

Regional Forest Protection Agreements

I, [REDACTED] submit with a background of study, knowledge and experience derived from:

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What changes have I seen in the RFA regions?

Visual Amenity

The horizon has changed from one cloaked in forests to saw toothed ridgelines in many parts of Victoria. Mount Torbrek; Rubicon Valley and now Snobs Creek Valley in the North East. Other areas, similarly 'beyond view' such as Warburton Ranges, near Gladysdale; Baw Baw; Maffra and Heyfield.

Travel into remote back roads and it's not difficult to see the road verge left with stands of timber and beyond – clear felled cleared ground.

The horizon and mountain sides are also marked by white bleached trees absent of foliage and dead from the extreme heat of bushfires.

The saw logs on trucks coming down Snobs Creek Road in the 1950's when I was a child were massive, compared to the logs being carried in 2019. People travel to Marysville to see the Cumberland forests. Once; the trees in the RFA regions looked like those in the Cumberland Valley.

Changes to wildlife

The media is focusing on increased deer populations in lowland grazing areas. At Eildon, deer and kangaroos graze below the dam wall. Drive down country roads in the early morning or late evening and it's common to see deer and kangaroos grazing with cattle or sheep. The Bunyip State Park; Gembrook Bushland Park; farmland near the Grampians – wherever you choose; wildlife is grazing pasture. Are they forced from the forests through wildfire destroying their habitat, the noise of chainsaws and bulldozers or other pressures?

Changes to birdlife. The jay's used to come down from the highlands at the onset of Winter and return in early Spring. This year they have been in my garden since about April.

Red breasted robins were frequent winter visitors and have not been seen since Ash Wednesday 1983 in the Gembrook area.

Cockatoos are prolific everywhere, congregating in hundreds on pastures surrounding rural towns.

Is it climate change? Is it destruction of habitat from expanding settlement and contributed to by logging and planned and unplanned burns.?

Changes to water quality / temperature

A visitor now to the Snob's Creek Valley; I cannot help but notice the turbid brown water flowing under the Goulburn Valley Highway bridge from the logged areas of Snobs Creek, the foothills of Torbrek.

Water temperatures have tested to be warmer as the water reaches the creek faster, by overland flow.

Rather than filtering slowly through the forest floor the runoff travels quickly over the denuded landscape gathering sediment as it moves to Snob's Creek. The Vic Forest burns, undertaken to

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disguise the massive waste residue of clear fell logging, and claimed to regenerate ash species, put carbon in the water. While it is the cheapest option for Vic Forests, the Hoban's Gap clearing has started to have an impact on the Snob's Creek Hatchery. With 22 coupes designated for clear felling in the Snob's Creek Valley, the viability of the Snob's Creek Fish Hatchery located as it was on a pure and reliable water supply is of concern.

What will happen to the water quality and volume as new forest growth needs the water to sprout a regenerating landscape?

One wonders whether there hasn't been long term and incremental planning for the demise of Snob's Creek Hatchery. The community of 9 family houses in the 60's has shrunk to 4 with the other houses demolished; the Visitors Centre and daily tours closed in 2009. Research positions have been reduced over the years. Now, a new native fish hatchery is mooted for the Shepparton area.

Despite having celebrated its 75th anniversary and with the water supply being significantly altered (temperature, flow and turbidity), the writing is on the wall for the State Fish Hatchery, Snob's Creek,

Erosion and landslips

Where the forest once was, the landscape was in balance and protected from soil loss. With clear felling comes sheet and gully erosion, landslips and general movement of soil. This is particularly noticeable on logging roadsides, where gutters are eroded off the road edges. Is it the poor formation of the logging roads, the heavy truck traffic; or the fact that more water is concentrated with more runoff and overland flow, through lack of vegetation to slow the water movement?

Changes to the peace of rural communities.

The communities of Thornton, Taggerty, Buxton and Narbethong were peaceful ribbon settlements before the timber jinkers arrived – 30 or more trucks per day, starting at 4.00am and taking their final load through after 9.00pm. Residents bordering the highway suffer the disruption to sleep and mental anguish of the adjacent deforestation, with every passing truck.

Trucks that carry other loads to different destinations bring with the noise a reminder of the disappearing forest. The regularity of logging truck traffic is eroding general health and wellbeing of residents in logging regions.

Ignorance of wholistic catchment management

Governments in the past, applied sensitive catchment management to benefit Melbournians. The legacy remains of exclusions zones for the water supply catchments surrounding the MMBW water resources: Maroondah, Silvan, O'Shannesy, Upper Yarra and Thomson dams. Excluding recreational and forest pursuits has ensured clean and relatively untreated water for Melbourne. Exclusion relies on pure water finding its way through the forested landscape to the reservoirs; transpiration refreshing the air around our city.

Remove any component of the catchment and the water supply is altered. Clear felling drastically causes soil loss through overland flow; initially increasing runoff, which increases energy in water movement and accelerated erosion.

The regrowth uses more water than a mature forest, thereby decreasing soil water availability.

Competing users for forests may be passive or active; bushwalkers may be compatible with drinking water reservoirs; but motor bikes and 4-wheel drives cause erosion, vegetation damage and soil displacement. Managing where passive and traditional owners may use the land compared to more destructive pursuits can protect a catchment for longevity.

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Allowing clear felling is incompatible with all other users.

What should the Victorian RFA's aim to achieve over the next 20 years?

When the RFA's were designed two decades ago they reflected an era of development. ***They should now do the reverse and maintain a highly conservative control of a vastly diminished valuable resource.***

The timber resource harvested by Vic Forests in the RFA's is primarily wasted. Of the 3% that is recovered just 1.3% is high value product suited to housing and furniture. I have personally owned and built three sustainable homes, and value timber for building and furniture.

Primarily, this needs to be plantation timber and timber needs to be very expensive. Alternatives such as laminated timber / lamiwood and pressed bamboo have a higher R rating and greater strength than forest saw log timber and should be used as mainstream choice.

The RFA's need to focus on selective harvesting of plantation forests, with all waste used, (such as for composting rather than burning), and timber being valued for the scarce resource that it is.

The RFA's need to reflect consultation with traditional owners and all interested parties.

The RFA's must achieve preservation of native forests.

Quotas must be adjusted progressively for forest resources diminished through fire, private land clearing and climate change.

Innovative technology must be applied to scrutinise logging coupes and landscape fragility. Vic Forests can currently use areas outside allocated areas and falsify data; taking advantage of post 1939 ash forest areas and by-passing areas with less valuable species.

The RFA's must be managed through third party oversight.

The Federal Government must have agencies to oversee compliance with the RFA requirements, the Code of Practice for Timber Harvesting and the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. The states contribution to the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act must be evaluated and periodic public reporting mandated.

How could the potential improvements in Section 4 of this Independent Consultation Paper help modernise the Victorian RFA's?

The potential improvements take into consideration 2019 interested parties and environmental concerns but they do not go far enough on implementation of the ideas documented.

The 5 potential improvements listed as the Vision statement should be core to the improvement in the RFA's

What are the potential improvements you think should be made that are not described?

4.1 Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management.

The improvement is honourable but stated purely as 'recognise' or acknowledge all forest values. *There needs to be instruments in place to incorporate each of the values into the RFA's*

4.1.2 Conserve Forest Biodiversity and maintain Ecosystem Health

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The improvement in the RFA's need to not just have commitment and policy statements but controls such as consultation, regular interested party meetings and reporting, accurate measurement techniques and independent audits such as through the Forest Stewardship Council.

4.1.3 Promote Traditional Owner rights and partnerships

The language of the RFA's must not be 'consideration and recognition' of rights but provide mechanisms for the rights to be incorporated into actions.

4.2 Theme 2 The long-term stability of forests and forest industries

4.2.1 Address climate change and other large-scale disturbances

This improvement in the RFA's is credible as it refers to multi-scale actions that build the resilience of Victoria's forests. The actions in the RFA's need to be specified, not be just motherhood policy statements. Vic Forests has been able to hide behind generalised data about allocated areas and environmental controls.

Research level involvement needs to be catered for to provide current input to modelling – matched with accurate data to allow the RFA's to be successful in their aims.

The RFA's of the future need to be able to accept input from a dynamic field of expertise – not to be allowed to be unchanged for 20 years. 2040 will need to be catered for in 2019.

4.2.2 Support the development of forest-dependent industry

This is similar to 4.1. All interests must be catered for with measurable controls and independent oversight.

Timber supply is best catered for by initial controlled selective logging, whole of tree utilisation; while active and massive plantation investment is implemented; and an aggressive and measurable switch implemented to alternative timber products.

The practise of sending the bulk of saleable Australian hardwood offshore as paper pulp to a world that is in the digital age is short sighted; looking for a quick buck. A mature forest is of far greater value to a diverse range of interests.

Vic Forests, seemingly above the law, are charged with harvesting and selling forest products.

Accountability must not be just for commercial viability but for environmental and social responsibility

4.3.2 Identify research priorities

The RFA's need not to just recognise research priorities but put forward criteria for government support of research. Responsibilities need to be assigned for implementing research.

Forestry and Sustainability must be the growing market in research to facilitate the vision expressed in the policy statements. The Federal and State governments must have an integrated approach into research into alternatives to forest products; and forest management.

4.3.3 Improve monitoring and reporting

All monitoring actions must not only be considered but implemented.

Vic Forests have been unable to attain FSC / PEFC certification. While these forms of monitoring have their shortcomings, they offer independent oversight, innovative measurement technology, third-party scrutiny and periodic scrutiny.

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Whatever monitoring is implemented needs to cater for both changing threats to forest resource management and independent third-party reporting.

Do you have any views on which potential improvements are most important?

Monitoring and reporting are the most important improvements needed to the RFA's

Vic Forests has been able to disguise the wastage and the areas logged, utilising generalised data that is not delivered by an independent authority.

Many aspects of the RFA implementation have not been measured and monitored such as consultative arrangement, the damage to water ways, soil loss and water quality.

Threatened and endangered species reporting is localised and difficult to attribute within the RFA's.

It is an indictment that Australia has the worst endangered species record in the world. With 1800 threatened species attributed to weak legislation; ministerial 'discretion' and lack of enforcement, species such as the Leadbeater Possum, Swift Parrot and Quoll don't stand a chance.

Productivity, wastage data, labour and employee data and forest industry related incident reporting are undisclosed by a company that people generally believe is a government authority.

Disclosure that Vic Forests is a private company with financial incentives from the government is important. Forest management must be within the environment department to be accountable.

Independent monitoring and transparent reporting are the most important improvements suggested in the consultative paper.

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