Regional Forest Agreements Reference Group
Summary Report

The Reference Group has been appointed to enable representatives of key organisations representing diverse community interests to work together to provide advice on potential changes to the Victorian RFAs. The reference group will provide a forum for strategic discussion around relevant issues and opportunities, informed by contemporary science and community values.

Meeting 3: Monday 1 July 2019	
Chair	Jane Brockington
Attendees	Wayne Hevey (Four Wheel Drive Victoria)
	Danya Jacobs (Environmental Justice Victoria on behalf of Jono La Nauze, Environment Victoria)
	Tim Johnston (Victorian Association of Forest Industries Inc.)
	Andrew Knight (Outdoors Victoria)
	Mike Nurse (Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations)
	Amelia Young (The Wilderness Society)

In the third meeting of the Reference Group, the Group discussed Theme 3 Environmental Protections and Theme 6 Traditional Owner Rights and Partnership of the RFA modernisation process. These are two of seven themes which form the basis of Victoria's negotiations with the Commonwealth on the RFA renewal and on which DELWP has sought the Reference Group's advice.

DELWP staff spoke to the background brief provided for Theme 3, and the Reference Group received a presentation from Tim Kanoa and Natasha Sommer from Aboriginal Victoria.

The Reference Group considered these themes and there was general agreement on a number of points, but not all of them.

The following summarises the Reference Group's advice to DEWLP on Theme 3 but does not represent a consensus view. However, on Theme 6, the Reference Group as a whole did not feel it had the expertise or authority to speak for or offer specific advice on the needs of Traditional Owner groups. The following provides insights from the discussion for information but cannot take precedence over the views and needs expressed directly by Traditional Owners and their representatives.

Theme 3 – Environment Protections

The Reference Group discussed the topic of environmental protections: how the RFAs can ensure there are adequate provisions to protect the environment, the CAR reserve system and its effectiveness, and the implications of climate change and other large-sale natural disruptions, and potential implications for the renewed RFAs.

It was generally accepted that due to the complexity of forest systems, changes and impacts due to climate change both increases uncertainty and are challenging to predict, and therefore that the science and research are essential and need to continue. Beyond this, views diverged.

The following summarises key points discussed but <u>does not necessarily represent a consensus view</u> on matters considered important for the RFAs and forest management systems to enhance and strengthen environmental and biodiversity protections:

- they must be based on modern knowledge of environmental systems, modern datasets on species, and Traditional Owner knowledge, needs and values

- the RFAs must be able to adapt, update and evolve as new information becomes available

- modelling, data, mapping and research are essential foundations for the forest management system

- to protect biodiversity, forest management system instruments - for example, action statements and recovery plans - should be strengthened or created for all relevant species

- Traditional Owner knowledge can be beneficial in environmental protection, particularly where Traditional Owners are involved from the start and should be reflected in the RFAs, and recognise the importance of IUCN Category 6

- the RFAs need to respect that some Traditional Owner knowledge about which species are being protected and why may be considered private

- public trust in the RFAs will be partly underwritten by evidence of, and accountability for, actions to give effect to environmental protections and

- the RFAs will need to balance adaptability in response to change across time, and prescription to provide certainty and accountability.

There was discussion as to whether Victoria's CAR reserve system is adequate for the renewal of RFAs; whether the reserve should be expanded to ensure adequacy; and whether other management techniques were better suited to enhancing environmental protections and biodiversity outcomes. The Reference Group did not reach a consensus on the topic. Key elements of the reserve discussion included:

- ensuring (through extension or other management) Victoria's CAR reserve system is adequate and able to protect:

  o old growth forests

  o rainforests

  o fire refugia

  o critical habitat for listed species and

  o an upcoming cohort of old growth forests.

- protected species lists should include protections for culturally important, vulnerable and endangered species

- establishing / extending reserved areas, for example, the proposed Great Forest National Park and Emerald Link areas

- informal reserves could further supplement formal reserves, for example, to connect habitats, focussing on culturally valuable areas and threatened species habitats

- parks and reserves need to work for all users and uses, and productive forest sites should be available to a range of forest-based industries and users

- a substantial barrier to creating and managing parks is resourcing for effective management; new parks or reserve areas require adequate funding for their care and management

  o forest management systems can better engage and value volunteers' and the community's support and effort available to enhance the management and restoration of parks and reserves

- if CAR reserves are extended, consider the access, amenity and economic impacts on nature-based and cultural tourism and other activities

- the CAR reserves' fire management practices need to be updated, given the increased probability of bushfires due to climate change and

- how to recognise and realise the value of the ecosystem services provided by forests and CAR reserves.

In considering opportunities and barriers for expansion of the parks estate, the group discussed that:

- it is important to build up communities adjacent to / within RFA areas
- unsustainable wood contracts may be a key barrier
- completing the industry's transition to plantations may be a key opportunity.

The discussion of how the RFAs could consider climate change and other large-scale natural disturbances (including bushfires) was contested. The Reference Group did not reach a consensus on these topics. The scope of the discussion included how or whether the RFAs should:

- support and be in alignment with climate change goals and emissions reduction targets and plans for how to reach them, and actively and adaptively managed to address and respond to climate change, invasive species and other disturbances

- alter the use of timber harvesting in forest management to reduce bushfire risk and severity. Some members advocated increasing timber harvesting to reduce fuel load, while others advocated for reducing timber harvesting to increase forest resilience

- model the economic and ecological impact of bushfires on wood supply quotas over the long term

- increase Victoria's carbon trading as a method of environmental management and recognise the significant carbon sequestered in native forests and

- support state, national and international climate change and environmental targets

- require and support development and implementation of a system of economic-environmental accounts.

Theme 6 - Traditional Owner Rights and Partnership

As noted above, the Reference Group do not consider they can speak for Traditional Owners or provide specific advice on their needs. The following presents key elements of the discussion for information only.

- Incorporating Traditional Owner groups into environmental management processes holistically from the beginning, rather than simply adding their voices to existing processes, will lead to more effective communication

- Keeping the RFAs open to adaptation and avoiding creating barriers to Traditional Owner groups or their self-determination are important considerations

- There are opportunities for co-regulation and co-development of policy, for example, the existing co-governing arrangements with Traditional Owner groups in fire and sea country management can be used as templates

- Government agencies need to de-compartmentalise their typical functional approaches so that Traditional Owner knowledge can be incorporated holistically, for example, dealing with fire and forest management together

- Provisions should be made for developments in Traditional Owner knowledge to be part of the RFA reviews, including assessing whether the hooks in the RFAs are sufficient to respond to Traditional Owner needs

- Definitions and treatment of 'forests' under the RFAs ought to encompass the water sources, waterways and catchments within those areas, as Traditional Owners do not differentiate the management of these areas or elements within them from the management of surrounding areas

- There are a number of internationally-recognised typologies of traditional ecological knowledge, expressed in general terms as:
    - indications and measurements of natural change

- o set of management arrangements codified in association with particular species
- o the discussion and transfer of social norms
- o sacred Indigenous worldview.
- While 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge' is a generally accepted term, it implies a static process, its application in 'planning and management' is more appropriate. Traditional Owners are keepers of an adaptive and living process and knowledge
- Engagement with Traditional Owners and the recognition of Traditional Owners within renewed RFAs should:
  - o recognise and respect the diversity of hierarchies within and between Traditional Owner communities
  - o approach groups in terms of knowledge holders and expertise as a way to begin productive conversations and build trust
  - o focus on how to word and structure the RFAs so that they open doors for ongoing and future engagement
  - o not restrict the way that engagement can take place or create barriers to engagement
  - o create opportunities for mutual learning and
  - o be open to finding the best way to engage to avoid conversations becoming deficit arguments that risk reinforcing hurt and disadvantage
- Being mindful of finding the most appropriate ways to incorporate Traditional Owner knowledge into the RFAs and forest management instruments is important both to the immediate rewrites and ongoing relationships with Traditional Owners
- **For culturally valuable areas, the RFAs need to enable Traditional Owners to undertake the planning and management of these areas as identified cultural landscapes, where cultural knowledge and practices are applied according to Lore**
- Victoria should create capacity for economic as well as environmental opportunities for Traditional Owners over the short and longer term; these could include cultural tourism, educational services, land management, pest control services, mining, forestry, timber harvesting, timber product production
  - o There must be recognition and support for Traditional Owners to build capability to realise the potential benefit of these over time. The Victorian Government should not assume it is possible or desirable for all groups.
- Engagement and partnership on the RFAs and forest modernisation more broadly must go beyond talking to Registered Aboriginal Groups (RAPs) to get a true representation of what is necessary and
- The RFAs ought not create exclusions or barriers arising from the different legal recognition or status of different groups. For example, they must:
  - o ensure that discussions are held with the right people with the right traditional claim to the specific land being discussed, which may not strictly align with administrative reserve boundaries and
  - o not assume that all or any Traditional Owners are responsible for and can speak for all Victorian lands.

Next Meeting
- 1 July 2019.

Prepared by: Jane Brockington, Chairperson