving trends:

- ✓ Area of forest by type, tenure and growth stage and area of forest in protected areas
- ✓ Volume of wood by forest type in State Forest available and suitable for timber production
- ✓ Proportion of harvested area successfully regenerated
- ✓ Area of planned burns

Forestry Australia ABN 48 083 197 586

A PO Box 2585, North Ringwood VIC 3134

T +61 3 7065 4250

E admin@forestry.org.au

W www.forestry.org.au

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- ✓ Area systematically assessed for risk to soil attributes
- ✓ Contribution of forest ecosystems to the global greenhouse gas balance
- ✓ Reuse and recycling of wood products
- ✓ Indigenous people's access and rights recognised
- ✓ Legal framework for conservation and sustainable management of forests.

Negative trends:

- X Forest dependent species at risk of not maintaining viable breeding populations – due to a range of factors, including climate change, fire, feral animals and weeds. Timber harvesting has a small and uncertain impact on some wildlife species, with risks to species managed through a comprehensive and representative reserve system and harvesting prescriptions.
- X Degree of disturbance caused by invasive species, i.e. feral animals and weeds - due to increasing populations of these species
- X Production and value of wood from State Forests – due to increased areas protected for other values
- X Area of forest available and suitable for wood production – also due to increased protected areas
- X Scale and impact of bushfire affected area – due to increased extent of intense fire over the last two decades
- X Change in catchment water yield through time – due to increased fire impacts
- X Direct and indirect employment in the forest sector – due to reduced timber volumes and increased automation
- X Resilience of forest-dependent human communities (incl. Indigenous communities) – due to reduced timber supply to forest industries and increased areas of parks, with fewer workers in the forests.

In addition, there are some indicators in the *State of the Forests* reporting for which the data quality is current poor and/or the status is unknown. These indicators comprise:

Data quality poor and/or status unknown

- ? Fragmentation of native forests
- ? Representative indicator species from a range of habitats
- ? Forest dependent species at risk from isolation that may lead to loss of genetic variation
- ? Production of non-wood forest products
- ? Scale and impact of agents and processes affecting forest health and vitality
- ? Area affected by grazing
- ? Change in river health characteristics
- ? Area and quality of forest actively utilised for recreation and tourism.



Timber harvest volumes in Victoria, 2002-03 to 2020-21

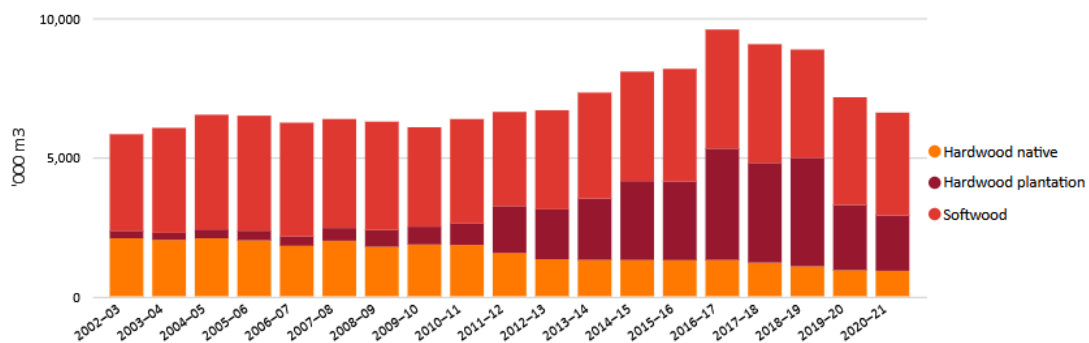


Figure 1. Victoria's timber harvest since 2002 (ABARES 2022).

Each year over the last 10 years an average of 7.8 million cubic metres of wood have been harvested from Victoria's forests. This includes:

- 3.9 million cubic metres from longer rotation softwood plantations for construction, panels and paper.
- 2.7 million cubic metres from hardwood plantations (mostly in western Victoria) and exported as woodchips.
- 1.2 million cubic metres per year (15%) from native forests. This wood is used to produce furniture, joinery and flooring, with lower grade logs used for pallets and local paper production.

Hardwood plantation volume supply peaked between 2016 and 2019 but has declined recently to about 2 million cubic metres. Some of these harvested plantations have been converted back to agriculture.

Management and Regulation of Timber Harvesting

The government agency VicForests is responsible for the sustainable harvest, commercial sale of timber and regeneration of this area. Prior to the recent legal challenges impacting timber harvesting activity in Victoria's State Forests, about 3,000 ha of multiple use State Forests were harvested each year to produce in the order of 1.2 million cubic metres of wood.

Timber harvesting in Victoria's forests is highly regulated in line with ecologically sustainable forest management standards and strict environmental controls. The Office of the Conservation Regulator was established by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) (now the Department of Energy,

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Environment and Climate Action (DEECA)) as an environmental regulator responsible for enforcing standards, such as the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014, and conducting audits on harvesting operations and activities, including those of VicForests (State Government of Victoria 2023).

Professional foresters and ecologists plan operations and undertake flora and fauna assessments before harvest. Sensitive environments, such as areas beside rivers and streams, rainforests and habitat for endangered flora and fauna are identified and protected within the designated harvest area. Action Statements for threatened species specify other constraints. Mapped Old Growth Forest is protected, but some old and large trees are harvested when they are mixed with regrowth and can't be retained in the harvested area.

All harvested native forests are regenerated through natural regeneration, by leaving trees with seed, direct seeding or planting. Small areas fail to regenerate due to climatic factors or animal browsing. Every effort is made to ensure these are restored to forest in the long term.

In addition, all timber harvesting on public land is certified under the Responsible Wood Standard, which is recognised under the international Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). Plantation forest managers and owners are certified under Responsible Wood, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), or both schemes.

However, the adequacy of government regulations and their application have recently been challenged in the Federal Court and Supreme Court. The outcomes of these cases resulted in directives for changes in timber harvesting practices, and a Supreme Court judgement that the existing pre-harvest planning and survey works did not adequately protect endangered or threatened species, most notably the Greater Glider. Following these litigation outcomes, in May 2023, the Victorian Government announced its policy decision to cease timber harvesting in public native forests by 1 January 2024, citing reasons that included the uncertainty for the timber industry caused by ongoing court and litigation processes and increasingly severe bushfires (Victoria State Government, 2023).

In respect to the future management of State forests, the State government also announced it would establish an advisory panel to consider and make recommendations to Government on the areas of State forests that may qualify for protection as National Parks, the areas of forests that would be suitable for recreation opportunities - including camping, hunting, hiking, mountain biking and four-wheel driving - and opportunities for management of public land by Traditional Owners (Victoria State Government, 2023). Forestry Australia will be engaged in these further considerations with the aim of ensuring that Victoria's forests are actively managed to be healthy and resilient and capable of sustaining a broad range of ecosystem services and benefits.

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References and Further Reading

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