

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 5: Monday 12 August 2019

Chair Jane Brockington

Attendees Ian Cane (Victorian Apiarist's Association)
Wayne Hevey (Four Wheel Drive Victoria)
Tim Johnston (Victorian Association of Forest Industries Inc.)
Andrew Knight (Outdoors Victoria)
Jonathan La Nauze (Environment Victoria)
Mike Nurse (Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations)
Amelia Young (The Wilderness Society)

This was the final scheduled meeting of the Reference Group prior to providing its final advice to DELWP to inform their negotiations with the Commonwealth Government to renew the RFA.

The focus was on capturing each member's top three priorities for the renewed RFA (acknowledging that not all members believe the RFAs should be renewed). The Reference Group also discussed the proposed approach to the final advice, as well any gaps either in the discussions of the Themes or in the process of the Group itself.

This summary report will first discuss the priorities where there was consensus across the group, then additional organisation-specific priorities. Unlike previous Summary Reports, specific priorities and opinions will be attributed to the relevant organisation. The discussion of general priorities and other discussion points will be de-identified consistent with usual practice.

General Priorities

The following were identified as priorities for the renewed RFAs by several Reference Group members and no objections were raised to them during the discussion.

- Accountability and enforceability – the accountability mechanisms are weak in the current RFAs and need to be strengthened in the renewed RFAs if they are to be effective in holding both governments to account for implementation and outcomes.
- All values, users and uses – the renewed RFAs should adopt an 'all values, all uses' approach and utilised at the centre of decision-making if the RFAs are to be effective.
- Traditional Owner engagement - has historically been very poor, and this needs to be rectified in the modernisation process through genuine co-design and support for TO management of country.
- Define 'multiple use' – the term is frequently misunderstood, can mean different things to different interests and therefore is difficult to give practical effect to. 'Multiple use' has to mean holistic and integrated approaches, not 'taking turns' or compartmentalising individual uses. A working defining was proposed as:
 - Multiple use means managing the natural world as a holistic natural system, for all its ecological, productive and cultural values and processes.

Management should be a core tenet of the updated RFAs and central to all forest allocation and management decisions. Management and planning should be truly collaborative and founded on a respect for Indigenous cultural knowledge and practice.

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- Climate change - the modernised RFAs must recognise and be adaptive having regard to the impact and uncertainty of climate change and to ensure forests are resilient, healthy and functioning.
- Monitoring and data - A key aspect of the renewed RFAs, and modernising the overall Forest Management System, is enhancing monitoring and data collection to support effective implementation, to make informed long-term decisions about the forests and to be adaptive in response to changing circumstances.

Specific Priorities

The following were identified as priorities for the renewed RFAs by individual Reference Group members specifically. Points already raised in the previous section are not to be repeated here.

The Federation of Traditional Owner Corporations' priorities include:

- Significant reforms that create a positive development in Victoria's understanding of Traditional Owner values and how they engage Traditional Owners in decision making
- A move away from deficit-focused approaches (that is, approaches that seek to restore the forests or Traditional Owners to a point before wrongs occurred) and towards strength-focused approaches (that is, approaches that seek to work with things as they are and find the best future outcomes possible from that starting point)
- Acknowledgement and application of the success factors for engaging Traditional Owners that were outlined in a presentation in meeting 3.

The Victorian Association of Forest Industries' priorities include:

- RFAs that deliver industry certainty to the timber industry for the whole of the next 20 years
- No net reduction in wood supply quantity or quality
- Balancing sustainable harvesting practices and selective harvesting with other values and uses so that the timber industry can continue to operate alongside other forest values and uses.

The Victorian Apiarists' Association's priorities include:

- Acknowledge and rectify shortcomings of the current RFAs including failure to recognise all forest uses and values, for example; in maintaining biodiversity, engagement with Traditional Owners, water and food security, and to provide appropriate certainty for the timber industry or The Beekeeping Industry that is heavily dependent on the Public Land Estate for honey production and very importantly, for beehive health prior to and after servicing many pollination dependent food crops.
- Develop an integrated decision making process to systemically calculate effects on forest values and uses, and thereby update and refine decision making over the next 20 years to achieve Victoria's forest management goals.
- Clear-fell/seed tree harvesting is unsustainable in many aspects, and also reduces the capacity of forests to regenerate, and should not be provided for in the renewed RFAs
- Build a shared, (all values and uses) future vision for forests and what a healthy and functional forest looks like long-term (ie 100+ years) and focusing particularly on being climate change adaptive and working collaboratively and consistently towards this.

Outdoors Victoria's priorities include:

- Recognise explicitly outdoor education and other activities as part of a multiple use approach adopted by the renewed RFAs

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- Enhanced data, for example, the State of Forests report has inadequate information on creek or river flows, which are key to forest management
- Established a representative group or taskforce committed to factoring multiple use into the decision-making to support implementation of the renewed RFAs and increase confidence that actual changes could and would be made. The group/taskforce would desirably:
 - have access to scientific advice / representatives (for example, on climate change and adaptation)
 - involve Traditional Owner engagement
 - bring a 'all values, all uses' focus and representation
 - support monitoring, evaluation and reviews
 - address issues of non-action where relevant
 - enliven and enact the RFAs in tangible ways to support effective implementation.

Four Wheel Drive Victoria's priorities include:

- Education about forests and forest management, especially regarding Traditional Owner values and uses, to address the current information deficits and build community support for change
- Facilitating information sharing between groups and gathering data from a wider range of sources - for example, recognition of the contribution the groups such as Four Wheel Drive Victoria and Outdoors Victoria can make
- There is a significant opportunity to draw on and draw in the diversity and strengths of different interests around a shared understanding and 'all value, all uses' approach.

The Wilderness Society's priorities include:

- There is no need to continue the RFAs at all and, if they are to continue, the timber industry's exemption under the EPBC Act should be discontinued and that the special treatment of the timber industry should end
- There should be no rolling 20-year agreements which it considers to be dangerous in light of the likely future changes to the forest estate and the likely scale of the effect of climate change.
- Bushfire risk should be a required input for wood models
- The CAR reserve system must be changed so that it meets the 'adequate' criterion prior to any extension or renewal, which it has not in the current RFAs
- Five-yearly reviews are too infrequent; in order to be properly adaptive, reviews should take place every three years, with clear triggers outlined so that events affecting the structure, condition and/or function of Victorian forests can be immediately assessed and taken into account
- RFAs must provide certainty for all forest-dependent businesses and industries.

Environment Victoria's priorities include:

- Mitigation of and adaptation to climate change which will involve the protection and restoration of carbon stocks and flows, and precautionary and adaptive management to ensure the protection of key environment values threatened by climate change
- Maintenance of biodiversity and the prevention of extinction and prevention of catastrophic forest systems collapse. This will require expanding the reserve system in order to protect species and maintain connectivity between habitats

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- Restoration of damaged ecosystems to a state of health and proper function, not necessarily returning forests to a pre-colonisation state
- Protection and restoration of all ecosystem services, including use values such as provision of water supply and climate regulation, but also facilitating people's connections with nature. The adoption of robust environmental accounting would support this objective
- Environment Victoria understands that to achieve these objectives will require a major re-prioritising of forest uses, and in particular reducing the priority placed on the wood products industry and supporting that industry to transition to a primarily plantation-based wood supply. Environment Victoria considers it unlikely the current or renewed RFA structures and RFA Act can achieve these outcomes and changes. But sees value in seeking a different kind of inter-governmental agreement that gets governments to discuss and commit to the large changes necessary to manage the forests.

Gaps in Discussions and Processes

As part of the wrap-up of the Reference Group's final working meeting, members were asked to reflect on the scope and process undertaken and to consider the advice provided to date and whether there were gaps or refinements required.

In terms of the engagement process, the Reference Group members:

- were disappointed with the limited exchange of information or engagement between the Science Advisory Panel (SAP) and the Reference Group
- were disappointed by the apparent lack of engagement with Traditional Owner ecological knowledge by the SAP
- were concerned about who will be responsible for rewriting the RFAs and ensuring the Reference Group's intent was clearly understood and incorporated, and
- proposed that, as a minimum, DELWP / the Victorian Government share the draft of the rewritten RFA document for comment before it is signed off.

The Reference Group did not consider it had been able to fully explore or comment upon some matters considered important and relevant to forest policy settings and mechanisms, including:

- duplication between the Commonwealth and Victorian systems
- the circumstances that would result if the RFAs were removed
- the burden on the timber industry seeking export applications or on the Commonwealth Government to process applications if the exemptions under the RFAs were removed or
- the Forest Wood Pulp Agreement Act (expires in 2030) and is a significant feature in the forestry legislative landscape in Victoria, nor received advice on

The Reference Group also noted that it was not specifically asked to comment on RFA negotiation Theme 7 - the research priorities in the forest management system which is the focus of the Scientific Advisory Panel's work. However, the Reference Group suggested the research priorities ought to have regard to:

- all values, uses and users
- Traditional Owner values and Traditional Ecological Knowledge
- climate impacts and uncertainty on forest resilience
- a multiple use system of management

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- a holistic socio-economic view
- enhancing data collection
- strengthening monitoring systems and
- an adaptive approach to research priorities across the period of the RFAs.

Finally, the Reference Group reiterated that:

- it wants to see significant changes that make both Governments accountable for the agreements made under the RFAs – implementation and outcomes, and
- the RFAs need to take into account that the forest systems have changed dramatically since colonisation, and it is important to build resilience if forests are to cope with the likely further impacts from climate and other large-scale disruptions without total systems failure.

The Reference Group will finalise its consolidated advice to DELWP and the Victoria Government in the coming weeks.

In concluding, the Chair thanked the Reference Group members for their engagement and insights and the Secretariat team for their support and assistance throughout the process.

Prepared by: Jane Brockington, Chairperson