

# Modernisation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements

Independent Report on the  
Joint Victorian and Australian  
Government Consultation

December 2019





### **Acknowledgment**

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

### **About Converlens**

Converlens is a global civic partner providing data analysis, research, tools and services to assist innovative organisations to better understand the discussion. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and the Victorian Government commissioned Converlens to undertake independent analysis of data collected through joint Victorian and Australian Government consultation, held from 3 May - 7 July 2019, on the modernisation of Victoria's Regional Forest Agreements, to synthesise and produce this report. Converlens conducted independent analysis, with input from the Victorian and Australian Governments, who also provided information about the consultation to create the context and background of the report and reviewed the report for accuracy. For more information regarding this report, please contact [information@converlens.com](mailto:information@converlens.com).

### **Disclaimer**

This publication may be of assistance to you but Converlens does not guarantee that the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.

### **Cloud Catcher disclaimer**

Cloud Catcher is an engagement partner that undertook face-to-face engagements on behalf of DELWP. Feedback collected through face-to-face engagement was transcribed by DELWP. All quotes have been transcribed from handwritten notes taken at engagement events that were either directly noted by participants or written by Government representatives on behalf of participants. Users should seek appropriate independent professional advice prior to relying on, or entering into any commitment based on material published here. Cloud Catcher does not guarantee, nor accept legal liability arising from or connected to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of the comments.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	...	<b>4</b>
<b>Key Findings</b>	...	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	...	<b>9</b>
Background	...	9
Scope	...	10
Consultation	...	10
Data Analysis	...	12
Analysis Approach	...	13
<b>Glossary</b>	...	<b>14</b>
<b>Overall Analysis</b>	...	<b>15</b>
<i>Survey and face-to-face</i>	...	<b>15</b>
<b>Overarching Questions - RFA Effectiveness and Future</b>	...	<b>16</b>
<b>Theme 1 - Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management</b>	...	<b>30</b>
- Recognise all forest values	...	31
- Conserve forest biodiversity and maintain ecosystem health	...	36
- Promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership	...	41
<b>Theme 2 - Long term stability of forests and forest industries</b>	...	<b>47</b>
- Address climate change and other large-scale disturbances	...	48
- Support the development of forest-dependent industry	...	51
<b>Theme 3 - Governance and management of Victoria's forests</b>	...	<b>57</b>
- Support the Victorian Government efforts to improve forest management planning	...	58
- Identify research priorities	...	61
- Improve monitoring and reporting	...	64
<b>Written Submissions</b>	...	<b>66</b>
<b>Regional Analysis (survey and face-to-face)</b>	...	<b>79</b>
Central Highlands	...	81
East Gippsland	...	83
Gippsland	...	84
North East	...	86
West Victoria	...	87
<b>Appendices</b>	...	<b>89</b>
Appendix A: Other comments/concerns	...	90
Appendix B: Survey questions	...	92
Appendix C: Promotion of consultation opportunities	...	93
Appendix D: Consultation Schedule	...	95

# Executive Summary

The Victorian Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) are agreements between the Victorian and Australian Government that establish the framework for the management of forests in each RFA region of Victoria.

The RFAs are due to expire on 31 March 2020 and the Victorian and Australian Governments are in the process of working towards modernising and extending these agreements. Modernised RFAs will include practical improvements to enhance their performance and also reflect changes that have occurred in the past twenty years since they were first agreed.

The Victorian and Australian Governments acknowledge there are many factors affecting Victoria's forests, including: climate change, extreme weather events (including drought and bushfires), scientific and technological progress, advances in understanding of forests and ecosystems, changing forest-based industries and opportunities, and increased recognition of the rights of Victoria's Traditional Owners.

Key commitments made between the Victorian and Australian Governments regarding the modernisation of the Victorian RFAs are:

- Agreement to review and modernise the Victorian RFAs before they expire.
- The overarching purpose and objectives of the RFAs remain unchanged.
- The amended RFAs will continue to maintain their existing spatial boundaries.
- Future forest management must be adaptive and underpinned by a strong scientific evidence-base, while also addressing community needs.
- Changes to RFAs will have regard to the outcomes of joint engagement and assessments of forest values.

As part of the process to modernise the RFAs, the Victorian and Australian Governments set out to understand the community's views and opportunities to improve the RFAs. From 3 May until 7 July 2019 the Victorian and Australian Governments conducted intensive community and stakeholder consultation across Victoria, which included an online survey, a written submission process, one on one stakeholder meetings, community drop in sessions and a series of stakeholder workshops.

To provide context and a framework for feedback, the Victorian and Australian Governments released the Independent Consultation Paper - *Modernisation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements*, authored by Dr William Jackson. The paper provided an explanation of the Victorian RFAs, how they operate, analysis of how effective they have been, and recommended areas for improvement. The paper also posed a series of questions and themes that were used to structure the consultation process. The Governments commissioned Converlens to undertake independent analysis of the responses received during the consultation, which are presented in this report.

This includes feedback from:

- 135 written submissions.
- 733 online survey responses.
- 47 face-to-face engagement events, attended by a total of over 330 participants.

These responses have been analysed and structured into sub-themes in this report, and the sub-themes can be broadly grouped into the following six areas for consideration:

## **1. Regulations and role of the Government**

A consistent theme throughout the consultation related to the Government developing and enforcing regulation with regards to timber harvesting, forest management and environmental protection. Respondents raised concerns regarding historical decision-making processes, policy development and review cycles, and the role and purpose of the RFAs. This included how legislation, regulation and other Government functions contributed to the management of Victoria's native forests. Respondents urged the Government to consult with communities, experts and Traditional Owners, to commit to conducting reviews and implementing recommendations, and to modify or remove current RFAs.

Discussion included recommendations to:

- legislate and enforce regulations,
- consult and collaborate closely with Traditional Owners, and
- build trust through transparency and independence.

## **2. Local economies and communities**

The impacts of timber harvesting and the development of sustainable economic opportunities related to the preservation and support of local communities was a common area of discussion. Responses included matters to do with jobs, industries and economic livelihoods as well as their connection to maintaining vibrant towns and communities by involving them in decision-making and creating opportunities for employment, recreation, and the sharing of culture and traditions. Respondents suggested that forests be open for public access and for multiple uses, both for recreation and enjoyment as well as for employment and other economic benefits. Another recurring theme had to do with creating opportunities for forest-based employment and industries, including cultural and eco-tourism, for Traditional Owners, and for alternate industries such as those related to carbon, recreation and food.

Discussion included recommendations to:

- focus on local community, people and sustainable economic opportunities,
- create employment opportunities outside of timber harvesting, and
- partner with and create opportunities for Traditional Owners to be involved in forest management.

## **3. Protect, conserve and restore native forests**

Respondents sought to “hang on to” the remaining forest and expressed strong sentiment when it came to protection and restoration measures being included in the RFA modernisation process. This was mostly focused on native and old-growth forest in the RFA regions and across Victoria, and included concern for the protection of native fauna and flora. There were calls for a greater emphasis on conservation, as well as the restoration and regeneration of the forests and related ecosystems. Responses also put forward the need for robust environmental protections, with a focus on sustainability and protecting the forests for the future.

Discussion included recommendations to:

- restore biodiversity and ecosystems,
- protect Australia's unique flora and fauna, and
- research conservation and restoration - benefits, efforts, impacts.

## **4. Destruction and loss of natural environment and biodiversity**

The negative impacts of timber harvesting on the natural environment was a consistent feature in responses. This covered matters such as the loss of native forests, concerns for biodiversity loss, as well as the effects on ecosystems and native fauna and flora. The

increased frequency and intensity of bushfires was a significant issue, with respondents calling for research into fire management and fuel reduction. Forest management was an important related issue, with respondents raising matters of undertaking research, applying best practices and utilising First Nation knowledge, as well as calling for an end to practices that damage native forests.

Discussion included recommendations to:

- address the increase in threatened species and loss of biodiversity,
- alleviate pressures on threatened flora and fauna and forest ecosystems, and
- research fire management and fuel reduction; implement best practice approach.

## **5. Timber harvesting**

There were two broad streams to this theme: the first was related to environmental impact and not continuing harvesting, while the second related to sustainability of the industry, industry development, transition to plantations, and future concerns. Responses covered matters related to supply, viability, the future of the industry, extraction practices and environmental impact. Respondents were largely against the continuation of timber harvesting in RFA regions and native forests, for a variety of reasons ranging from climate change mitigation, preservation of local cultures, communities and recreational spaces, and concern for native fauna and flora. Respondents called for sustainable practices and a transition towards plantations, with explorations of alternative materials and timber species for harvesting.

Discussion included recommendations to:

- end native-forest timber harvesting and transition to plantations,
- address the incompatibility of existing timber harvesting practices with environmental protection for native forests, and
- develop sustainable practices within the timber industry.

## **6. Future of ecosystem services**

A smaller but important set of responses discussed the role of ecosystem services and how RFAs can capitalise on potential future functions such as carbon storage, as well as exploring alternative materials to timber and opportunities for other approaches to land use. Within this area, many responses discussed climate change and its impact and possible mitigations. This included finding ways to use forests for carbon storage, deriving and maximising benefits from ecosystem services and moving towards sustainable industries.

Discussion included recommendations to:

- Maximise the benefits from ecosystem services,
- Explore alternative materials and land uses, and
- Recognise the importance of forests for climate change mitigation.

These themes provide a general picture of what was heard from consultation participants. For more detail we recommend reading the full report. The report is structured into two main sections: the overall analysis which provides a summary of the survey and face to face responses and analysis of the written submissions; and the regional analysis which provides insight to areas of interest and issues in each of the five RFA regions.

In the analysis of survey and face-to-face responses, included in the first section of the report, respondents noted observation of significant changes in the RFA regions, including an increase in threatened species and the loss of biodiversity, increases in timber harvesting and pressures on timber supply. There was support for the transition out of native-forest timber harvesting and a move towards plantations, with a focus on sustainable practices within the timber industry and

protections for native forests, flora and fauna to enable restoration of biodiversity and native ecosystems.

The face-to-face consultation sessions allowed people to speak directly with Government representatives about the issues that mattered to them. To reflect the depth of these discussions, Cloud Catcher, the independent facilitators of these sessions produced separate reports of the consultation in each region. We recommend reading these in conjunction with this report.

In the written submissions, community members and stakeholders were able to go into more detail regarding their specific areas of interest. The majority of submissions were concerned with natural resource degradation and the protection and restoration of the forest, and issues surrounding climate change featured prominently in most responses. Concerns for people, communities, local economies and future forest-dependent industries were frequently discussed. Discussion surrounding Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act Exemptions and the use of science and expertise can also be found here.

The final section analyses responses by region to highlight differences in local feedback, concerns and issues in each of the five RFA regions. The regions differed somewhat in terms of their main themes, however environmental deterioration featured in most, as well as calls for increased research, discussion regarding the uncertainty faced by timber industry, and the involvement of Traditional Owners in forest management.

Although there were a range of consultation opportunities this does not mean the results presented are representative of all Victorians. Engagement reflects only the views and responses received from those who chose to contribute.

This report has been delivered to the Victorian and Australian Governments to provide an understanding of the broad range of views and opinions held by Victorians regarding forest management and specifically the RFAs.

More information on modernisation of the RFAs is available at:  
[www.delwp.vic.gov.au/futureforests](http://www.delwp.vic.gov.au/futureforests).

# KEY FINDINGS

The themes arising from all responses were grouped into six broad categories, with a selection of highlighted themes presented below:



## 1. Regulation and the role of the Government

Legislate and enforce regulations, consult and collaborate closely with Traditional Owners, build trust through transparency and independence, modify or remove current RFAs and commit to conducting reviews and implementing recommendations.



## 2. Local economies and communities

Focus on community, people and opportunities, create employment opportunities outside of timber harvesting, and partner with and create opportunities for Traditional Owners.



## 3. Protect and restore native forests

Restore biodiversity and ecosystems, protect Australia's unique flora and fauna, research conservation and restoration - benefits, efforts, impacts, and ensure ecosystem health through robust environmental protections.



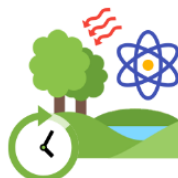
## 4. Destruction and loss of natural environment and biodiversity

Increase in threatened species and loss of biodiversity, desire to alleviate pressures on threatened flora and fauna and forest ecosystems, and research fire management and fuel reduction; implement best practice approach.



## 5. Timber harvesting

End native-forest timber harvesting and transition to plantations, existing timber harvesting practices are incompatible with environmental protection for native forests, and develop sustainable practices within the timber industry.



## 6. Future of ecosystem services

Maximise the benefits from ecosystem services, explore alternative materials and land use, and recognise the importance of forests for climate change mitigation.



# Introduction

## BACKGROUND

Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) are agreements between the Australian Governments and States that establish the framework for the management of forests in an RFA region. They are a key outcome of the National Forest Policy Statement (1992) through which the Australian, State and Territory Governments committed to the sustainable management of all Australian forests, whether the forest is on public or private land, or reserved or available for timber production.

The main objectives of the Victorian RFAs are to provide for:

- a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserve system
- the ecologically sustainable management and use of forested areas in each RFA region, and
- the long-term stability of forests and forest industries.

Under each RFA, the Australian Government agrees the State's forest management system delivers ecologically sustainable forest management.

There are five RFAs in Victoria, all due to expire on 31 March 2020:

- Central Highlands
- East Gippsland
- Gippsland
- North East
- West Victoria

A Memorandum of Understanding between the Victorian and Australian Governments signed in March 2018, sets out areas of focus and actions to be undertaken to deliver a modernised and harmonised RFA framework by March 2020.

Key commitments made between the Victorian and Australian Governments regarding the modernisation of the Victorian RFAs are:

- The Victorian and Australian Governments have agreed to modernise the Victorian RFAs before they expire.
- The overarching purpose and objectives of the RFAs remain unchanged.
- The amended RFAs will continue to maintain their existing spatial boundaries.
- Future forest management must be adaptive and underpinned by a strong scientific evidence-base, while also addressing community needs.
- Changes to RFAs will have regard to the outcomes of joint engagement and assessments of forest values.

## SCOPE

As agreed by the Victorian and Australian Governments, the scope of this consultation was to seek ideas on potential improvements to the Victorian RFAs to:

- Simplify and harmonise the RFA framework.
- Reflect contemporary legalisation, policy and institutional arrangements.
- Increase transparency and durability of forest management.
- Improve engagement and communication

The consultation was framed around the key themes identified in the "Independent Consultation Paper" written by Dr William Jackson. Seventeen questions, including five overarching questions related to RFA effectiveness and future, and a series of questions related to key themes of the Consultation Paper. The themes were:

### **Theme 1: Ecologically sustainable forest management**

- 1.1 Recognise all forest values
- 1.2 Conserve forest biodiversity and maintain ecosystem health
- 1.3 Promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership

### **Theme 2: The long-term stability of forests and forest industries**

- 2.1 Address climate change and other large-scale disturbances
- 2.2 Support the development of forest-dependent industry

### **Theme 3: Governance and management of Victoria's forests**

- 3.1 Support the Victorian Government's efforts to improve forest management planning
- 3.2 Identify research priorities
- 3.3 Improve monitoring and reporting

## CONSULTATION

### ***Consultation Dates***

The consultation period was from 3 May 2019 - 7 July 2019. Additional one-on-one meetings were held on 19 July and 30 July with stakeholders who were impacted by the cancellation of the Melbourne drop in event, which was originally scheduled for 28 June 2019.

### ***Consultation Process***

The consultation process involved a variety of engagement methods including:

- community drop-in sessions
- stakeholder workshops
- one on one stakeholder meetings
- an online survey
- written submissions

The face-to-face engagement sessions were held between 3 June and 29 June. They were designed in collaboration between the Victorian and Australian Governments, with the support of a professional independent facilitator, Cloud Catcher. Cloud Catcher provided independent facilitation for the face-to-face engagement events - community drop-in sessions, workshops, one-on-one meetings - held in June. Their role was to create a context wherein community members could have their questions answered and Victorian and Australian Government representatives could listen to their views. This ensured that the engagement process was impartial. Additional one-on-one meetings held in July were facilitated by Victorian and Australian Government representatives.

In total, forty-seven face-to-face engagement sessions were held. Sessions were held in regional Victoria (Daylesford, Beaufort, Forrest, Geelong, Benalla, Corryong, Bairnsdale, Heyfield, Traralgon, Orbost, Alexandra, Marysville, Powelltown, Healesville) and Melbourne. Government representatives at these sessions included:

Australian Government:

- The Department of Agriculture
- The Department of the Environment and Energy

Victorian Government:

- The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)
- The Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions

The face-to-face consultations and drop-in sessions were framed around the three broad overarching consultation questions, with the additional consultation questions available to capture specific feedback. The questions were:

1. What changes have you seen in the region?
2. What should the Victorian RFAs aim to achieve over the next 20 years?
3. What are the potential improvements you think should be made?

Throughout the conversations, feedback was recorded as short comments by either the facilitators or government representatives under each question. At the drop in sessions, community members could write their own short responses to questions or provide feedback directly to a government representative to be recorded.

### **Community drop-in sessions**

There were 11 drop-in sessions held at locations across Victoria (full list in Appendix C). These were open to the public and provided the opportunity to speak directly with representatives from the Victorian and Australian Governments.

### **Stakeholder Workshops**

There were 18 workshops held with key stakeholder groups. These workshops targeted key impacted groups such as timber industry representatives, environmental non-government organisations, local government and forest recreation groups.

### **One on one stakeholder meetings**

There were 18 one-on-one meetings held with specific stakeholder groups to provide an opportunity for a more in-depth discussion about potential improvements to the RFAs. These

were 30 minute unstructured interviews, primarily focussed on the overarching consultation questions.

#### **Online survey and written submission process**

The broader Victorian community was also invited to complete an online survey or provide a written submission through the Engage Victoria online engagement platform, by post or by direct email to DELWP. Participants could respond to as many questions as they chose to.

#### **Promotion**

Opportunities to participate in the engagement process were promoted through a range of methods to encourage broad participation. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning website provided information about the overall engagement process and opportunities to be involved. In addition, specific opportunities were promoted to the community and stakeholders via social media, print media, radio interviews, postcards, stakeholder newsletters and word of mouth through our regional staff. Further details of the various methods of promotion are provided in Appendix C.

#### **Participation**

A broad range of community members and stakeholders participated across the engagement opportunities offered. This included local government representatives, forestry industry stakeholders, environmental organisations and environmental non-governmental organisations, the scientific community, other commercial forest-based industries, recreational groups, forest users as well as the broader Victorian community.

#### **Face-to-face engagement**

Over 330 people attended stakeholder workshops and community drop-in sessions.

#### **Online survey and written submissions**

Between 3 May 2019 – 7 July 2019, a total of 733 surveys were completed through the Engage Victoria platform. A total of 135 written submissions were also received during the consultation.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The purpose of the analysis for this report was to identify the issues, themes and topics of importance raised in the responses from the stakeholder participants of the Phase 2 Engagement. We have endeavoured to report on the themes raised in a style and manner that enables access to both experts and the general public.

733 survey submissions, 135 written submissions and 3,040 face-to-face comments were received and considered for analysis. All submissions were converted into plain text and analysed as qualitative data. In total this accounted for over eight hundred thousand words of text contributions, about 1,600 pages and 60 hours of reading. We note that *only* those responses that were received were considered for analysis, and these may not necessarily be representative of the views of Victorians as a whole, or of any special interest groups in particular.

## ANALYSIS APPROACH

Our goal was to identify the key themes represented. We achieved this through a combination of manual categorisation by professional analysts and by using several Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques. No pre-determined themes were used: we let the data guide the analysis and drew the themes from what people had said in the consultation. Once the manual process and the NLP process were completed, we combined the results from both and compared this to the source data, ensuring that the outputs were true to the original words of the participants.

Themes were also subject to a significance threshold, requiring a minimum percentage (around 10%) of the submissions under consideration to warrant reporting on. Applying this threshold approach was necessary to create a summary of the discussion.

In sorting the data, the survey responses and the face-to-face comments were combined and analysed on a question-by-question breakdown (state-wide), and then on a region-by-region basis (regional). The long-form written submissions, being considerably more detailed, were analysed separately. Some of the face-to-face comments were extremely short (in many cases only a word or two, such as “truck drivers” or “bushfire”), making categorisation and intent difficult to determine. These contributions added to the overall discussion but were not necessarily helpful in expressing thematic content.

Three sources of pro-forma (pre-written or form-letter) submissions were identified from “Friends of the Earth Melbourne”, “Wilderness Society”, and “Victorian National Parks Association”. Each of these groups provided a template for question responses, which some participants modified to present their specific thoughts. To ensure the pro-forma didn’t unduly influence thematic exposition, we excluded the pro-forma responses from the initial analysis results, so as not to sway the relative strength of individual contributions. We did however re-introduce the pro-forma responses to be assessed in the context of the discovered themes, to ensure that they still contributed to the percentage weight of submissions by theme. We felt this was appropriate given that each submission was an individual contribution, even if the words were sourced elsewhere.

We have relied on direct quotes from the respondents as much as possible to express the themes and issues raised in this report. Presenting source material was a conscious consideration, as the words, feelings, and preferences of the respondents are what we want to represent in this report. Comments are presented verbatim with no grammatical edits. Only submissions marked as “public” were used as quote sources, which meant excluding some relevant private quotes.

A separate report has been produced by Cloud Catcher based on the face-to-face engagements they conducted. The responses collected at these events formed a subset of the responses considered for this report. We reviewed the draft work done on the face-to-face submissions by Cloud Catcher (the face-to-face session facilitators) and noted similar findings in some parts of their work. This analysis is independent of that work.

# Glossary

<b>CAR</b>	Comprehensive Adequate Reserve
<b>EPBC Act</b>	Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act
<b>EVC</b>	Ecological Vegetation Class
<b>GFNP</b>	Great Forest National Park
<b>RFA</b>	Regional Forests Agreement
<b>RFAs</b>	Regional Forests Agreements
<b>SPZ</b>	Special Protection Zone
<b>TOs</b>	Traditional Owners
<b>VNPA</b>	Victorian National Parks Association
<b>VPS</b>	Victorian Public Service

# OVERALL ANALYSIS

The first five questions were designed to draw out the high-level thinking and performance of the future RFAs. Here are the main themes from the responses.

Q1

## Understanding the changes seen in the regions

Increase in threatened species and loss of biodiversity  
Decreased timber supply and increased timber harvesting



Q2

## What should we aim to achieve over 20 years

Transition out of native-forest timber harvesting  
Restore biodiversity and native ecosystems



Q3

## What are the potential improvements

End native-forest timber harvesting, transition to plantations  
Support forest protection and biodiversity



Q4

## How to modernise RFAs

Develop sustainable practices within the timber industry  
Protect Australia's unique flora and fauna



Q5

## Which improvements are most important

Use forests for carbon storage and climate change mitigations  
End and protect against practices which damage native forests



## OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

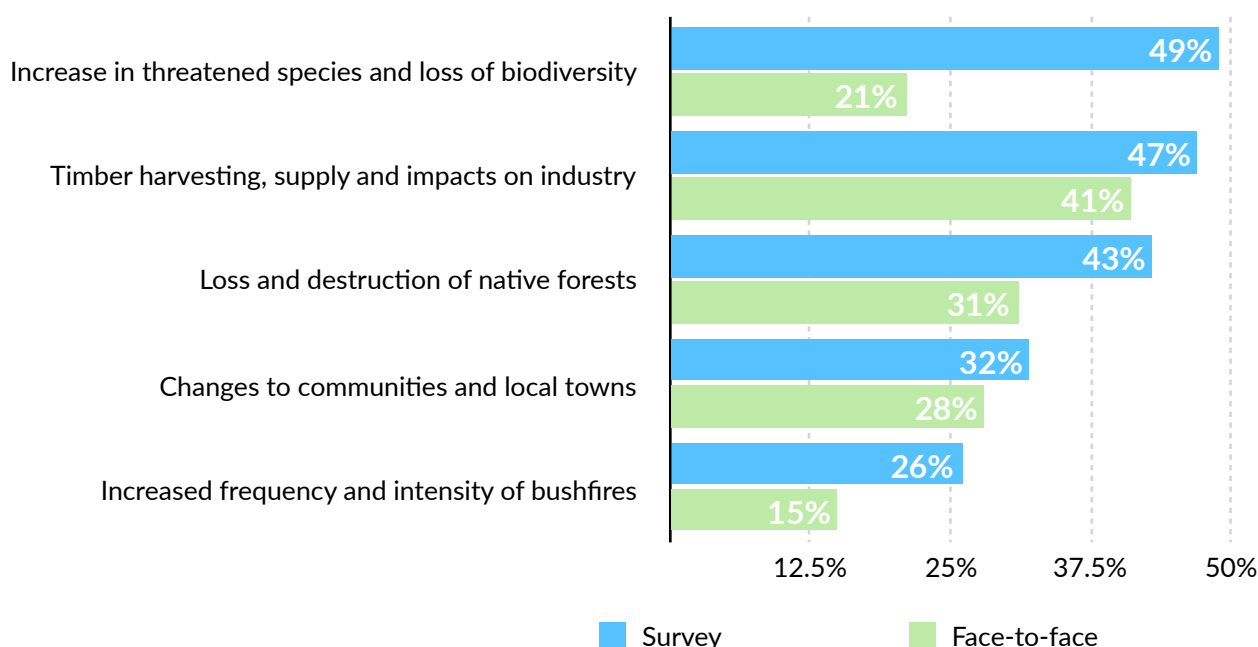
### RFA Effectiveness and Future

Questions 1 to 5 focussed on “RFA Effectiveness and Future”, asking respondents to consider a broad range of RFA-related matters such as the changes that have happened to the regions and what could be improved. Respondents were asked to further consider what longer term aims could be achieved over 20 years, how to modernise the RFAs and which improvements were most important.

#### Q1. What changes have you seen in the RFA regions?

There were 653 online survey responses to question 1, representing around 89% of survey responses. Most of the responses were original, 11% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (59), the Wilderness Society (11) and the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) (6). There were 627 face-to-face recorded comments, representing around 17% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations.

Several broad and often overlapping themes arose from the responses:



The pro-forma responses from the Wilderness Society and Friends of the Earth Melbourne were primarily concerned with changes in Victoria’s natural environment, namely loss of native animals, habitat destruction and the impact of bushfires. Also discussed was local town’s livelihoods and economic opportunities. Responses from the VNPA concerned the West Victorian RFA region



and largely discussed wood production value, funding and costs, asserting that the West Victorian RFA is now out of date and unnecessary.

**Increase in threatened species and loss of biodiversity:**

***Survey data: 49%, Face-to-face: 21%***

Responses to this question directly mentioned animals, wildlife, flora, fauna and biodiversity. Frequently discussed was the perceived loss of native animals and biodiversity in Victoria's forests, *"Numbers of forest-dependent species listed as threatened continue to rise, and forest health is declining..."* Alongside this discussion, respondents remarked on the increased pest and feral species, both of animals and plants. They expressed concern that biodiversity didn't seem to have been taken into account and was continuing to decline. Some raised concerns around the impact of climate change on the already endangered species, and the ability of a compromised forest to mitigate that and protect Australia's unique wildlife.

This was a smaller theme in face-to-face consultations, accounting for around 21% of comments. The key differences were that face-to-face discussion topics centred on criticism that there seems to be a disconnect between what was aimed to be achieved by RFAs and the CAR system and what has actually been implemented. Also discussed was the decrease in species of timber and the impact this has on international and local demand and supply.

**Timber harvesting, supply and impacts on industry:**

***Survey data: 47%, Face-to-face: 41%***

Timber supply and harvesting continued to be a strong theme throughout the survey, with over 40% of all responses discussing the timber industry. Responses were mostly in the context of the timber industry's sustainability and future viability. Survey responses in this theme were often critical of current practices, referring to increased timber harvesting *"...of environmentally significant native forests in regional forest agreements and poor management and protection of areas that deserve more protection."* The most commonly discussed change within this theme was that there had been a perceived increase in timber harvesting since the introduction of RFAs which had led to forest destruction and loss. This loss was perceived as a negative outcome and often referred to as something that needed to be remedied. Many respondents remarked on the reduction of old-growth forest areas, but acknowledged this was partly to blame on extensive bushfires. Others referred to the 'scarring' and general decline of the landscape, describing *"...a stark comparison between the mountains cloaked with forests and the scars of clear felling."*

Changes in the timber industry was the strongest theme throughout face-to-face consultations, accounting for 41% of comments to question one. These differed to the online survey responses as they focussed on the impact the timber industry has on regional economies and livelihoods (see community and towns section) and the way the industry has changed since RFAs were introduced. Commonly referred to were the machinery and efficiency changes in the industry, decreases in volume of available timber, access to forests being prohibited by State or National Parks, mill closures, and an increase in international demand for timber. From these comments there was a sense from participants that the timber industry is slowing down and is *"embattled"* from environmental groups and lack of Government policy and decisions leading to industry uncertainty and decline.

### **Loss and destruction of native forests:**

***Survey data: 43%, Face-to-face: 31%***

An ongoing theme throughout responses to question 1 was the alleged loss and destruction of native forests. As discussed above, this loss was perceived as a negative outcome with responses often using terms such as devastating, ugly, appalling, tragic and shame. They felt there was very little forest left, and what remained had experienced severe habitat loss, reduced species diversity, increased weeds and invasive animal species. Responses in this theme viewed that this destruction seems likely to continue in the absence of immediate remedial actions; including ending timber harvesting and introducing regeneration projects. They valued the forest not only as a source of natural beauty and recreation, but also claimed a need to keep them intact as a source for future income opportunities (tourism, cultural and heritage sharing, food and carbon stores).

In face-to-face consultation this loss and destruction became about the loss of wood supply and the reduction in business; either due to a decline in native timber forest industries or due to native timber harvesting activities negatively impacting on tourism (and flow on businesses). Also discussed was the lack of genuine consultation between Government and communities to mitigate these losses or *"...engagement not being meaningful, decision already made and engagement tokenistic"*. Protection of native forests for resource supply, whether that was for wood resources or natural attraction tourism, was seen as the desired outcome mirroring much of the discussion in the online survey.

### **Changes to communities & local towns (employment demographics, livelihoods, opportunities):**

***Survey data: 32%, Face-to-face: 28%***

Present in almost a third of responses were references to livelihood changes, specifically around community, local towns, work, jobs, employment and opportunities. Responses flagged the decline of regional towns, blaming reduced employment opportunities and removal of local assets as a cause. There were accusations that communities were unhappy and had experienced *"A reduced connection between local communities and timber harvesting in forests in their vicinity"* through the impact of the timber industry and its decline. Respondents alleged these local towns had been left with very little by way of natural assets (native and old-growth forest) with which to pursue alternative forest industries such as tourism and apiculture. People felt that regional towns had experienced demographic shifts as a result of this decline, with families and individuals pursuing better education and employment opportunities closer to the city. There was some mention of conflict and divisiveness within communities particularly when it came to expressing views on timber harvesting in local forests. There was some hope for positive change, with respondents often referring to tourism as viable future employment, provided forests are protected and kept in a pristine state.

This sentiment was closely echoed in comments from the face-to-face consultations, where discussion also focussed on the impact of policy uncertainty meaning that business aren't confident to invest in staff to increase skills. An interesting point raised in face-to-face consultations that wasn't seen in the online survey was several comments on the closure of forestry schools (tertiary), combined with decreased enrolment numbers leading to a decline in expertise for the industry, and difficulty for employers to recruit skilled employees. Comments often referred to industry frustrations with lack of certainty and the negative impact that's having on regional communities.

### Increased frequency and intensity of bushfires:

#### **Survey data: 26%, Face-to-face: 15%**

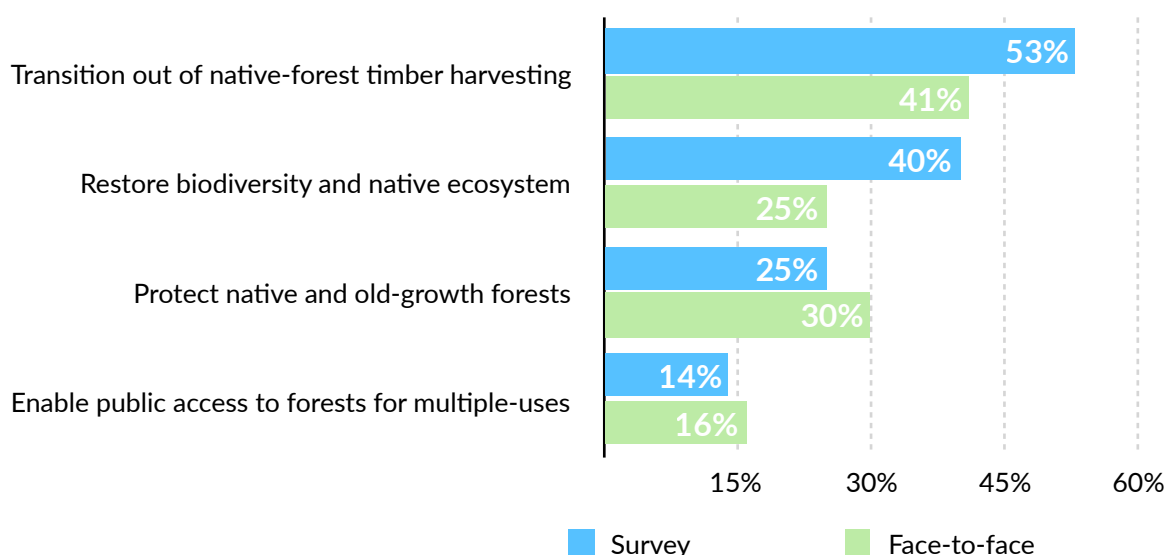
Just over a quarter of online survey responses (26%) and 15% of face-to-face responses mentioned fire, burns, bushfire, smoke or burn offs in their responses. Most commonly discussed was the increased frequency and severity of massive bushfires, *“A massive increase in the number of mega fires, these started back in 2003 and increased from then on. These fires have been high intensity stand replacement fires, with ecosystems often starting from scratch from seedling regeneration, this has put their condition score back to square one.”* Respondents speculated that bushfires will occur more frequently and with more intensity in the future as a result of human actions (timber harvesting, deforestation, clearing etc). In some responses there were concerns that forests were not being given sufficient time to completely recover and that decline in old growth and native forest increased the impact, severity and frequency of fires.

Bushfires were a relatively small theme from face-to-face consultations comments regarding question 1, accounting for 15% of discussion. Participants remarked on a general decline in the quality of Victoria’s fire management program and were critical of actions (or lack thereof) undertaken for prevention, management and aftermath. Unlike online surveys, the workshop participants also remarked on how fires affect the timber industry, noting the impacts are felt on *“...wood supply and also on environmental and ecological values (threatened species) and infrastructure.”*

## **Q2.** What should the Victorian RFAs aim to achieve over the next 20 years?

There were 705 online survey responses to question 2, representing around 96% of survey responses. Most of the responses were original, 16% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (66), the Wilderness Society (37) and the Victorian National Parks Association (12). There were 531 recorded comments regarding question 2 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 14% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations.

The key themes across responses were based around 4 broad and often overlapping themes:



The pro-forma responses from the Wilderness Society and Friends of the Earth Melbourne focussed on transitioning out of timber harvesting and into tourism and passive use, with a focus on conservation and protection of native forests. Both organisations called for RFAs to not be renewed and allowed to simply expire. This was echoed by Victorian National Parks Association responses which called for the West Victorian RFA to be cancelled, along with the removal of VicForests from that area and a transition to the national parks and reserve system .

#### **Transition out of native-forest timber harvesting:**

***Survey data: 53%, Face-to-face: 41%***

Facilitating a transition out of native-forest timber harvesting was viewed as a key aim for Victorian RFAs by around half of online survey responses. Frequently postulated as a solution to timber supply issues was a transition to plantation timber, with suggestions to use degraded farm land and other agricultural land. Responses were not supportive of clearing native forest in order to facilitate plantations. Whilst there wasn't a lot of support for continuing RFAs within this theme, some respondents felt RFAs could assist in completing the timber industry's transition to plantations. Respondents felt quite strongly that harvesting native forests was unnecessary and outdated, at times comparing native forest logging to the whaling industry. Many comments referred to the perceived greater economic value of tourism and associated business for regional towns, over the short-term gain of timber harvesting. *"...people do and will travel to experience wild nature. It has happened in many areas within Australia whose economies were once based on extraction industries are now thriving vibrant communities."* There was a sense of frustration with a lack of long term planning and supposed inaction from regulators to support emerging industries outside of timber harvesting.

Face-to-face feedback differed when discussing timber harvesting transitions. They advocated for increased certainty, often at times expressing frustration with the lack of certainty resulting from indecision and overdue agreements. There were concerns for ensuring future ongoing investment in the industry but participants felt this couldn't be accomplished without a clear, implemented policy approach. There were also concerns for employment in regional areas that were dependent on forestry and had already experienced downturns through the closure of sawmills.

#### **Restore biodiversity and native ecosystems:**

***Survey data: 40%, Face-to-face: 25%***

A dominant theme throughout online survey responses to question 2 was biodiversity, forest ecology and protection of native flora and fauna. Many were critical that these had not been adequate or comprehensive enough to protect biodiversity. There were also concerns that the unprecedented level of threat to forests through human activity, climate change and intense bushfires meant that conservation and restoration measures should be stronger. Respondents wanted to see *"Very conservative long term security of the forest..."* and were concerned with threatened species, improving biodiversity and restoring habitats. Specific suggestions included biodiversity measures such as environmental corridors, feral animal control, and eradication of weeds and invasive species.

Face-to-face comments on biodiversity and conservation focused on increasing diversity and balancing social, environmental and economic values. Some participants cautioned against unintended consequences of a heavily environmental approach, including reduced access and availability. Others supported minimal intervention and wanted to 'lock up' forests in order for animals and habitats to recover without human interference.

### **Protect native and old-growth forests:**

***Survey data: 25%, Face-to-face: 30%***

Likewise, protection of intact native forests was of concern to around a quarter of online survey responses. The general view across these responses was that responsibility for forest protection lay with the Government for regulation, policing and enforcement. The potential loss and resulting scarcity of resources such as clean water and carbon storage was viewed as an unacceptable trade for timber and wood resources to be gained from the same forests. Respondents wanted this sentiment reflected in the RFAs and urged for the new RFAs to achieve *"Genuine and proper protection for the environment..."* Beyond environmental reasons, responses also pointed to a responsibility to safeguard Victoria's native forests for future generations and referred to the community wellbeing impacts of keeping them intact for recreational, economic and health benefits.

When discussing protecting native and old-growth forests, face-to-face comments differed in that they included water catchments in their arguments. Many comments pointed out the importance of water catchments and rivers to Melbourne's water supply, as well as noting the timber industry's reliance on water for log processing. Suggestions included adding species to the protected list, removing EPBC Act exemptions, increasing reserve areas and improving connectivity between reserves. Others warned against stringent protections, commenting that Special Protection Zones (SPZ) reduce timber supply and have a negative economic impact.

### **Enable public access to forests for multiple-uses:**

***Survey data: 14%, Face-to-face: 16%***

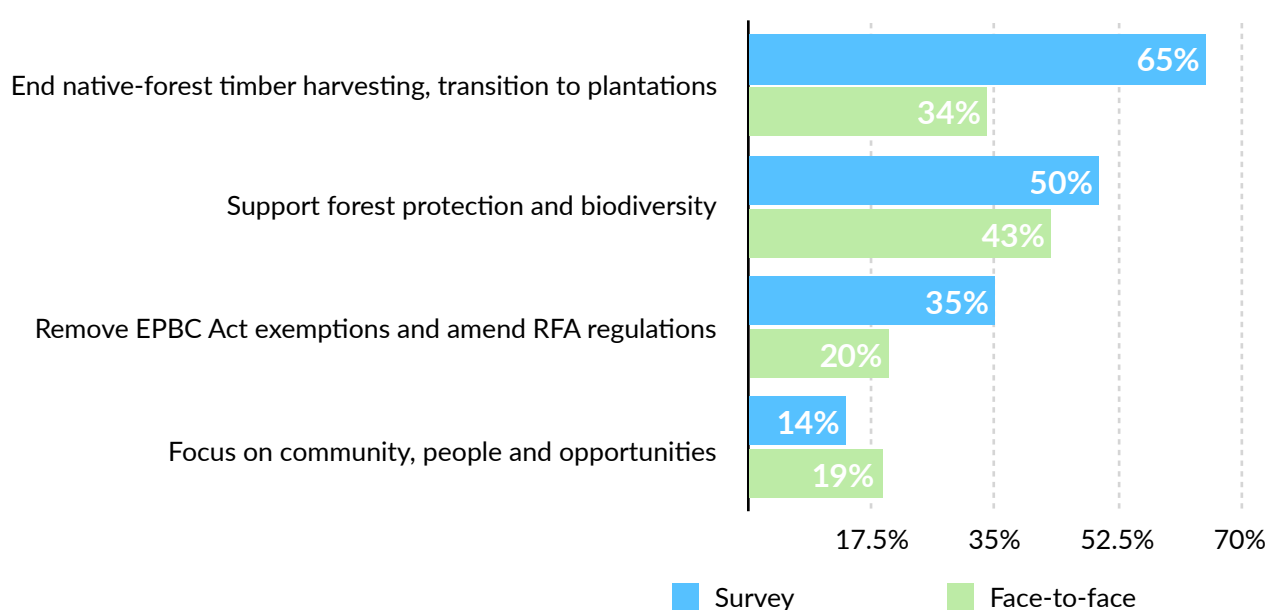
Improving access to forests for all Victorians and visitors for multiple-use was a smaller theme across online survey responses to question 2. Reducing barriers to access for recreational use and evaluating the needs and impact of different groups of forest users was viewed as a necessary inclusion to any regulation to forest accessibility. Responses emphasised the requirement to be able to enter and use forests, expressing firm displeasure with the concept of 'lock up and leave' native forest management. Reasonable use was a term frequently referred to, but there lacked agreement on what this entailed. Some responses supported recreational use such as four-wheel driving (4WD), hunting, fishing and camping, whereas others were opposed to anything more active than bushwalking and birdwatching. Regardless, respondents in this theme agreed that restricting access to forests was not acceptable and this thinking needed to be in RFA renewal negotiations. Also mentioned was Traditional Owner access, with responses strongly supporting unfettered access for Traditional Owners especially for the purposes of joint management and traditional practices. This was a contentious idea, with other responses concerned about Traditional Owners restricting forest access without appropriate consultation and review.

Establishing a balance between forest values and users was key in face-to-face comments. Participants acknowledged the tension between different user groups but felt that open access and working with people was a step in the right direction. They noted the benefits forests provide people in keeping them healthy and active, as well as providing a source of income for many. People wanted to ensure ongoing access to public land and encouraged regulators to maintain infrastructure (such as roads) to facilitate this.

### Q3. What are the potential improvements you think should be made?

There were 694 online survey responses to question 3, representing around 95% of survey responses. Most of the responses were original (81%), 19% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (83), the Wilderness Society (41) and the Victorian National Parks Association (9). There were 582 recorded comments on question 3 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 16% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations.

The key themes across responses were based around four interrelated themes:



The pro-forma responses from the Wilderness Society and Friends of the Earth Melbourne focussed on ending native forest timber harvesting and removing exemptions from environmental law. There was an emphasis on enabling multiple-use forests and preserving conservation values to protect against climate change impacts. VNPA had a similar sentiment and sought for timber harvesting to be plantation based only. They also included recognition of Traditional Owner land rights and encouraged joint ownership and management.

#### **End native-forest timber harvesting, transition to plantations:**

**Survey data: 65%, Face-to-face: 34%**

Mirroring responses to question 2, the majority of survey responses (and over a third of face-to-face responses) discussed improvements around the timber and logging industry. In particular, respondents were firmly opposed to the harvesting of old growth and native forests, with many comments like *"Stop logging old growth forests"* and *"Cease logging in native forests"*. Responses in this theme tended to be fairly similar and were mainly concerned with the loss of native forests and EPBC Act exemptions. Frequently referred to was the Government's role in forest management through policy and regulation such as RFAs and industry subsidies. Specific suggestions for potential improvement included: discontinuing RFAs, removing exemptions from

environmental law for the timber industry (EPBC Act), managing forests for best use and highest value, and transitioning timber harvesting out of native forests into plantations.

In face-to-face consultations, the sentiment was less about ending native forest timber harvesting and more focussed on improvements to the industry and change in its practices. These included looking into the science on clear-felling, single tree selection, lighter machinery (lower impact) and reviewing day-to-day operations. There were comments that were concerned for the industry and livelihoods of its employees, with participants often urging regulators to ensure supply and certainty for forest-based business. Others pointed to benefits and reciprocity of having a timber industry, *“A recognition of the additional services provided by the industry e.g. for fire fighting.”*

#### **Support forest protection and biodiversity:**

***Survey data: 50%, Face-to-face: 43%***

Improving forest protection, conservation and biodiversity—particularly of native flora and fauna—was raised by around half of responses to question 3. Echoing discussion in question 2, a desire for the protection of forests for the enjoyment of future generations and to open up opportunities for nature tourism was evident with comments like *“More recognition for the economic benefit of tourism and recreation derived from forests.”* and *“[these forests] belong to us all and should be protected and preserved for future generations.”* Specific suggestions focused on stricter enforcement and controls, monitoring endangered species, introducing the Great Forest National Park and Emerald Link and managing forests for long-term conservation.

Protecting forests and ensuring their sustainability was the strongest theme from face-to-face consultations data on question 3. Water management emerged as a sub-topic through these comments particularly of catchments and yields. Workshop participants noted the changing nature and relative unknowns facing forests and stressed that RFAs need to be flexible in response. People felt that as forests are not static over time neither should their management be. *“RFA extension should include longer term arrangements to address the shifting baseline phenomenon mindset and address net loss/decline in values overtime.”*

#### **Remove EPBC Act exemptions:**

***Survey data: 35%, Face-to-face: 20%***

Of particular interest to online survey responses in this theme was that if RFAs are to continue, the exemptions from national environmental laws should not. People felt that the ‘special treatment’ given to the timber industry was unfair and was negatively impacting other forest industries, both established and emerging. *“During transition, remove the RFA exemption from the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, unique to the logging industry, to put it on the same basis as any other industry that could impact EPBC listed species.”* Responses often cited the increase in threatened species as a foundation for removing the exemptions, claiming it no longer made sense for RFAs to support industry if the consequence is irreversible biodiversity loss. Comments also referred to the Emerald Link and Great Forest National Park and were generally in favour of establishing something along those lines. Other areas discussed included the Strathbogies, Gippsland and West Victoria.

This wasn’t a prominent part of discussion in face-to-face consultations comments. Discussion in this context tended to be more specific to RFAs and their regulations and review. Of specific interest was the West Victorian RFA, with participants questioning if there was a need for it to be continued and others insisting on its removal. Also mentioned in this discussion was the Otways

and North East RFA. Renewal of RFAs was a contentious concept, with several comments that RFAs should not be extended, however their reasons for this weren't always stated. Adopting a long-term, flexible approach to RFAs was encouraged. Participants also discussed the overall role and interests of Government in RFAs, calling for greater accountability and transparency in decision-making.

**Focus on community, people and opportunities:**

**Survey data: 14%, Face-to-face: 19%**

While only 14-19% of respondents directly discussed improvements related to employment, work, jobs and contractors, it remained a significant topic of interest. There was a mixture of concern for existing forestry-based employment to be supported and transitioned to “...*new job opportunities in renewable industries*”. Some suggested that supporting tourism through measures such as establishing the Great Forest National Park “*would stimulate the local economy and rural communities*”. The underlying theme here was that the timber industry no longer provides enough employment opportunities in regional areas and that job diversity in local communities should be a priority. Additionally, around 4% of survey responses discussed the role and involvement of Traditional Owners, particularly in relation to forest management being informed by traditional knowledge to improve the health and resilience of forests in Victoria.

This was also a smaller theme in face-to-face discussions, with sentiment generally focussed on forest access and longevity in order to provide economic stability to regions. The creation of local jobs and local value was deemed important with significant discussion on local business and employment opportunities. Participants advocated for better education on forest management and productive forestry for both local communities and the general public, in order to facilitate greater understanding between the timber industry and environmental groups. A handful of comments suggested engaging with Traditional Owners and supporting greater engagement and participation of First Nations peoples in future forest management planning.

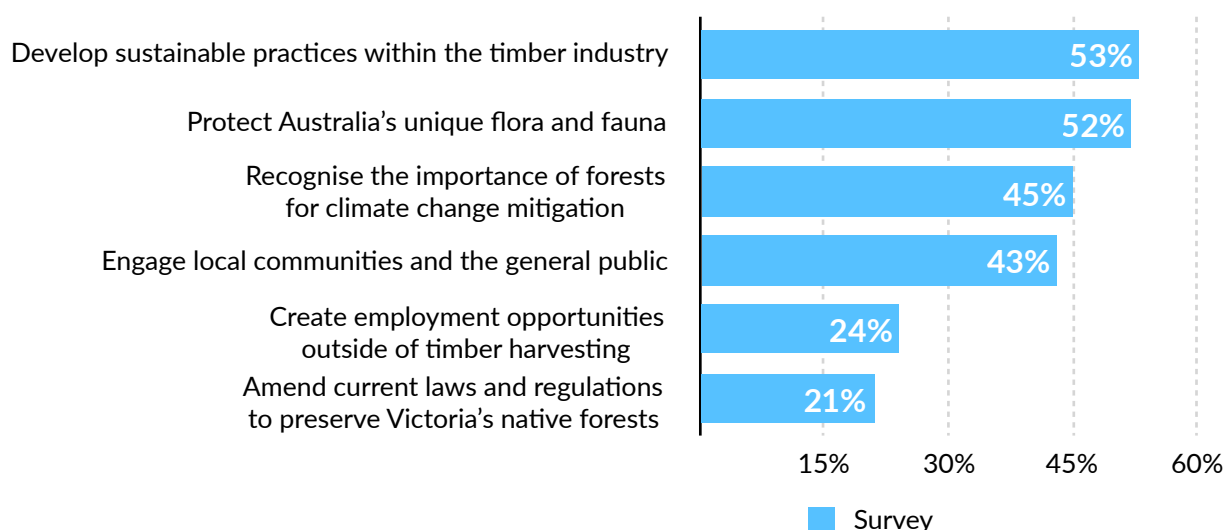


## Q4. How could the potential improvements in the consultation paper help modernise the Victorian RFAs?

There were 581 online survey responses to question 4, representing around 79% of survey responses. Around 70% of these responses were original, 30% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (97), the Wilderness Society (68) and the Victorian National Parks Association (8).

There were only 22 specific recorded comments on question 4 from face-to-face consultations, representing less than 1% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations. Given the small data set these comments were not cross compared to online survey results in order to avoid misleading statistical comparisons.

The key themes across online survey responses included:



The main points emerging from the face-to-face engagements included:

- Ensuring information about forest management and timber is clearly communicated with the public and stakeholders;
- Keeping a focus on the environment and creating healthy, sustainable forests; and
- Phasing out industrial timber harvesting.

The pro-forma responses from the Wilderness Society and Friends of the Earth Melbourne focussed on managing the forests for conservation and supporting matters of environmental significance. VNPA claimed the improvements were not helpful and criticised the consultation process as having a pre-ordained outcome and being “tokenistic”.

### **Develop sustainable practices within the timber industry:**

#### **Survey data: 53%**

In over half of online survey responses (53%), there were varying views on what the future of timber harvesting should be, and what changes could be made to the timber industry.

Suggestions from respondents centred on how to modernise the industry, support and encourage innovation and transition to plantations. Others went so far as to suggest the removal of the industry altogether in favour of alternative materials such as hemp, bamboo and other fibres. The main focus in this theme was the issue of sustainable use, with comments often inferring that under current practices the demand will outpace supply and the effects of this would be devastating not only for the environment but for all forest-related employment. Some respondents felt that Victoria had already been over-cleared, and that any new RFA area harvesting activities needed to “recognise community standards” and could be improved “By taking into account all forest users”.

#### **Protect Australia’s unique flora and fauna:**

##### **Survey data: 52%**

Respondents were concerned for environmental protection, with many referring to ecosystem biodiversity, native species, conservation, and extinction in their response. Many emphasised that Victoria was home to unique species, and these needed to be protected as a matter of pride and global responsibility. There was a prevailing view that this should take first priority, *“Jobs and innovation can be created, biodiversity cannot be”*. Responses in this theme were also concerned that the potential improvements in the consultation paper didn’t do enough to address these issues, and that the proposed improvements lacked clarity, deliverables, and concrete outcomes.

#### **Recognise the importance of forests for climate change mitigation:**

##### **Survey data: 45%**

Of significance in around 45% of online survey responses was climate change and the role of ecosystem services in mitigating the impacts of climate change. Responses referred to key terms of water, carbon, soil and future focus, advocating for RFA modernisation to recognise the value forests have (and could expand on) in relation to ecological functions. *“There is more value in leaving the trees in the ground to store carbon than cutting them down and burning them.”* They also emphasised the importance of ecosystem services such as water catchments (servicing both regional Victoria and Melbourne), pollination services and soil quality. Respondents stressed the need for any potential improvements to incorporate this and to stress that *“Any plan needs to be able to demonstrate long-term applicability.”*

#### **Engage local communities and the general public:**

##### **Survey data: 43%**

Around 43% of online survey responses focussed on community desires and people working together. They wanted to ensure that any potential improvements to modernise RFAs would make them *“...more in line with Victorians and Australians attitudes towards protecting our native forests”*. There was strong emphasis on listening to community, particularly of locals and regional townspeople to ensure ongoing vitality and viability of life in regional Victoria. Specific suggestions included customising and tailoring plans to each community’s issues and challenges. Employment opportunities formed a large part of this, with respondents eager for the Government to recognise the *“...long term value of forests”* for *“...conservation, water supply, tourism [sic] and other economic and social opportunities”*. Within this theme comments encouraged greater transparency between decision-makers and local communities through genuine engagement and consultation. Also discussed was the benefits forests provide to people’s health and the enjoyment many gain from being in nature. *“The report fails to mention a significant value for many- the physical and mental health benefits of being in the forest, and for some its cultural and spiritual significance....A mighty waterfall, a soaring cathedral of trees, who does not connect to these?”*

### Create employment opportunities outside of timber harvesting:

#### Survey data: 24%

Around a quarter (24%) of online survey responses saw the potential improvements in the consultation paper as a possible avenue to accelerate forest-based employment outside of timber harvesting. The most popular opportunities were those associated with increased tourism as a result of visitors wanting to experience Victoria's native, intact, old-growth forests. Responses postulated that with increased protection, restored biodiversity and reduced 'special treatment', other industries would have a chance to flourish and these would provide greater opportunities than what currently exists. People were generally optimistic about this change and were eager for transformation to be supported by RFAs, however they warned that if RFAs prohibit this development in any way they should be 'scrapped' and the market allowed to take over.

### Amend current laws and regulations to preserve Victoria's native forests:

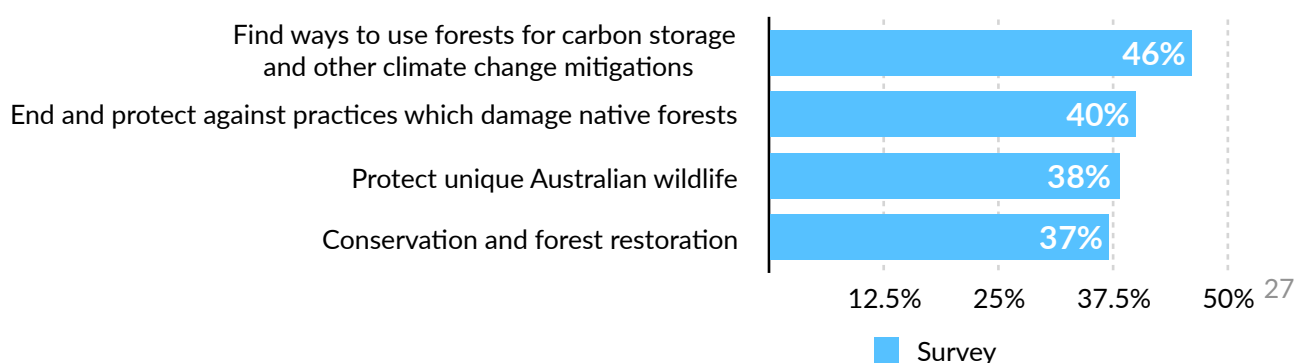
#### Survey data: 21%

The role of Government, law and decision-makers was a frequent theme in around 21% of online survey responses. Issues raised included regulation and enforcement, monitoring, transparency, public consultation, ownership, and the appropriateness of the current RFA model. Respondents questioned the governance model of forest management, "...for too long the Victorian Government has taken the lazy option of letting Vicforests managed [sic] the native forests". Others claimed there were too many conflicting agencies and that any future management agency should be unified, community driven and work with the support of scientists and field experts.

## Q5. Do you have any views on which potential improvements are most important?

There were 611 online survey responses to question 5, representing around 83% of survey responses. Around 75% of these responses were original, 25% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (69), the Wilderness Society (65) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10). Question 5 was not asked at the face-to-face consultations, therefore there are no recorded comments.

Online survey responses to question 5 were scattered in their theming, with some simply commenting to "refer to the above", either in reference to their previous answers or to the pre-reading content which preceded the question. Those who provided a detailed answer can be grouped into four main themes:



The pro-forma responses from Friends of the Earth Melbourne centred around maintaining and protecting forests and supporting other forest-based industries such as tourism. The Wilderness Society were concerned with climate change and the vital role of forests for carbon storage. on managing the forests for conservation and supporting matters of environmental significance. VNPA repeated the view that timber harvesting should be ended in the west. In addition, VNPA linked Melbourne's growing population with increasing numbers of forest tourism and visitors, thus providing greater economic benefit than the previous 20 years.

### **Find ways to use forests for carbon storage and other climate change mitigations:**

#### ***Survey data: 46%***

Finding ways to use forests for climate change mitigations emerged as a strong potential improvement from online survey responses. Almost half (46%) of responses mentioned climate change, usually in conjunction with discussing carbon storage, clean water and clean air. Responses generally referred to the climate "*emergency*" or "*crisis*" and were urgent in tone, often using terms such as catastrophe, breakdown, global-scale, catastrophe, and serious. Often discussed (around 25% of responses to this question) was using forests for carbon sequestration and that their "*carbon storage potential*" should be explored and valued. There was substantial overlap between this theme and the theme of forest protection, as responses often referred to the value of having "*intact forests*" in order to combat and mitigate climate change impacts.

### **End and protect against practices which damage native forests:**

#### ***Survey data: 40%***

Online survey responses viewed potential improvements that centred on ending practices which damage native forests as one of the more important improvements. Two practices emerged as common offenders: timber harvesting and bushfires. Many comments in this theme were vehemently against native forest timber harvesting continuing under Victorian RFAs, "*Native forest logging is finished in the west*", "*Accepting that, at this point in history, a logging industry must not exist*", "*Immediately stop any logging of native forests*", "*Please stop telling us that logging has to be part of it. It doesn't*".

Respondents felt that the negative impact of logging on native forest far outweighed any economic and employment benefits which may be gained from continuing the practice. Similarly, the destruction caused by fires, particularly of planned burns, fuel reduction and thinning practices, were viewed as unnecessary high-risk practices that should be discontinued. Responses often highlighted the increased frequency, intensity and size of bushfires, and linked this with increased timber harvesting and associated forestry management practices. The dominant theory was that fire management practices were either inadequate or ineffective and action needed to be taken to remedy this. Suggestions included further research into fire management in a drier climate, working with Traditional Owners for joint-management and traditional burning, and engaging locals in joint community fire management efforts.

### **Protect unique Australian wildlife:**

#### ***Survey data: 38%***

Forest protection, biodiversity, ecosystems, wildlife and their habitats was important to around a third (38%) of respondents, "*...because the ecology of forests is what provides backbone to economy and public's health and well-being*". Again, there was some criticism that the improvements didn't go far enough to ensure ongoing biodiversity and meaningful protection. Responses were resolute that any measures adopted by the RFA renewals needed to be genuine and practically

implemented, not just discussed. Climate change was also of concern to responses which discussed increased forest protection, *“The impact of climate change and fire cannot be mitigated against other than by having healthy undisturbed forest surrounding them with a full mix of ecological diversity to ensure balance”*.

### **Conservation and forest restoration:**

#### ***Survey data: 37%***

There was a strong sense of urgency and impetus to not only protect what was left, but to restore what had been destroyed or was under threat. Suggestions to achieve this included by ensuring the *“west link is restored”*, *“positive future forest management”* and *“Looking after the forests and the wildlife, greater funding and resources”*. The integrity of the forest and its ecological systems was deemed to have *“inestimable value”*, and without intact, restored forests none of the other potential improvements would be viable. Tourism emerged again as an economic motivation to restore forests where possible as this would be more sustainable and far-reaching in the long term than more consumption based industries. Other suggestions included minimising human impact on forests to enable recovery from deforestation (either by fire or harvesting) and engaging scientists to survey and monitor species on a regular basis.

# THEME 1: ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

Question 6 – 11 sought to understand the following three themes:



## Recognise all forest values

Forests are a place for recreation, enjoyment and economic benefit, with many deriving benefit from ecosystem services. There remains concern for biodiversity loss and threatened species. Respondents sought to place a greater emphasis on conservation, and provide access for low impact recreational activities, with a focus on sustainability and protecting forests for the future while transitioning to sustainable jobs.

*"The replenishment from waking up to the sounds of birds, and running water is magical."*



## Conserve forest biodiversity and maintain ecosystem health

Respondents felt that current protections should be improved and that there was a need to alleviate pressures on threatened forest ecosystems. Existing timber harvesting practices were felt to be incompatible with environmental protection for native forests. It was suggested to modify or phase out timber harvesting in native forests, and to legislate and enforce regulations. The goal being to restore forest biodiversity and protect wildlife habitats.

*"...an opportunity for Victoria to lead the nation in terms of improved stewardship of our magnificent native forests and our precious natural heritage."*



## Promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership

It was suggested that Traditional Owners should be consulted, engaged and collaborated with closely, to help promote awareness, share traditions and utilise their knowledge for forest management. It was further suggested to acknowledge the continued connection to country and to develop opportunities and support for forest-based employment, noting that the public should respect and learn from traditional knowledge

*"Traditional Owner's land rights and management rights should be recognised and encouraged"*

## THEME 1: ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

### 1.1: Recognise all forest values

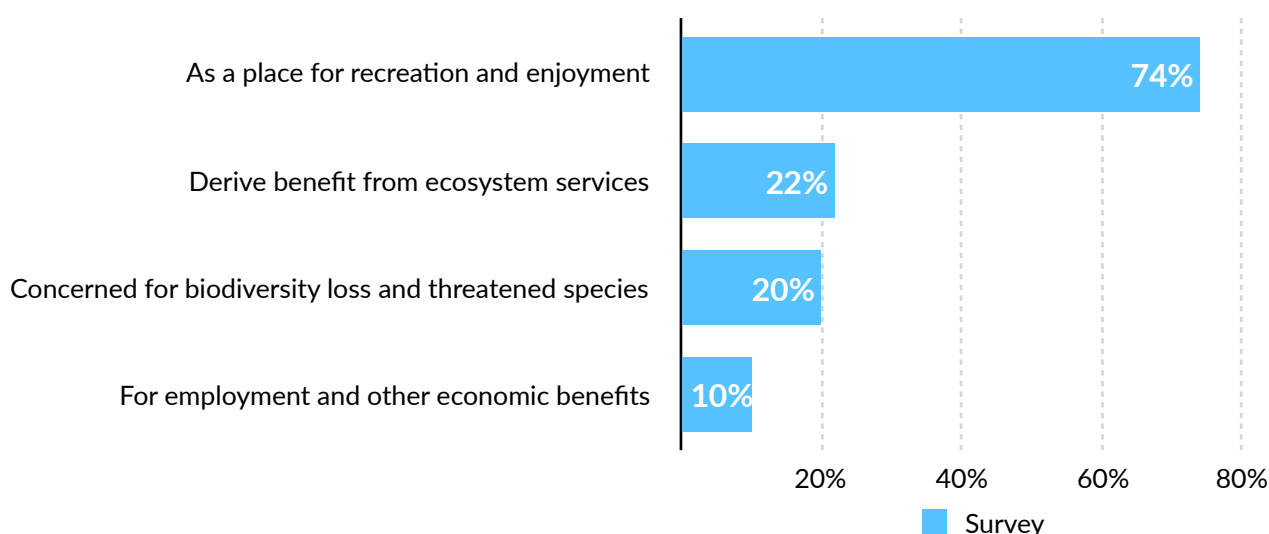
Question 6 and 7 focussed on “Ecologically sustainable forest management”, specifically that of ecosystem services such as resource supply, ecological benefits and recreational use, as well as the importance of forests to Aboriginal Victorians. The paper suggests that “The Victorian RFAs should more clearly incorporate the wide range of values and benefits that forests provide.” Respondents were asked to answer these questions with this in mind.

#### Q6. How do you use forests in your region?

There were 677 online survey responses to question 6, representing around 92% of survey responses. The majority of these responses were original (90%), around 10% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (48), the Wilderness Society (9) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10).

There were 41 recorded comments to question 6 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 1% of all face-to-face comments. Given the small data set these comments were not cross compared to online survey themes in order to avoid misleading statistical comparisons. Discussion in the face-to-face consultations mirrored online responses in that most of the comments centred around recreation, “*Hiking, camping, quiet time, groups for good physical and mental health.*” A handful of face-to-face comments mentioned resource supply and use, including for employment purposes and ecological functions such as clean water.

The key themes across online survey responses were dominated by the theme of recreational use however there were 3 other sub-themes that emerged across the data:



There was a significant decrease in the number of pre-filled pro-forma survey responses to this question. This is most likely a result of the pre-filled instructions from the Wilderness Society directing people to answer according to their personal experiences. The pro-forma responses from the Wilderness Society prompted respondents to think about mostly recreational uses, but also provoked imagery of burnt and destroyed forests implying that without intact forests no forest use would be possible. Friends of the Earth Melbourne focussed on biodiversity loss and the negative impact of this decline on forest enjoyment. VNPA also focussed on biodiversity and recreation uses.

#### **As a place for recreation and enjoyment:**

##### **Survey data: 74%**

Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, the most commonly referred to uses all centred around recreational activities and activities for personal enjoyment. The vast majority of responses (74%) discussed both passive to active recreational uses, including bush-walks, hiking, camping, hunting, bird-watching, photography, four-wheel driving, prospecting, canoeing, skiing and mountain biking. Responses expressed a sense of appreciation and awe for forests, *"The replenishment from waking up to the sounds of birds, and running water is magical."* Respondents were eager for access to be maintained and expanded in forests so they could continue to use them for recreational use. Mental health benefits were also frequently raised, with comments claiming being in the forest improved mental wellbeing, *"I use forest to foster a sense of personal wellbeing, without our forest I see rising mental health cost for our nation."*

#### **Derive benefit from ecosystem services:**

##### **Survey data: 22%**

Around 22% of responses to question 6 referred to ecological functions as a use of forests in their region. Clean air and water were frequently mentioned, alongside rainfall and climate change mitigation. Respondents stressed the importance of acknowledging how all of these functions are connected and how humans benefit from them. A common point of discussion was the connection of the waterways and catchments, and how critical these are to Melbourne's water supply, *"...it's wonderful to know our water is pure and from these wonderful forests."* Other ecological benefits listed included forests as a source of firewood, carbon sink, soil protection and food (fish, honey).

#### **Concerned for biodiversity loss and threatened species:**

##### **Survey data: 20%**

Despite listing enjoyment of the forest as a common use, around 20% of responses added that through this use they feel saddened by the declining biodiversity and increasing fragmentation of the landscape. Some talked about the elation they feel when they spot a unique animal or plant but noted this was occurring less frequently than it had in the past. The decline in native flora and fauna was referred to as impacting people's desire to use and visit the forest. *"I like to visit our forests for rest and relaxation, but the biodiversity loss has become overwhelming for me"*.

#### **For employment and other economic benefits:**

##### **Survey data: 10%**

A small amount of responses (10%) referred to forest use as a place of employment, resource supply and production. Some respondents were employed in the timber industry and so used the forest directly for their livelihood. Others used the forest as inspiration for creative work (art, craft and jewellery making). The apiary industry was also referred to as relying heavily on healthy



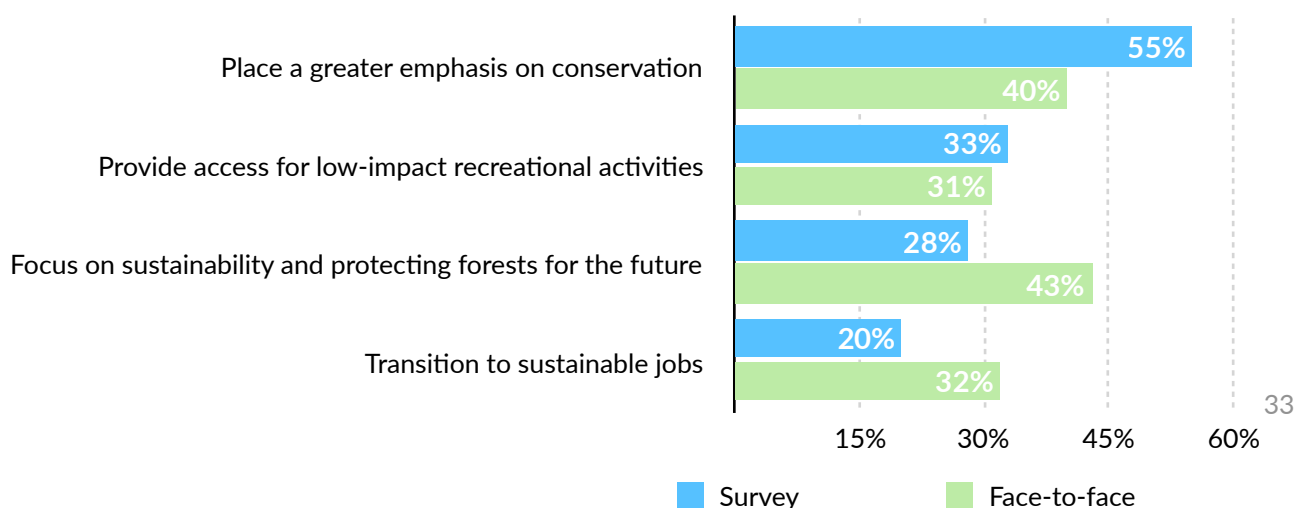
forests as “the backbone” of the industry. Some pointed to using the forest by consuming products derived from it, such as honey, firewood and timber, however there was some backlash against this mentality referred to in other responses. These were concerned with the consumption based attitude and implication of the question, stating that people should appreciate and protect the forests rather than ‘use’ them. The potential of forest use for the tourism industry was also mentioned, “Many people spend quite a lot of money on outdoor pursuits, you only have to look at the members of people undertaking multi day hikes in Europe. We have a unique environment that would be attractive to many people for hiking, bike riding and other activities.”

## Q7. How could the RFAs better provide for multiple forest uses (i.e. recreation, conservation, livelihood and economy)?

There were 658 online survey responses to question 7, representing around 89% of survey responses. Around 80% of these responses were original, 20% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (76), the Wilderness Society (43) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10).

There were 170 recorded comments on question 7 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 5% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations. Most commonly mentioned in face-to-face data were comments focussing on sustainability and protecting forests, referring to not harvesting intact mature forest and better planning for multi-use forest such as zoning. Conservation issues were also raised particularly around water and biosecurity. Comments on recreational use tended towards supporting access and community led, collaborative decisions on finding a balance for mixed use forests. Transitioning jobs was a smaller theme in face-to-face consultations. Comments in this theme were more focussed on security and certainty for regional towns, maintaining infrastructure such as roads, and supporting transitions to long term future industries such as tourism and apiculture. Face-to-face consultations also raised the need for better communication with the public about how forests are used in that area, and suggested that visitors be given education on multi-use forest when they arrive in the region. Also mentioned was the frequency of review and assessment for RFAs; 20 years was seen as too long and comments suggested annual assessments instead.

The key themes across responses were based around four interrelated themes:



The pro-forma responses from Friends of the Earth Melbourne was one sentence which answered, *“By terminating the unsustainable native forest logging industry and lapsing the RFAs”*. The Wilderness Society response centred around ending environmental law exceptions for the timber industry and the ways in which this would stimulate other forest-based industries such as tourism. VNPA repeated the view that there is no need for an RFA in West Victoria especially because the relative size of the industry is small (\$1m annual revenue), and also echoed the above calls for an end to EPBC Act exemptions.

**Place a greater emphasis on conservation:**

***Survey data: 55%, Face-to-face: 40%***

Biodiversity and conservation were discussed by more than half (55%) of online survey responses, as well as 40% of face-to-face responses, particularly that of catchments, wildlife, gene pools, carbon sequestration, climate refuges, water and native fauna and flora. Some felt that *“a more conservation focused approach with views to sustainable fire management, carbon storage and tourism rather than timber harvesting”* would better provide for multiple forest uses. Responses emphasised the importance of conservation in order to ensure the forest remains able to be used, implying that without conservation no other uses would be viable due to over-consumption and degradation. Respondents frequently referred to conservation and protection in terms of need, urgency and immediacy, often including terms like crisis, destroyed, remaining, and priority.

**Provide access for low-impact recreational activities:**

***Survey data: 33%, Face-to-face: 31%***

Around a third of responses discussed recreational uses. These mostly focussed on ensuring access, supporting use by improving amenities, and ensuring recreational activities did not negatively impact forest ecosystems. However, others cautioned that recreational use can also damage forests and that some users take advantage. In order to avoid this, some called for increased *“people on the ground”* to help monitor and police appropriate use.

**Focus on sustainability and protecting forests for the future:**

***Survey data: 28%, Face-to-face: 43%***

Encouragement of forward thinking and long term planning appeared frequently across responses, with comments urging regulators to facilitate sustainable forest management to ensure security of ecosystems and longevity of Victoria’s native and old-growth forests. When discussing forest protection, many comments referred to the value of old-growth for carbon storage and were anxious to protect this resource due to its increasing scarcity. There were concerns that if RFAs continued with ‘business as usual’ these valuable State (and National) assets risked being lost. Their loss was deemed to be completely unacceptable as respondents pointed out that we have no way of replacing old-growth once it is gone. Responses also touched on the uncertainty of the future and contended that a conservation approach was more suitable to be able to respond to any potential unexpected developments.

### **Transition to sustainable jobs:**

**Survey data: 20%, Face-to-face: 32%**

Online survey responses took a different view to face-to-face comments when it came to economy and livelihood. Online responses tended towards transitioning timber harvesting jobs to sustainable industries either through plantations, alternative materials or complete industry switches for employees to work in tourism and carbon management. One respondent suggested that *“Employment is best served by focusing on the high conservation value of our forests and promoting ecotourism and capitalising on the ecosystem services.”* The main argument for this was one seen throughout the survey which centres on the fact that without forests, timber harvesting jobs are not sustainable, therefore forest protection should be in the interest of these workers.

The merits of this thinking were strongly opposed in face-to-face results, where participants expressed frustration that others don't fully understand how forestry works and that regardless of their intentions, increasing demand for product meant that some degree of forest harvesting would continue.

## THEME 1: ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

### 1.2: Conserve forest biodiversity and maintain ecosystem health

---

Question 8 and 9 focussed on “conserve forest diversity and maintain ecosystem health” where the paper suggests that “To conserve forest biodiversity and maintain ecosystem health, the modernised RFAs should include a range of conservation strategies, including changes to the formal and informal CAR reserve system, restoration of EVCs, improving connectivity between fragmented EVCs, and working with private landholders to conserve under-represented EVCs.” Respondents were asked to answer these questions with this in mind.

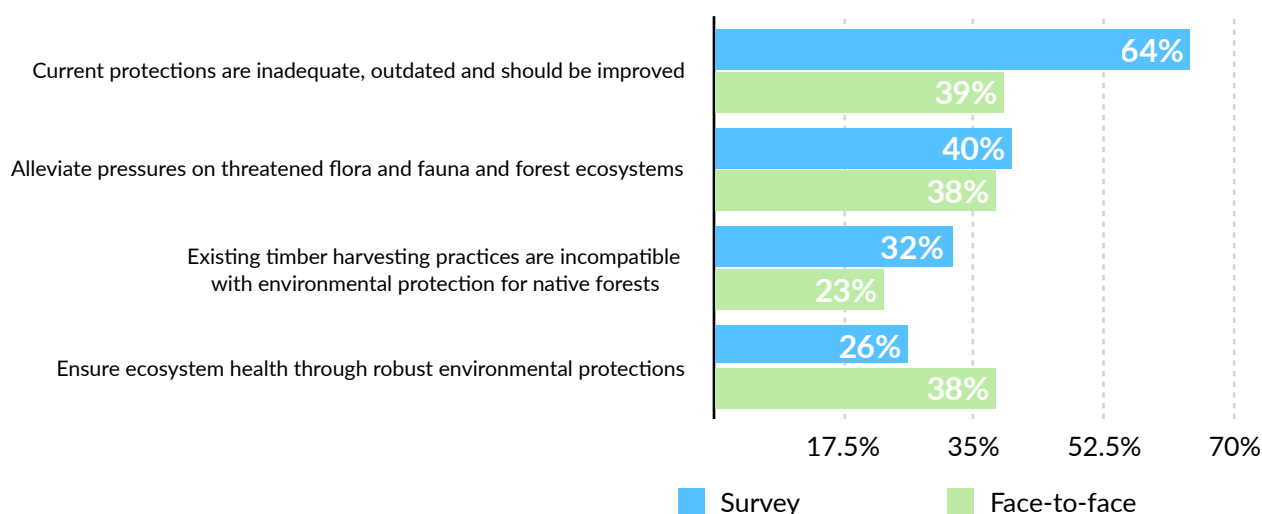
---

#### Q8. What are your views on existing environmental protections afforded across the entire forest estate (including parks, reserves and State forests) through the RFAs?

There were 674 online survey responses to question 8, representing around 92% of survey responses. Around 80% of these responses were original, 20% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (80), the Wilderness Society (47) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10).

There were 106 recorded comments on question 8 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 3% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations. Interestingly, face-to-face data didn't strongly argue that protections were inadequate, but more commonly referred to practical, day-to-day difficulties as a result of environmental protections (or lack thereof). In terms of environmental protections, face-to-face comments differed from online responses in that they frequently commented on the impact of fire and invasive or feral species. Bushfires were front of mind for much of the face-to-face discussion on flora and fauna and robust environmental protections. Comments drew attention to bushfires reducing habitat and the length of time forests take to recover from major fire events. They were generally not in favour of a 'lock up and leave' approach, denoting high fuel loads and invasive species creating more problems than solutions if forests were left unattended. Feral and invasive species were seen as a considerable problems that should be addressed by any environmental considerations of RFAs, referring to pests such as wild dogs, feral cats, deer, blackberry, weeds. Some suggested researching bio-controls to create a comprehensive, science-based management plan to combat this.

The key themes across responses were based around four interrelated themes:



The pro-forma responses from Friends of the Earth Melbourne and the Wilderness Society discussed the inadequacy of environmental protections, pointing out the increases seen in endangered species (including the Greater Glider). Both organisations urged for the Government (State and Federal) to take responsibility and action on this matter. It was noted the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) conducted an investigation in the central west, and previous findings and recommendations for areas to be protected were encouraged to be implemented.

#### **Current protections are inadequate, outdated and should be improved:**

**Survey data: 64%, Face-to-face: 39%**

The majority of survey responses (and fully 39% of face-to-face responses) claimed the existing environmental protections were “*totally inadequate*”, “*poorly managed*”, “*very weak*”, and “*clearly failing*” and that “*What is said and what is done are incongruent.*” There was strong criticism of environmental law exemptions and the alleged cognitive bias of industry and Government to change this. Also discussed within responses to the above theme was the perceived disregard for existing protections, “*Existing environmental protections are insufficient and those that exist are not adequately policed or persecuted.*” Many responses alluded that regulators and industry are aware of the impact on the environment, but choose to ignore the effects in favour of economic benefits. There was support for more practical application, monitoring and enforcement of protections, as many respondents were sceptical that protections would actually be implemented, “*There are plenty of reports and policies but that doesn't mean anything is ever done once they get written.*”

#### **Alleviate pressures on threatened flora and fauna and forest ecosystems:**

**Survey data: 40%, Face-to-face: 38%**

Of significant concern in many responses was the precarious future of threatened and endangered native species that rely on forests for their survival. Respondents raised the role of legislation in protecting these species, frequently pointing to the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*. Responses in this theme were concerned that species could not simultaneously survive the

threats they faced with environmental challenges (lower rainfall, increased temperatures, decreased habitats, invasive species, feral animals etc) and the impact of declining forests without intervention from Government which they claimed has “...a duty of care to maintain forest integrity”.

**Existing timber harvesting practices are incompatible with environmental protection for native forests:**

**Survey data: 32%, Face-to-face: 23%**

There was a consistent theme throughout responses to question 8 that continuing current timber harvesting practices would create a conflict of interest with environmental protection measures. Responses accused timber harvesting of being responsible for many forest ailments including increased frequency and intensity of bushfires, endangerment of native species, declining diversity, putting the climate at risk and negatively affecting the integrity of forest ecology. Many comments felt that you could only have one or the other, with the majority supporting environmental protection through the dismantling of the native forest timber harvesting industry.

**Ensure ecosystem health through robust environmental protections:**

**Survey data: 26%, Face-to-face: 38%**

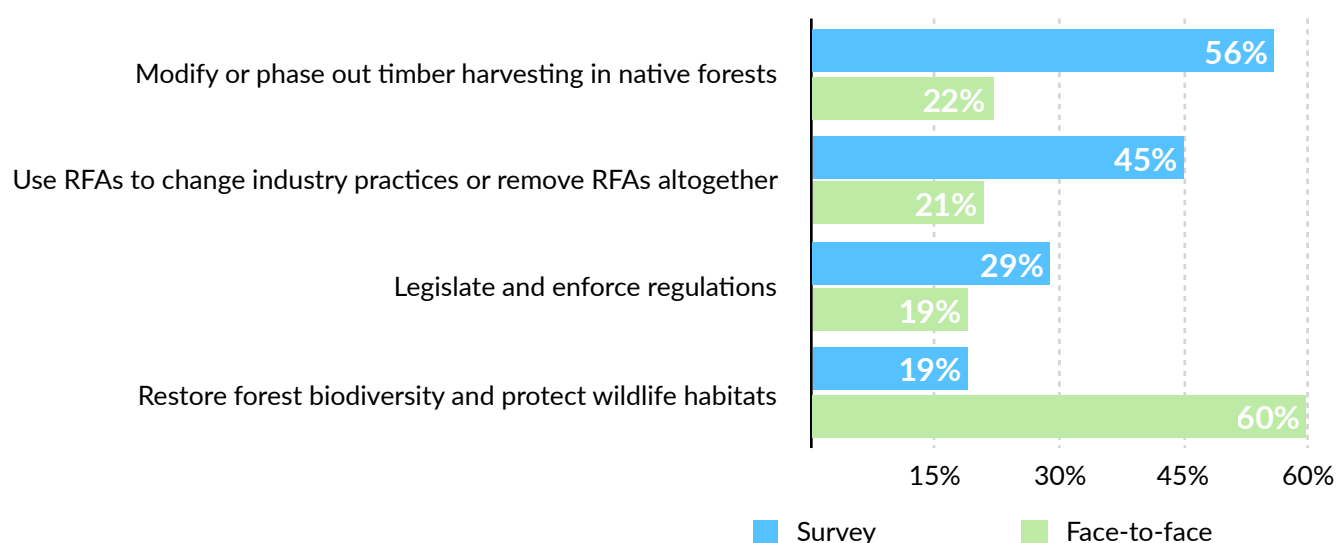
Over a quarter of responses wanted to ensure ecosystem health through robust environmental protections, but many felt that current measures are “...woefully inadequate and have failed to protect the forests and the species that rely on them.” Others pointed out that despite RFAs and existing protections, Victoria’s forest biodiversity had become increasingly threatened over the past 20 years. There were concerns that the existing protections did not protect native forests in practice, and that Victoria was likely to experience continued decline in biodiversity.

## Q9. How could the environmental protections be improved?

There were 664 online survey responses to question 9, representing around 90% of survey responses. There was a considerable increase in the number of pro-forma responses received for this question. Around 72% of responses were original, 28% came from pre-filled pro-forma responses provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (102), the Wilderness Society (72) and the Victorian National Parks Association (11).

There were 132 recorded comments on question 9 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 4% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations. In contrast to the online survey results, the strongest theme from face-to-face data was based around restoring forest biodiversity and protecting wildlife habitats. In this theme, comments referred to expansion of the reserve (CAR) system, increasing research and surveying of species, and strongly advocated for control measures for feral animals and invasive weeds (e.g. blackberries). Frequently mentioned when discussing timber industry practices was moving towards a landscape approach instead of a “...coupe by coupe, species by species approach.” Other changes discussed in relation to editing RFAs was adopting other options for managing public forests such as utilising community groups and volunteers. Changes to legislation and regulation to ensure environmental protections are adhered to was regularly cited, with suggestions to include Key Performance Indicators to ensure goals are met and protections are implemented, not just discussed.

The key themes across responses were based around four interrelated themes:



The pro-forma responses from Friends of the Earth Melbourne and the Wilderness Society both discussed removing exceptions to environmental law as an essential outcome of the RFA modernisation process. VNPA went into specific detail for the West Victorian RFA areas and issues but echoed the sentiment that protections and ecological criteria have been inadequate and gaps should be filled. They went on to provide in depth technical detail on how this could be accomplished in the West Victorian RFA region.

#### **Modify or phase out timber harvesting in native forests:**

**Survey data: 56%, Face-to-face: 22%**

The strongest area of interest for respondents was changing or phasing out the timber industry. Much of this discussion concentrated on industry regulations facilitated through RFA requirements. Some responses acknowledged the transition to plantations had begun but still urged regulators to immediately stop any native forest harvesting. The overall sentiment was that the timber industry had been granted unfair exemptions and was doing more harm than good. This wasn't always agreed to, with other responses pointing out that harvesting timber can help with fuel reduction, forest infrastructure management (roads) and provides employment for regional communities. Many responses felt that regardless of the merit, RFAs should be allowed to lapse, thus reinstating the requirements of the EPBC Act and that the timber industry should then have to compete in the same market without "*special treatment*".

#### **Use RFAs to change industry practices or remove RFAs altogether:**

**Survey data: 45%, Face-to-face: 21%**

Responses in this theme—which comprised almost half of the survey results (45%)—felt that the "*free pass*" awarded to the timber industry via RFAs needed to be addressed urgently. Around 23% of survey responses specifically discussed the EPBC Act, stating that the requirements of the Act should apply to logging and as such the RFAs (which enable the exemption) should lapse. Respondents in this theme wanted greater accountability, monitoring and application of law.

Some also suggested the best way to accomplish this would be through the Great Forest National Park and Emerald Link, not RFA modernisation.

**Legislate and enforce regulations:**

***Survey data: 29%, Face-to-face: 19%***

Another controversial theme was the regulation and enforcement of policy, particularly around RFAs. Sentiment in this theme revolved around a high level of distrust that any regulations would be enforced, with comments often pointing to a lack of monitoring and overdue reviews throughout the last 20-year RFA period. Alongside this thinking were criticisms that when reviews are conducted they are biased and have predetermined outcomes, and where reviews are conducted by an independent third party their recommendations are not heeded by industry or regulators. People wanted improvements around accountability, review periods and findings, and for consequences if RFA aims are found by these evaluations to not have been achieved. Again, there was strong support to *“Remove the RFA exemption from environmental laws, and create a protected forest”*.

**Restore forest biodiversity and protect wildlife habitats:**

***Survey data: 19%, Face-to-face: 60%***

Also of concern to around 19% of survey responses and 60% of face-to-face responses in this question was forest protection and restoration. These responses raised that any improvements to environmental protections needed to consider native flora, fauna and habitat as priority and that it was important to *“Recognise our unique natural resources”*. There was strong support for protection and conservation of forest, particularly to ensure ongoing biodiversity. Others raised that improving environmental protections benefits everyone in the long run and could provide *“... an opportunity for Victoria to lead the nation in terms of improved stewardship of our magnificent native forests and our precious natural heritage.”* Also discussed was the importance of forests for mitigating climate change and ensuring threatened species were not lost as a result of human activity.



## THEME 1: ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

### 1.3: Promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership

---

Question 10 and 11 focussed on “Promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership”, specifically building collaborative relationships with Traditional Owners and increasing their involvement in management of country. The paper suggests that *“The RFAs should support the recognition of the rights of Victoria’s Traditional Owners to partner in land management on parks, reserves and State forests, and seek economic and cultural opportunities for Aboriginal Victorians.”* Respondents were asked to answer these questions with this in mind.

---

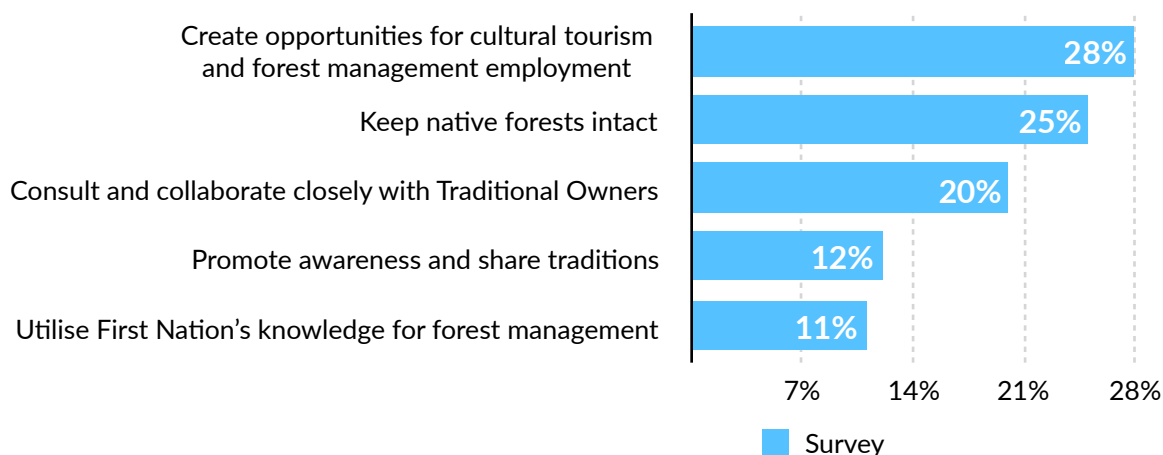
#### **Q10.** What opportunities could the RFAs provide to support access to and traditional use of forests by Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people?

There were 583 online survey responses to question 10, representing around 79% of survey responses. Around three quarter of these responses were original (75%), and the remaining 25% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (77), the Wilderness Society (55) and the Victorian National Parks Association (14).

There were 56 recorded comments to question 10 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 2% of total comments from all consultations. Given the small data set these comments were not cross compared to online survey themes in order to avoid misleading statistical comparisons. The main points emerging from the face-to-face engagements were very similar to online responses, with comments concentrating on the broad ideas of:

- Inclusion, engagement and authenticity of interaction between Government and Traditional Owner groups; collaborating on a regular basis.
- Creating and providing opportunities for Traditional Owners to be more closely involved in forest management, including employment, training, monitoring, fire management.
- Sharing knowledge held by Traditional Owners for both forestry and cultural interactions; ensuring this process is enhanced by RFAs rather than having RFAs be prescriptive.

The key themes across online survey responses frequently overlapped, with respondents offering similar ideas in slightly different ways. The themes were broadly based on the following actions:



The pro-forma response from Friends of the Earth Melbourne was one sentence: “Get logging out of native forests so there are still some values intact on country for traditional custodians.” The Wilderness Society went into more depth, supporting the aspirations of Traditional Owners in areas of land management, access and title. The Wilderness Society encouraged RFAs to facilitate agreement making in these matters. The VNPA advocated for the question to be directed to Traditional Owners however observed the importance of recognising First Nations rights, and of combining traditional knowledge and science to improve the health of forests and communities. The VNPA also noted that joint-management in Victoria has traditionally been delivered under the *National Parks Act 1975*, not via RFAs and State forest.

### **Create opportunities for cultural tourism and forest management employment:**

#### **Survey data: 28%**

Just over a quarter (28%) discussed active participation of Aboriginal people, including by creation of employment opportunities and furthering joint-management initiatives. “*The end of the RFAs will be incredible opportunity to partner with Traditional Owners to champion and protect Victoria’s ancient culture and history – from the preservation of sacred sites to the creation of new ranger and tourist guide jobs*”. Some responses were in opposition to this idea however, pointing to issues that may arise within communities when a particular group (or family) claims ownership and therefore control of the resource and revenue from that area. Others felt offended by the idea that they were not included in ownership (due to being non-indigenous) and that decision-makers should approach forest management decisions as “one people”. There were many comments to consult, actively listen and involve Traditional Owners in decision-making of forest management. Specific suggestions included:

- “Employ Traditional Owners and respect their connection to country”
- “Traditional Owner’s land rights and management rights should be recognised and encouraged with a proportional ranger representation.”
- “Reserve areas of significance to Traditional Owners to be set aside as unavailable for forestry, tourism, and other economic developments.”
- “Fire management the Aboriginal way might help - and respect”
- “Consult with that community to find out all the information we seem to have lost”

### **Keep native forests intact:**

#### **Survey data: 25%**

A quarter (25%) of discussions in this question surrounded protecting and preserving forests to avoid further damage, as represented by the following quote expressing strong sentiment that *“Logging effectively is further destroying stolen Aboriginal land.”* Respondents in this theme claimed that *“RFA’s are inconsistent with traditional owner rights and responsibilities”* as they support activities (such as timber harvesting) that are in conflict with how Traditional Owners would have used and managed the forests. Others suggested that *“Area should be made available specifically for the protection of cultural values”* which was further supported by others who wanted to stop all interference, *“Leave them [forests] in as natural state as possible”* which has been a contentious notion throughout consultations. Some were concerned that even if custodianship is restored, it was important that forest protection and biodiversity were maintained, *“...biodiversity conservation in partnership with Koori communities is important”*. Nonetheless, people felt that it was important for Traditional Owners to be empowered and have reduced (or no) barriers to access.

### **Consult and collaborate closely with Traditional Owners:**

#### **Survey data: 20%**

Many respondents felt unable to comment, either due to lack of knowledge, information or ownership, *“This question should be directed to the Traditional Owners. I don’t feel qualified to comment on their behalf.”* Around 20% raised that RFAs should create more opportunities for partnership, engagement and collaboration with Traditional Owners particularly when industry and Government are looking to make decisions and reviews around forest management (such as timber releases). There was an underlying view that any activities which would utilise forest resources (such as timber, hunting, fire management, apiary etc) should be discussed with local indigenous rangers in order to incorporate traditional views.

### **Promote awareness and share traditions:**

#### **Survey data: 12%**

Increasing awareness, understanding and education, both for the general public and Traditional Owners was a smaller, but significant theme with around 12% of responses advocating increased awareness, understanding, training, information, communication and documentation. This knowledge exchange went both ways, with some responses suggesting a blended approach to forest management—taking the best scientific information and combining that with traditional management approaches. This was most commonly mentioned in relation to fire management practices, particularly that of cool burns and patchwork burning. There were suggestions to increase training opportunities, specifically in relation to Registered Aboriginal Parties as well as calls to *“Promote awareness and facilitate communication and collaboration...”* and to provide *“Education on sacred sites”*.

### **Utilise First Nation’s knowledge for forest management:**

#### **Survey data: 11%**

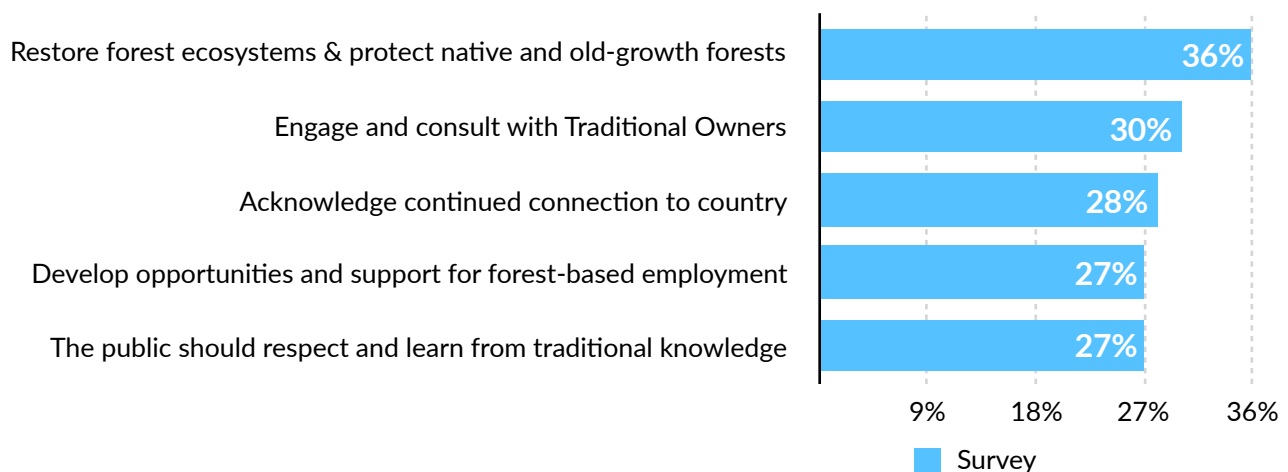
A smaller theme across responses to question 10 was to ensure RFAs utilise the knowledge of First Nations peoples in order to support access to and traditional use of forests. The most commonly referred to management was related to fire programs and utilising more traditional approaches to manage this in future. People felt that the current practices were not working and were unsuitable to the environment. They valued the depth and history of knowledge Traditional Owners possess in relation to their country and wanted RFAs to take this opportunity.

## Q11. How could the RFAs enable the legal rights of Traditional Owners to partner in land management and seek economic and cultural opportunities to be realised in future forest management?

There were 550 online survey responses to question 11, representing around 75% of survey responses. There were a lot of pro-forma responses in this question (28%), provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (89), the Wilderness Society (56) and the Victorian National Parks Association (9). About 72% of responses were original.

There were 39 recorded comments to question 11 from face-to-face consultations, representing less than 1% of total comments from all events. Given the small data set these comments were not cross compared to online survey themes in order to avoid misleading statistical comparisons. Comments varied in their suggestions, but focussed predominantly on empowerment and collaboration, with suggestions ranging from creating opportunities and employment, to decision making powers, increasing Traditional Owners' voice, joint management, and reducing barriers to participation via consultation.

The key themes across online survey responses can be grouped over the following categories:



Again, the pro-forma response to this question from Friends of the Earth Melbourne was one sentence: *"Create opportunities for first nation stakeholder groups to have custodianship restored within a multiple purpose reserve system."* The Wilderness Society encouraged RFAs to be a tool to facilitate negotiation and consultation with Traditional Owners. They were also supportive of encouraging Traditional Owner directed land management and for Traditional Owners to rightly benefit from any economic benefits derived from forests. The VNPA again advocated for the question to be directed to Traditional Owners however observed the challenge faced due to separate legislative processes (*Native Title Act 1993*) and noted *"...it is hard to understand exactly how the RFA could usefully deliver in this area"*.

### **Restore forest ecosystems and protect native and old-growth forests:**

#### **Survey data: 36%**

Around a third of online responses (36%) discussed increasing joint management and partnership with Traditional Owners to restore forest ecosystems and better protect remaining native and old-growth forests. The overall sentiment in this theme was that decision-making and regulation of these issues should be more heavily directed by Traditional Owners including *“...for the identification, creation and management of new parks and reserves, and for... the broader cultural landscape and ecosystem processes.”* There was a strong focus on creating opportunities for Traditional Owners to be more involved and to take leadership of forest management, with responses calling for restored custodianship and to *“Prioritise their opinions over the opinions of those outside their communities.”* Others noted that protecting and restoring forests was also vital in order to protect and restore culturally significant sites.

### **Engage and consult with Traditional Owners:**

#### **Survey data: 30%**

Responses raised that RFAs should enable (not obstruct) ongoing consultation between Government and Traditional Owners. They felt it was important to directly involve Aboriginal people in decision-making on forest management and that these decisions should be driven from a culturally informed process. Some responses felt that ongoing consultation with Traditional Owner groups should be built into the RFAs. Authenticity was also frequently mentioned, with respondents insisting that any engagement and consultation should be authentic and done with integrity.

### **Acknowledge continued connection to country:**

#### **Survey data: 28%**

Respect, recognition and voice were key terms in this concept, where comments often reflected awe and gratitude for the wealth of cultural heritage First Nations people bring to the area. *“Over history of white settlement, Aboriginals have been removed from their traditional country, their knowledge and land management practices suppressed. Study of Aboriginal culture should be encouraged and methods of indigenous food gathering, growing and hunting.”* Respondents also felt it was important to *“engage local Aboriginal communities and act upon their local knowledge”* and to incorporate this in the modernisation of RFAs. They acknowledged the depth of cultural knowledge Aboriginal people hold, *“Surely knowledge based on thousands of years of living within these areas needs to be heard and relied upon.”* People were keen to maximise the opportunities this knowledge could provide.

### **Develop opportunities and support for forest-based employment:**

#### **Survey data: 27%**

Economic benefits, including employment opportunities, were raised in around 21% of responses. There were suggestions to *“create opportunities”* in a range of areas: custodianship, tourism, rangerships, forest guardianship, and education. Respondents felt it was important to enable access to forest economies for Aboriginal people and that they should *“rightly benefit from any economic values, or systems accounts that may be developed for carbon, water, tourism or other values.”* Other responses called for a *“multi-purpose reserve system”*, managed by Traditional Owners, where they could work with Government to create wildlife sanctuaries, education centres, and cultural sites. Respondents cautioned that any such undertaking should *“...be in the spirit of respect and reconciliation.”* People did acknowledge that RFAs were a difficult vehicle by

which to accomplish something like this, but nonetheless felt that it was important to include the idea in discussions.

### **The public should respect and learn from traditional knowledge:**

#### **Survey data: 27%**

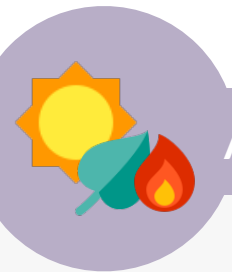
Creating awareness and understanding through education opportunities was raised in around a quarter (27%) of responses to this question. They pointed out the value in educating and sharing traditional knowledge and culture, and the positive impact on forests this could have. As above, there were suggestions to support the development of *“cultural centres to educate and highlight importance of the land and their culture.”* This was a common idea throughout responses to this question, suggestions ranged from food education (bush tucker), wildlife knowledge demonstrations (similar to Northern Territory crocodile demonstrations) and sharing cultural practices (language and ritual), with the proviso that *“Sacred and traditional sites should be understood and protected.”*

#### **Criticisms and suggestions:**

Some online survey responses were offended at the idea proposed by this question, with criticisms including comments such as *“Having Aboriginal blood does not mean that person loves the bush anymore than me, nor utilises anymore than me”* and *“Economic opportunities are not a traditional use of the land.”* A few comments pointed to examples across Australia of successful joint management, particularly in Queensland and at the Uluru National Park. These suggested Victoria could adapt their processes and management systems to better address Traditional Owner land management rights.

# THEME 2: THE LONG-TERM STABILITY OF FORESTS AND FOREST INDUSTRIES

Question 12 – 14 sought to understand the following themes:



## Address climate change and other large-scale disturbances

Responses called for research into fire management and fuel reduction, and to implement best practice approaches. Also discussed was to phase out native forest timber harvesting and to consult with experts so as to apply findings in evidence-based decision-making model, to allow the forest to regenerate and restore biodiversity.

*"Bushfires are the greatest threat to the biological diversity of our forests."*



## Support the development of forest-dependent industry

There was support for the transition of timber harvesting out of native-forests to plantation and to move towards sustainable industries (tourism, food foraging, water, carbon, recreation). Respondents wanted to modify or remove current RFAs, explore alternative materials and land use and to create opportunities and think long-term. There was also encouragement for a move towards ecotourism and other low impact forest-based industries, and to maximise the benefits from ecosystem services, with support for native-forest protection.

*"Ensure adequate funding for establishing plantations and manage for longer rotations so they can supply timber not just paper."*

*"Explore valuing or quantifying the contribution of forests to climate regulation and carbon sequestration."*

## THEME 2: THE LONG-TERM STABILITY OF FORESTS AND FOREST INDUSTRIES

### 2.1: Address climate change and other large-scale disturbances

---

Question 12 focussed on “Address climate change and other large scale disturbances”, including landscape-level fires and invasive species. The paper suggests that “A modernised RFA process should ensure that forest management decisions are informed by up-to-date scientifically-credible information on the current and likely future impact of climate change and other large-scale disturbances.” It goes on to state “Forest management strategies for State forests, parks and reserves should incorporate multi-scale actions that build the resilience of Victoria’s forests...” Respondents were asked to answer this question with this in mind.

---

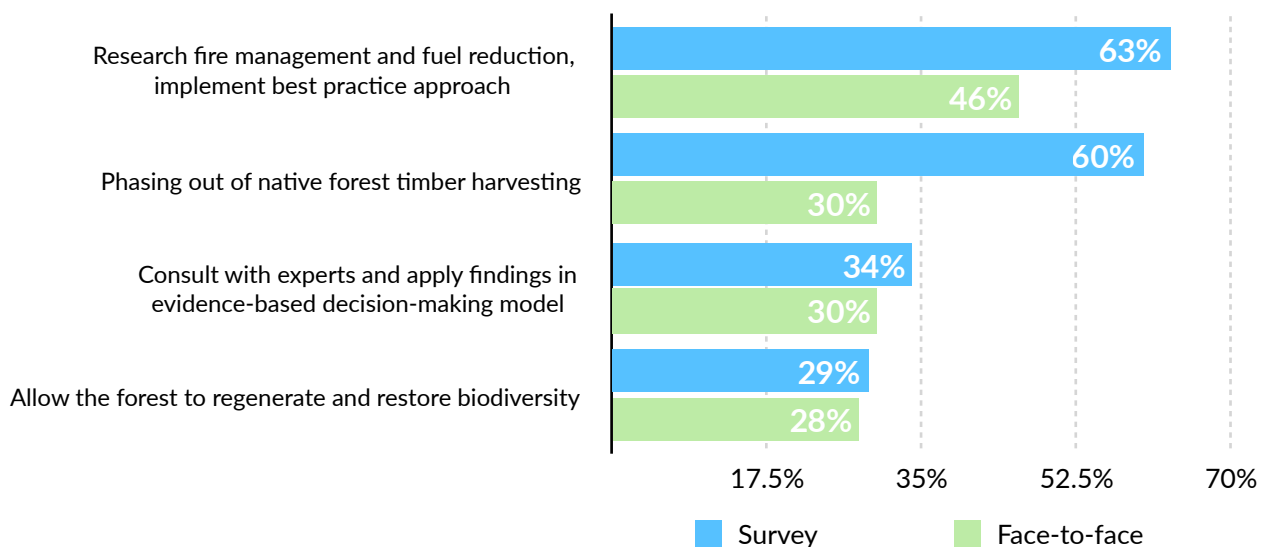
#### **Q12.** How could the RFAs consider climate change and other large-scale natural disturbances (including bushfires)?

There were 627 online survey responses to question 12, representing around 85% of survey responses. Around 75% of responses were original, 25% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (90), the Wilderness Society (54) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10).

There were 155 recorded comments on question 12 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 4% of total comments from all face-to-face consultations. The strongest theme was the same as online survey responses: *Research fire management and fuel reduction, implement best practice approach*. Almost half (46%) of face-to-face comments mentioned bushfires, burns, fire, fuel and wildfire. Changing timber harvesting and consulting with experts were of equal frequency. The face-to-face comments raised a new approach in timber management, suggesting that the use of timber should be promoted over more carbon intensive production materials (such as concrete and steel). Salvage logging was also suggested, with comments noting that after fires it’s possible to use the burnt wood left behind. Forest regeneration and biodiversity was a smaller theme in face-to-face comments, which identified the need for ongoing surveying of bushland and native species. Comments in this theme also referred to water catchments, bees and pollination, planting trees for carbon capture and expanding the reserve system.



The key themes across responses were based around four broad categories:



The pro-forma response from Friends of the Earth Melbourne discussed the importance of accepting existing research around the impact of timber industry practices on climate security. The Wilderness Society echoed this sentiment, and supported removing *“logging regimes that make forests more flammable and fire-prone”*. Also mentioned in their response was the value of carbon stocks in Victoria’s forests. VNPA pointed out that further research and assessments need to be undertaken to fully understand the issue and create a strategy, providing several links to external references to guide this thinking.

#### **Research fire management and fuel reduction; implement best practice approach:**

**Survey data: 63%, Face-to-face: 46%**

Fuel reduction and fire management was a significant theme, with a large proportion (46-63%) of responses directly mentioning bushfires, burn programs, and controlled burning. Respondents in this theme felt that *“... bushfires are the greatest threat to the biological diversity of our forests”*. There was contention between responses which felt that fuel reduction was beneficial and others that felt forests should be left to grow, and that new growth will not burn with the same intensity. Some felt that timber harvesting increased forest vulnerability to bushfires and that the current model of forest management was *“...not adaptive to climate change or major bushfires”*. They acknowledged that fire loads needed to be controlled and urged Government to *“work closely on fire management”*. A handful of responses suggested working with Traditional Owners, *“Allowing the ecosystem to re-established and managing it in conjunction with Traditional Owners will help the forest function as a carbon sink and reduce fire risk across the region.”*

#### **Phasing out of native forest timber harvesting:**

**Survey data: 60%, Face-to-face: 30%**

A number of respondents discussed timber harvesting, with many calling for a cessation of the practice in native forests particularly that of clear-fell practices *“...clearfelled logging...is a very wasteful process and contributes significantly to erosion, water catchment degradation, loss of biodiversity and loss of rainfall.”* There was some disagreement however, with another response

which claimed that despite the timber industry being “...touted as a major threat to biodiversity and species...” those areas actually contain “...a network of stream buffers, retained patches, habitat trees etc. The logging actually provides a diversity within the landscape with regenerating forests of varying ages.” Others disagreed, pointing out that harvested areas of forests will dry out and their understories will take years to regenerate, and that Victoria did not have years to prepare for major fires and the impact of an already hotter climate. There was nonetheless agreement that “RFA regulation needs to be flexible enough to adapt to unprecedented changes...” and that an immediate end to native and old-growth logging was required to restore the forests to a state where they could manage large scale disturbances.

#### **Consult with experts and apply findings in evidence-based decision-making model:**

***Survey data: 34%, Face-to-face: 30%***

Engaging with scientists and other experts to research the best solutions to this question was a theme in around a third of responses. They emphasised the need to ensure any research is done with integrity and strongly advocated for the independence and neutrality of those conducting any investigations into this matter. Accountability and tangible findings were also deemed important, with comments suggesting the results of research should include “...measurable outcomes on climate action woven into them, with clear and specific repercussions for failing to meet those outcomes.” Within this theme some responses also suggested consulting with locals and Traditional Owners who may have more specialised knowledge in the relevant region or issue.

#### **Allow the forest to regenerate and restore biodiversity:**

***Survey data: 29%, Face-to-face: 28%***

In contrast to the fire management and fuel reduction responses, some people advocated for a ‘hands-off’ approach to forest management in order to allow the forest to regenerate and self-correct. Responses in this theme concentrated on protection and restoration, particularly of biodiversity and habitats. Some suggested utilising the CAR facility and implementing Special Protection Zones (SPZ). The general argument for protection and restoration was that forest integrity had been compromised and therefore they were less resilient than they had previously been. People argued that if forests were supported to regenerate themselves that would be the best way to ensure their resilience is restored, which would allow them to better combat large scale natural disturbances.

## THEME 2: THE LONG-TERM STABILITY OF FORESTS AND FOREST INDUSTRIES

### 2.2: Support the development of forest dependent industry

---

Questions 13 and 14 focussed on “*Support the development of forest dependent industries*”. The paper suggests that “*The RFA modernisation process should consider how Governments can best support the development of forest-based industries, including the forest and wood products industry, tourism and recreation industry, apiary, and the water industry, and ensure that these industries are sustainable into the future.*” It also offers that the process “*should also consider opportunities to encourage investment in innovation and new market opportunities.*” Respondents were asked to answer these questions with this in mind.

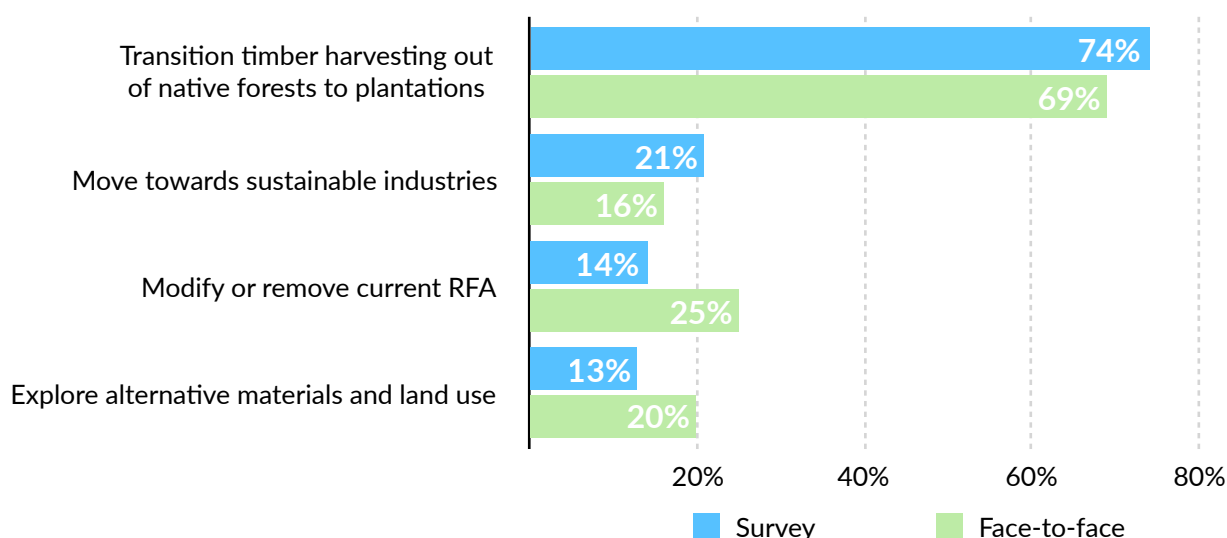
---

#### Q13. How could the RFAs better address industry sustainability?

There were 627 online survey responses to question 13, representing around 85% of survey responses. Around 77% of responses were original, 23% came from pre-filled proformas provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (90), the Wilderness Society (41) and the Victorian National Parks Association (11).

There were 163 recorded comments on question 13 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 4% of total comments from all events. Most commonly mentioned were ideas relating to the timber industry and ways in which it could be modified to continue to operate but with a more sustainable focus. Ideas included plantation timber, end to pulp harvesting, and “*Promote small scale selective harvesting for high value products, such as musical instruments in areas of low conservation significance*”. Face-to-face comments were less charged when discussing modifying or removing RFAs. Generally their comments were either focussed on access, however they also raised the length of RFAs and their review should be shorter, audited more frequently and focussed on principals of sustainability and responsibility. Alternative land use was a smaller theme in face-to-face, with comments also suggesting utilising private land plantations to increase diversity of species. Also suggested was research into medicinal and health use of forestry as an alternative sustainable industry.

The key themes across responses were dominated by the idea to transition timber harvesting out of native forests and into plantations. Responses often stated the timber industry needed to transition to plantation based and then added a suggestion on how this could be accomplished and what could take its place. This led to key themes being based across four interlinked categories:



The pro-forma response from Friends of the Earth Melbourne was one sentence: *“Ensure adequate funding for establishing plantations and manage for longer rotations so they can supply timber not just paper.”* The Wilderness Society took a similar standpoint, pointing out that *“It’s clear that RFAs have overseen the reduction of the sawn timber sector, while vast pulp volumes, which have a much smaller job ratio, continue.”* Both organisations advocated for RFAs to support industry transition out of native forests, suggesting the use of plantations and recycled materials. VNPA repeated the view that native forest harvesting in western Victoria is no longer viable and advocated for the focus to shift to other forest-dependent industries including carbon and tourism. VNPA supported firewood resourcing from woodlots and plantations and suggested the western forest should be assessed economically and socially for all uses and values.

### **Transition timber harvesting out of native forests to plantations:**

**Survey data: 74%, Face-to-face: 69%**

There were strong calls for transition to plantations, with 59% of survey responses directly mentioning plantations. *“Given that Victoria’s native forests are threatened in their long-term survival and face ecological collapse, the timber industry should not conduct logging (particularly clearfell logging) in native forests.”* Responses acknowledged that the issue of transition was complex, but nonetheless called for an immediate stop on native forest logging and for the Government to allocate funding to plantation development. Not all agreed with this, saying the market should decide and if the timber industry couldn’t survive without Government help it was not for taxpayers to *“prop it up”*. People were vehemently opposed to pulp coming out of native forest, but there was some support for selective logging of high value timber that could be used for furniture and art, *“If you must have logging, use the timber for high-value product, not woodchipping”*. People felt this transition was overdue and that there were benefits to this model, including industry certainty, increased species diversity, selective harvesting, opportunities for other materials and enabling efficiencies in the timber industry.

### **Move towards sustainable industries – tourism, food foraging, water, carbon, recreation:**

**Survey data: 21%, Face-to-face: 16%**

Responses sometimes discussed other industries to take the place of timber harvesting in native forests. The most common of these was tourism, closely followed by beekeeping and carbon.

People viewed these industries as being both sustainable in terms of their environmental impact, and for long-term, ongoing employment in regional communities. There were many comments that international and local visitors alike would cherish the opportunity to visit Victoria's unspoilt forests for a range of activities including art, cycling, hiking, cultural tourism and food tourism. Some comments went even further to detail and compare the relative cost and profitability of tourism versus timber, claiming that in the future tourism was clearly more valuable and far-reaching. Responses advocated for RFAs to support a transition towards more long-term, low-impact forest-based industries in order to better address sustainability.

#### **Explore alternative materials and land use:**

**Survey data: 14%, Face-to-face: 25%**

A smaller, but notable, theme was that of exploring alternative materials and land use. Responses suggested RFAs facilitate and encourage investigation of alternative materials for uses that were previously provided by timber and timber by-products. *"It seems such a waste to cut old growth forest for fiber...Hemp grows at a much faster rate than trees and should be considered for fiber production."* There were suggestions to repurpose disused farmland and agricultural areas for plantations of alternative crops or best use hard/softwood. Within this theme, people felt it was important for RFAs to enable the timber industry to work more closely with Government and local authorities to explore more creative and innovative solutions to timber harvesting practices in the future.

#### **Modify or remove current RFAs:**

**Survey data: 13%, Face-to-face: 20%**

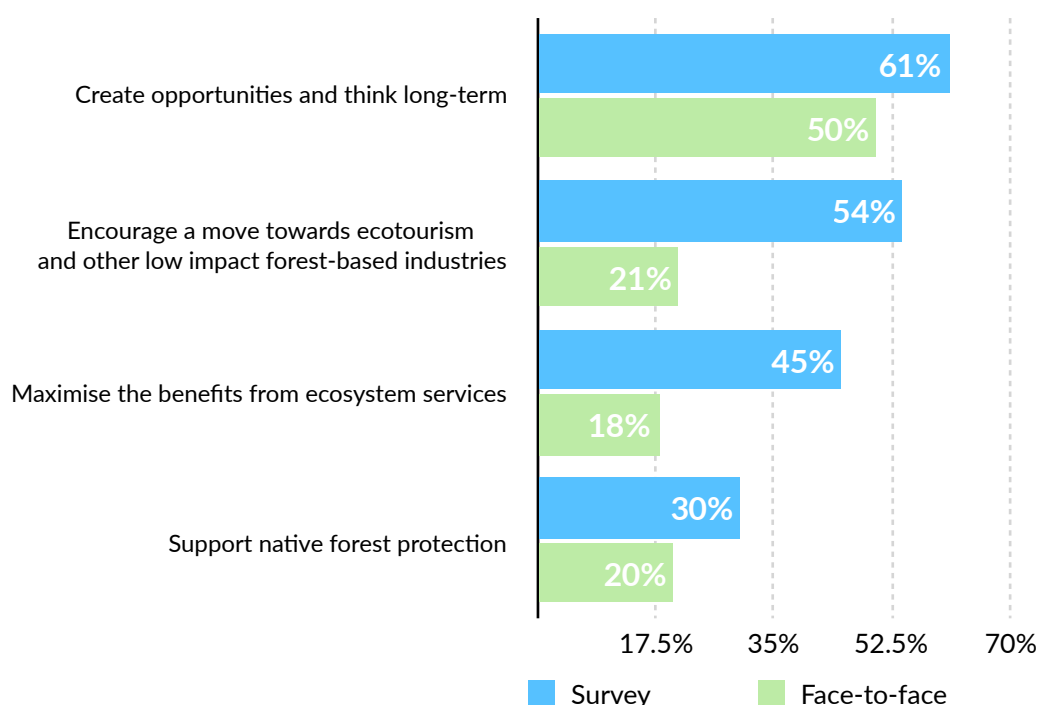
There were a moderate number of responses which advocated for the removal of the RFA system entirely. Responses in this theme expressed frustration with the focus of RFAs and felt they were outdated and inadequate to address present-day issues of sustainability. There was a high level of distrust with RFAs and anger towards their alleged impact on biodiversity, forest stability and supposed bias towards 'propping up' the timber industry via VicForests. *"RFA's have been such a spectacular failure at addressing sustainability because of their focus exclusively on the financial returns of timber as a product, that they should not continue, and be replaced by a different mechanism, more accountable for sustainable, natural heritage and non-destructive outcomes."*

**Q14.** How could the RFA's encourage investment and new market opportunities for forest-based industries (including the forests and wood products industry, tourism, apiary and emerging markets such as carbon)?

There were 579 online survey responses to question 14, representing around 79% of survey responses. Around 72% of responses were original, 28% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (94), the Wilderness Society (60) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10).

There were 151 recorded comments on question 14 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 4% of total comments from all events. Face-to-face comments discussed opportunities in terms of driving innovation and creative uses for the timber industry, including plantations and timber salvaging. They also raised the possibility of utilising waste products from forestry. Tourism was a smaller theme, as face-to-face comments concentrated more on the current industry (timber) than emerging ones (ecotourism, carbon). Recreational use was raised in these comments as a way in which RFAs could encourage investment but did not go into detail of how this could be accomplished. The most commonly referred to ecosystem service was carbon, with suggestions for the state to sell carbon and incorporate it into their long-term planning. When discussing protecting native forests, face-to-face comments centred on ensuring access, combatting pests and regenerating forests through planting programs.

The key themes across responses were interlinked, with strong support for a 'forward-thinking' approach and suggestions of ways to support emerging industries. Key themes follow:



The pro-forma response from Friends of the Earth Melbourne stated that carbon is the most important investment for the future and that retaining forest should be prioritised when exploring other industries. The Wilderness Society focussed on removing environmental law exemptions and urged RFAs to “...provide for the full range of forest-dependent businesses and industries.” VNPA stressed the urgency for an agreed method for assessing carbon impact of logging in native forest and advocated for the removal of VicForests from the western forests. They also raised “...a need to provide more opportunities for camping and recreation, particularly for the growing ‘grey nomad’ market.”

### **Create opportunities and think long-term:**

***Survey data: 61%, Face-to-face: 50%***

Over half of responses (50-61%), mentioned opportunities, future, incentives, support and innovation in their response. The sentiment seemed to be that now is the time for Government, through RFAs, to enable and empower smaller emerging forest-based industries that have previously been overlooked. Others criticised the “unfair” treatment granted to the timber industry through RFAs and urged regulators to remove Government support of the timber industry. There have been a few suggestions throughout consultation responses to use Victorian hardwood timber as a high value, luxury timber only and that all paper, pulp and wood-chips should be sourced out of plantations or from alternative materials such as hemp. *“I understand that some high end furniture and cabinetry products are enhanced by the beauty of our natural timber products. Where timber is not considered a decorative feature of any product there are now higher yield crops”*

Others called for an end to the industry altogether, especially of native-forest harvesting. There was excitement around the possibilities alternative materials could bring, with suggestions to explore the viability of hemp, bamboo and recycling for innovative ways to fill the demand previously catered to by timber products. Responses in this theme requested red tape to be removed and for RFAs to be supportive in providing access to forests and enabling emerging industries.

### **Encourage a move towards ecotourism and other low impact forest-based industries:**

***Survey data: 54%, Face-to-face: 21%***

Responses discussed shifting towards alternative forest-based industries. Discussion in this theme centred around two main areas: tourism and beekeeping. Timber harvesting was seen as a low-value use of forests compared with the potential value of tourism, bush-medicine and recreation. Comments pointed to New Zealand as an example of what this could look like in Victoria, and also encouraged Victoria to market its unique flora and fauna. Respondents expressed strong support for developing the tourism industry, specifically forest-based eco-tourism *“Nature based tourism and health benefits of nature are a growing trend.”* However, some responses felt that forest degradation was causing loss of *“...important forest trails for walking, bike riding and other activities”*.

They also raised that the timber industry has *“had it all its own way for too long”* and that the economic, environmental and social benefits of low-impact industries would be of greater value to the wider community. Many respondents stated that timber harvesting, bushfires and other events were reducing the available areas to the bees for foraging and that increased access for beekeepers to native forest would improve overall forest health. In order to accomplish this, responses which discussed beekeeping often demanded the removal of timber harvesting from native forests and called for restoration and recovery projects to enable honey production from natural sites.

Whilst there was support for encouraging low impact forest-based industries, there was also concern for its possible impacts. There were warnings to ensure the forest was not negatively impacted by human activity and that use and visitor numbers should be monitored and regulated to ensure future forest preservation.

### **Maximise the benefits from ecosystem services:**

***Survey data: 45%, Face-to-face: 18%***

Respondents mentioned ecosystem services in their response. Typically this was to use the forest as carbon storage, although there were some that took a wider view. Suggestions included “*Learn how to assess and measure the economic value of carbon storage*” and “*...developing a longer term approach to management.*” Responses pointed out the emerging markets and new opportunities future forests could present and encouraged “*...valuing or quantifying the contribution of forests to climate regulation and carbon sequestration.*” Responses which discussed carbon also frequently mentioned the forest’s role in water security, pointing out the importance of ensuring the ongoing security of rivers, catchments and reservoirs.

### **Support native forest protection:**

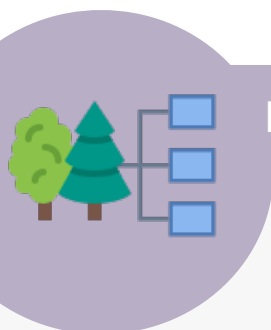
***Survey data: 30%, Face-to-face: 20%***

Up to 30% of responses repeated the idea that without intact forests no industry or commercial activity could take place, and therefore it is just as important, if not more so, for RFAs to support native forest protection. To accomplish this the most common suggestion was removing exemptions from the EPBC Act. Others took a more extreme view that RFAs were the problem and should be ceased altogether. Most other responses were focussed on increasing reserves and creation of State and National parks including the Great Forest National Park and Emerald Link.



# THEME 3: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF VICTORIA'S FORESTS

Question 15 - 17 sought to understand the following three themes:



## Improve forest management planning

The clearest message from respondents was to stop native-forest timber harvesting. Improvement suggestions particularly included researching fire management and fuel reduction, and implementing best practice approaches. It was also suggested to create opportunities for other industries (tourism, carbon, recreation and food) and to employ an adaptive management approach.

*"Logging of habitat is the threatening process we have the greatest control over and should be the first port of call when responding to loss of habitat."*



## Identify research priorities

Of primary importance was to research conservation and restoration - the benefits, efforts and impacts. Respondents suggested to monitor species and habitats and consider the impacts of climate change and the role of the forest in this regard. Also suggested was to find alternative materials and best species for plantation harvesting and explore impact of fire and fuel reduction.

*"Applying the science and knowledge is critical to make change."*



## Improve monitoring and reporting

The main suggestions were to conduct reviews on a more frequent basis and to build trust through transparency and independence. Respondents also recommended that the process involve people in decision-making. It was commonly felt that RFAs should be allowed to lapse and not be renewed, and to commit to conducting reviews and implementing recommendations.

*"Properly monitor and report on what's going on in our forests."*

## THEME 3: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF VICTORIA'S FORESTS

### 3.1: Support the Victorian Government efforts to improve forest management planning

---

Question 15 was based on “*Support the Victorian Government efforts to improve forest management planning*”, detailing the opportunity to identify milestones, obtain feedback and collect information. The paper suggests that “*Overall, forest management planning for public forests (including State forests, and forested parks and reserves) should aim to deliver ecologically sustainable forest management and work towards the State’s vision for forests. It should be undertaken in partnership with Traditional Owners. Moreover, as new knowledge is acquired, and circumstances related to forests change, the forest management planning system will need to adapt. For this reason, the reforms to forest management planning should be an ongoing process of improvement.*” Respondents were asked to answer the question with this in mind.

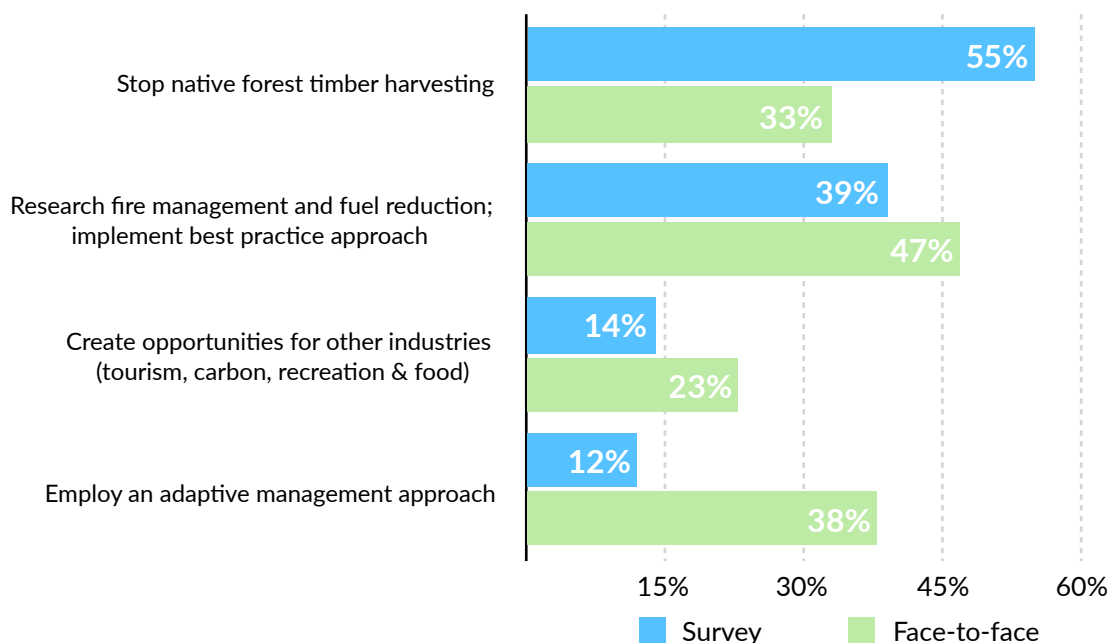
---

#### **Q15.** How can the RFAs support the adaptive management of Victoria’s forests in response to emerging issues and opportunities?

There were 540 online survey responses to question 15, representing around 74% of online survey responses. Around 70% of responses were original, 30% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (90), the Wilderness Society (58) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10).

There were 162 recorded comments on question 15 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 4% of total comments from all events. Most frequently referred to in comments were issues related to fire management, including buffers, zoning, use of fire-stick methods, managing post-fire wood supply volumes, and maintaining breaks. There were repeated suggestions for adaptive management of the buffers and zones. Other adaptive management ideas included allocating more staff for monitoring and enforcement, investment in combatting pest species (deer and other feral animals), area specific management plans and improving communication of forest management plans to the public. Face-to-face participants emphasised the right of everyone to work and make a living from the forest, and stressed that RFAs should take a balanced and evidence focussed approach to managing industries. The importance of road access and maintenance was also referred to in face-to-face comments but not in the online survey responses.

The key themes across responses leaned towards alleviating practices and events which may lead to severe forest degradation (harvesting and fire). There were smaller themes based on opportunities presented by emerging industries and how best to ensure RFAs are responsive to this:



The pro-forma response from Friends of the Earth Melbourne cautioned against experimentation at the expense of threatened species habitats and encouraged investigation of ecologically sustainable forest management away from public native forest. The Wilderness Society response centred on *“Removing logging from Victoria’s high conservation value forests...”* in order respond to the impacts of bushfires and climate change, and to give *“...other businesses and industries a go....”* VNPA were critical of the current approach to forest management, claiming it *“...has led to significant decline in the condition of remaining native forests and decline in the forestry industry.”* They suggested a ban on logging and a review of forest management plans.

### **Stop native forest timber harvesting:**

***Survey data: 55%, Face-to-face: 33%***

As seen throughout the previous questions, a strong emerging theme from respondents was *“Removing logging from Victoria’s high conservation value forests”* particularly from old-growth and native forest areas. Respondents directly mentioned logging, harvesting, timber or plantations in their response. Respondents noted that timber harvesting should be removed from native forests, transitioned to plantations and the remaining forest protected and restored. Their arguments for doing so were based on various reasons, such as:

- *“The native timber harvesting industry has dominated the use of public native forests for too long. It is time to give other industries an opportunity to benefit from the native forests.”*
- *“Substantial research proves that clearfell logging increases the flammability of forests.”*
- *“Logging of habitat is the threatening process we have the greatest control over and should be the first port of call when responding to loss of habitat.”*

### **Research fire management and fuel reduction; implement best practice approach:**

***Survey data: 39%, Face-to-face: 47%***

Over a third of responses directly mentioned fire management. There were concerns over the impacts of bushfires not only on wildlife and habitat but also on local communities. They pointed out the time taken for forests to recover from bushfires and expressed desire for more support in their rehabilitation. Respondents felt that forest management needed to be more responsive to bushfires and acknowledge the changes seen in recent years stating the need to ensure “... *applicable technology utilised and quick responses to any fires before they become major. Too often there seems a lag or inefficiency in a coordinated response to fires.*” Within this, they also raised the need for forest management plans to be adaptive to global events, advancements in knowledge and updates from monitoring forest health. Fuel reduction, controlled burning and fire risk management were frequently discussed, yet were contentious points with respondents often at odds over best practice and methodology. Some felt that timber harvesting is beneficial as it reduces fire loads, while others claimed logging leads to more “homogenous” forest which burns with higher intensity. There were also calls for investment to “...*revegetate and replant those areas that have been used with diverse indigenous plant species to re-establish biodiversity in areas previously logged or destroyed by fire.*”

### **Create opportunities for other industries (tourism, carbon, recreation and food):**

***Survey data: 14%, Face-to-face: 23%***

Respondents discussed “*emerging industries*” and future employment opportunities. The most common emerging industry was tourism. “*RFAs should be discontinued and eco tourism, conservation activities and nature appreciation and therapy, as well as recreation activities such as mountain biking, hiking, mindful walks etc. should be explored.*” Also frequently discussed was the timber industry (sometimes referred to as ‘forestry industry’) and the perceived need to transition this industry into a plantation-based and alternative materials market. A common reason cited for this transition was the concept that timber harvesting is not compatible with tourism. There were suggestions to include Traditional Owners in a more active role to support a “... *future tourism economy built on cultural understanding and appreciation.*”

### **Employ an adaptive management approach:**

***Survey data: 12%, Face-to-face: 38%***

The fixed nature of RFAs was criticised by some responses, which advocated for a more responsive, flexible structure if RFAs were to be renewed. Within this theme people also criticised the frequency of reviews and suggested they be done annually and that ‘triggers’ (such as new climate information or changes in species levels) are built in for interim reviews. Also suggested was for RFAs to utilise existing research to increase the resilience of the forest “*Adaptive management can include developing species with greater ability to resist impact of climate change.*”

## THEME 3: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF VICTORIA'S FORESTS

### 3.2: Identify research priorities

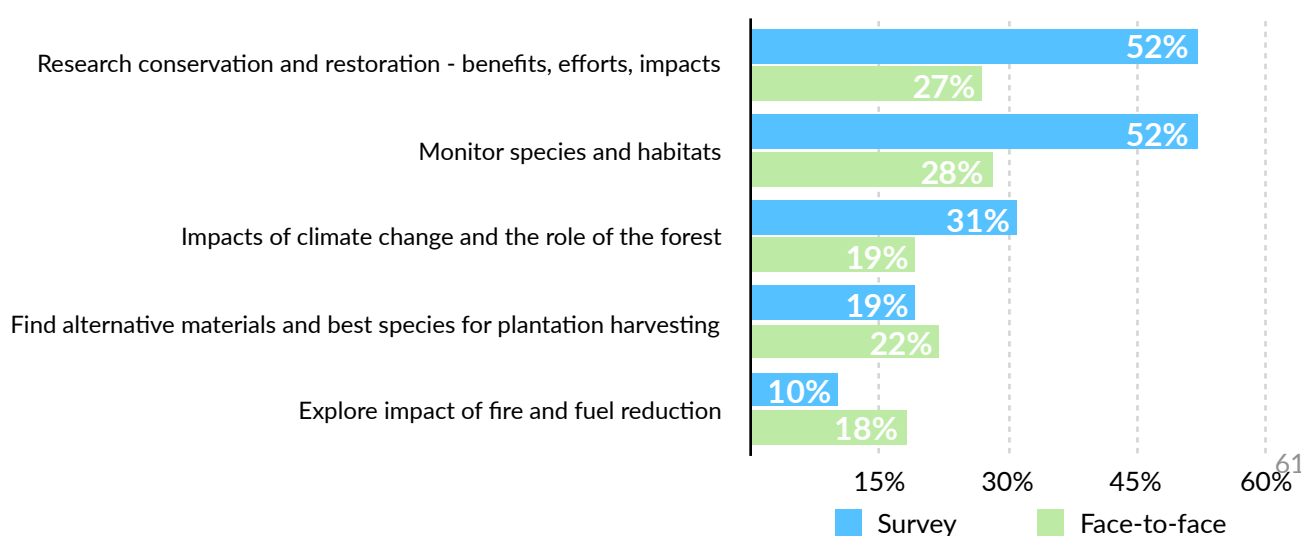
Question 16 aimed to “Identify research priorities”, with the paper suggesting that “The RFA modernisation process should facilitate negotiations on forest research priorities between the Victorian and Australian Governments, including identifying how existing research programs and investment can be better utilised.” It then goes on to identify a range of research priorities for forests and asks respondents to give their views on the question.

#### Q16. What areas of research would better equip us to sustainably manage Victoria's forests?

There were 581 online survey responses to question 16, representing around 79% of online survey responses. Around 72% of responses were original, 28% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (90), the Wilderness Society (58) and the Victorian National Parks Association (10).

Responses offered a wide variety of suggestions for research areas which can be grouped into the following broad topics: conservation and restoration; species and habitats; climate change; alternative materials and plantations; and fire and fuel. There was significant overlap, with comments referring to multiple areas of research per response.

There were 160 recorded comments on question 16 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 4% of total comments from all events. Face-to-face comments often implied that research is biased or advocacy based, and that any future research needs to be objective, transparent and well communicated with the public. An underlying theme in face-to-face comments (around 18%) was the need for research to be peer reviewed, holistic and rigorous with many comments also stating the need for questions and definitions to be clearly defined. Some criticised the ‘snap-shot’ approach of research, stating it can seem at times to only scratch the surface of complex forest management issues. Key themes follow:



The pro-forma response from Friends of the Earth Melbourne remarked on the findings in current research of the failure of RFAs to manage the forest sustainably and suggested new research to “... investigate ways to best achieve a recovery of lost forest values so that further extinctions can be avoided.” The Wilderness Society emphasised the need to apply existing research findings, observing that the issue goes beyond simply engaging scientists and experts—their research needs to be heeded and implemented. VNPA reflected on the unpopularity of native forest timber harvesting and noted the decline in forestry graduates. They criticised species survey efforts and suggested the focus of the industry shift to plantations, manufactured wood products and recycling.

#### **Research conservation and restoration - benefits, efforts, impacts:**

***Survey data: 52%, Face-to-face: 27%***

Over half of survey responses discussed forest conservation and restoration. They pointed to the need for forests to recover after bushfires and harvesting and the length of time this takes. Respondents wanted to see research into the extent of any forest destruction and what could be done to restore “...the structure and biodiversity of native forests...to their past complexity.” Frequently mentioned was the loss of forest biodiversity, with concerns over losing unique flora and fauna. They felt that researching how to sustain and grow existing forests, finding alternative to wood products, and promoting forest education in schools could help accomplish this. Many felt that past timber harvesting had detrimentally affected forest health and therefore felt that it was important to research forest restoration and regeneration methods. Comments reflected that timber harvesting is not compatible with sustainability and that in the past harvesting had been given preference over conservation. There was a strong underlying theme of change, respondents wanted to see a different future.

#### **Monitor species and habitats:**

***Survey data: 52%, Face-to-face: 28%***

Linked in with conservation and restoration, monitoring species and their habitats was also a commonly suggested area of research. People wanted to understand the current state of forest wildlife and vegetation in order to better assess and protect their survival. Within this theme, responses also pointed out that “Applying the science and knowledge is critical to make change.” Most of these responses focussed on monitoring and surveying flora and fauna. Also suggested was fire mapping and planning, and developing long-term monitoring programs. Notable comments included:

- “Assessments must not only consider habitat but reliable food sources within reasonable range to allow for species survival.”
- “It is not so much more research that is required, but applying the science that has been gained from these long term research programs.”
- “Accurate assessment of native species, and feral species, and methods to control feral species should be top priority.”

#### **Impacts of climate change and the role of the forest:**

***Survey data: 31%, Face-to-face: 19%***

Many responses mentioned climate change, suggesting research into carbon, water, soil and emissions. They focussed on the unknown impact and extent of climate change, pointing out the already drier climate and changing rainfall patterns. Responses in this theme emphasised that

future research should focus on how to combat and mitigate the negative ramifications of climate change on an already fragile forest ecosystem. Specific suggestions included:

- *“Current research into water resources is particularly alarming for farmers and people living in cities, it indicates that deforestation pollutes our water catchments, and generally reduces the amount of water we are able to catch and use. This research should continue...”*
- *“How to protect endangered species and address the additional impact of climate change on species and waterways.”*
- *“Development of independently verifiable and transparent pricing models to fully price existing and future user licences to incorporate the effects of climate change on Victoria’s natural assets.”*

#### **Find alternative materials and best species for plantation harvesting:**

***Survey data: 19%, Face-to-face: 22%***

A strong research topic within this question was exploring alternative materials for possible wood substitutes and potential future industries. Frequently suggested was researching bamboo, hemp and recycled materials to replace resources previously supplied by timber. Others encouraged further research into plantation species to assess what grows well and provides the best sustainability and climate merits.

#### **Explore impact of fire and fuel reduction:**

***Survey data: 10%, Face-to-face: 18%***

A small, but important, theme in research avenues suggested was fire management and fuel reduction. This has been present as an issue throughout questions in this consultation. A small number of responses (12%) suggested research into burning methods (mosaic, cool burning, traditional burns). Other areas for fire management research included:

- *“Research into the management of more intense bushfires as climate change worsens is also essential for this region.”*
- *“How to stop bush fires even more efficiently, before they spread.”*
- *“Research into the hydrology of old growth forests compared to post logging regrowth and post natural bush fire events such as the Black Saturday fires.”*
- *“Improving alertness and bushfire responses if there is a trend to hotter seasons and catastrophic fire (or flood) events.”*

## THEME 3: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF VICTORIA'S FORESTS

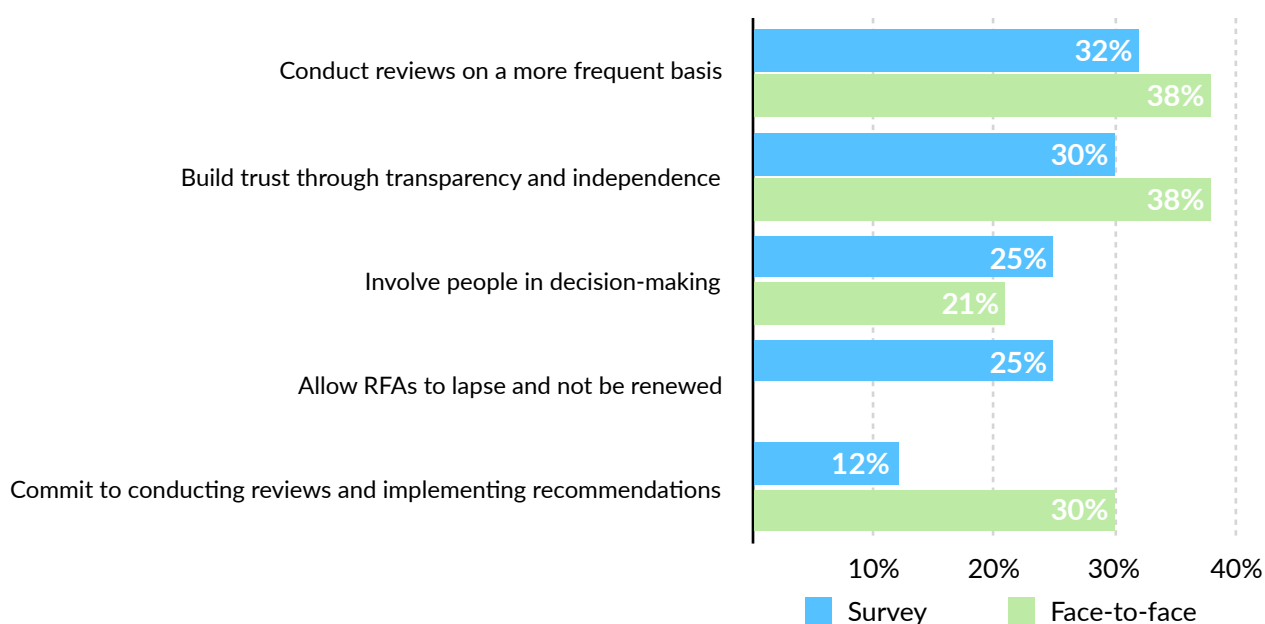
### 3.3: Improve monitoring and reporting

Question 17 aimed to “*Improve monitoring And reporting*”, with the paper suggesting that “*The RFA modernisation program presents an opportunity to continue to improve monitoring and reporting to enhance evidence-based decision making and improve the transparency of forest management with the community.*” It then goes on to identify a range of actions to be considered and asks respondents to give their views.

#### Q17. How could RFA monitoring, review (including five-yearly reviews) and reporting arrangements be improved?

There were 560 online survey responses to question 16, representing around 76% of online survey responses. Around 74% of responses were original, 26% came from pre-filled pro-forma provided by Friends of the Earth Melbourne (86), the Wilderness Society (46) and the Victorian National Parks Association (11).

There were 133 recorded comments on question 17 from face-to-face consultations, representing around 4% of total comments from all events. The biggest difference from online survey responses was that face-to-face comments didn't discuss ending the RFAs. This is likely due to the pro-forma responses in online results. The strongest theme in face-to-face comments was tied between frequency of reviews and building transparency and independence of the reviews. There were suggestions for greater monitoring and “*Decision based on fact not weight of opinion.*” Comments also emphasised the need for reviews to be done on time and for the Government to commit to better funding and improving compliance. Key themes can be grouped as follows





The pro-forma response from Friends of the Earth Melbourne stated *"The RFA process to date has failed on all reporting milestones."* They listed this failure and trend of forest degradation as a reason why RFAs should be allowed to lapse. The Wilderness Society stressed the need for reviews to be more credible, frequent, better communicated and broader in scope. VNPA once again stated that the West Victorian RFA be cancelled. They echoed the sentiment that review periods need to be shorter.

#### **Conduct reviews on a more frequent basis:**

***Survey data: 32%, Face-to-face: 38%***

Shorter review periods emerged as a dominant theme in online survey responses. They raised the point that reviews need to happen *"...far more regularly than every five years."* They also suggested there should be triggers for interim reviews and that the industries involved needed to be audited by independent reviewers. Alongside reviewing on a more frequent basis, some responses raised the content of the reviews, suggesting a more macro approach *"Monitoring and reviewing needs to audit what the RFAs are achieving, but also whether they are fit for purpose in the changing external (social, economic and ecological) environment."* Other suggestions included streamlining reporting systems and ensuring that reporting was measurable and set against meaningful targets and benchmarks.

#### **Build trust through transparency and independence:**

***Survey data: 30%, Face-to-face: 38%***

Respondents were often critical of Government's ability to *"...properly monitor and report on what's going on in our forests"* with some claiming the RFA process to date has *"...failed on all reporting milestones."* There were calls for more sincere relationships between Government, industry and citizens, with accusations of embedded interests and biased decision-making. Many felt there should be increased Government oversight of these reviews, including suggestions that reports should be tabled in parliament.

#### **Involve people in decision-making:**

***Survey data: 25%, Face-to-face: 21%***

Involving local communities, on-the-ground expertise and Traditional Owner groups was supported in responses. Around a quarter of responses directly mentioned consultation, involve, citizens, engagement, sphere, local, citizen and people. Comments in this theme centred on the idea that RFA renewal and regulation should be community led, *"The Government does not have legitimate social licence to renew the RFAs."* They wanted more consultation, more citizen-science led monitoring and surveying, and transparency between Government and communities when it came to the methodology and findings of reviews.

#### **Allow RFAs to lapse and not be renewed:**

***Survey data: 25%, Face-to-face: 0%***

Responses advocated for the removal of RFAs, claiming the Government was *"out of touch"* and could only vindicate itself by fixing RFAs to align with Victoria's values, or by removing them entirely. As seen in previous questions, many responses felt that RFAs were the wrong vehicle by which to manage Victoria's forests and that they shouldn't be renewed or 'modernised' but instead *"When the Victorian RFAs expire, they should be allowed to lapse."*

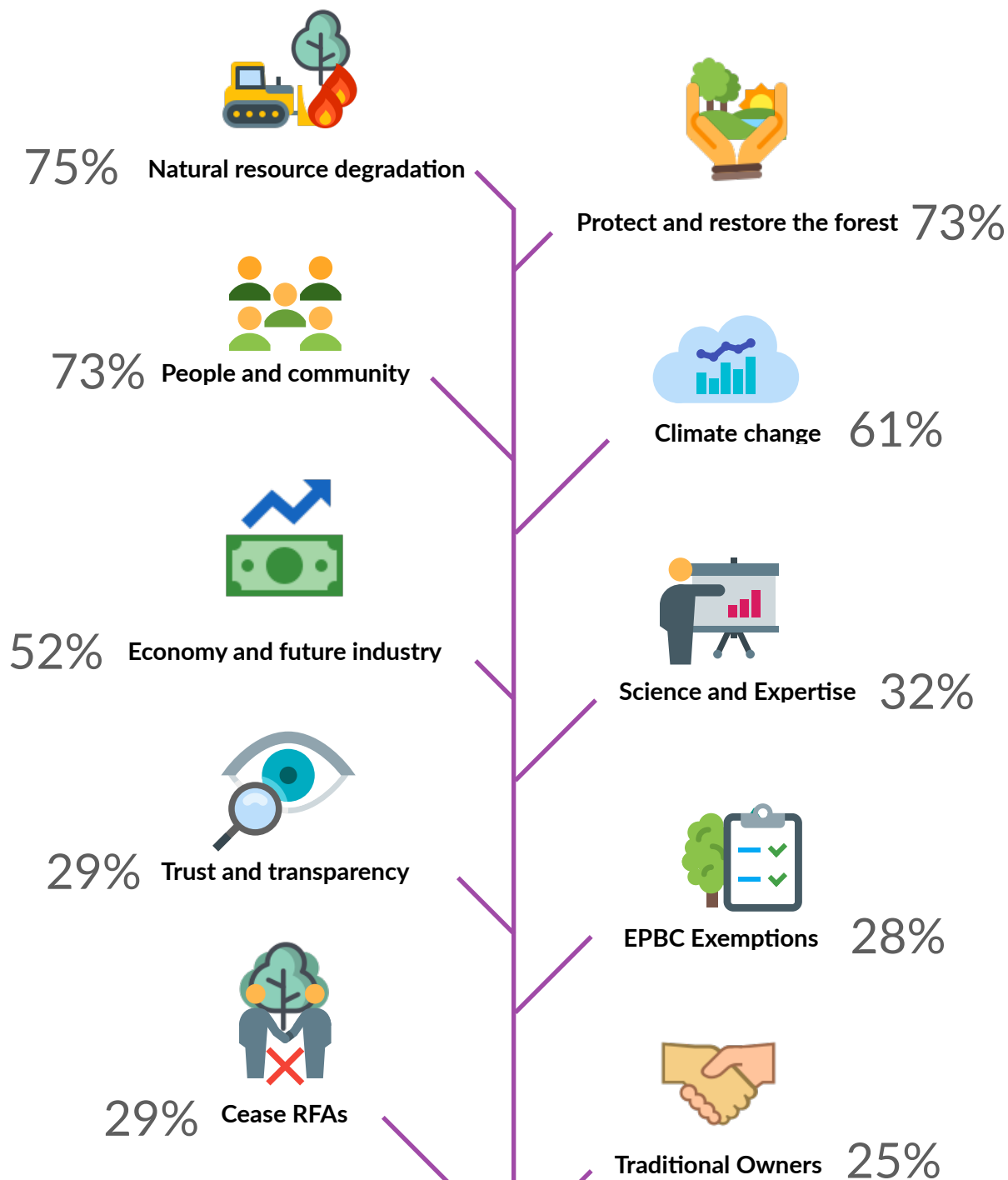
#### **Commit to conducting reviews and implementing recommendations:**

***Survey data: 12%, Face-to-face: 30%***

Responses also pointed out that while reviews may be conducted, there is very little point in doing them if they are not *"...listened to"*. They pointed to previous independent reviews and recommendations that had been made but not applied, with some accusing decision makers of *"turning a blind eye"*. Also discussed by around 10% of responses was *who* conducts the audits, with many stating the independence of this was critical.

# WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS: KEY THEMES

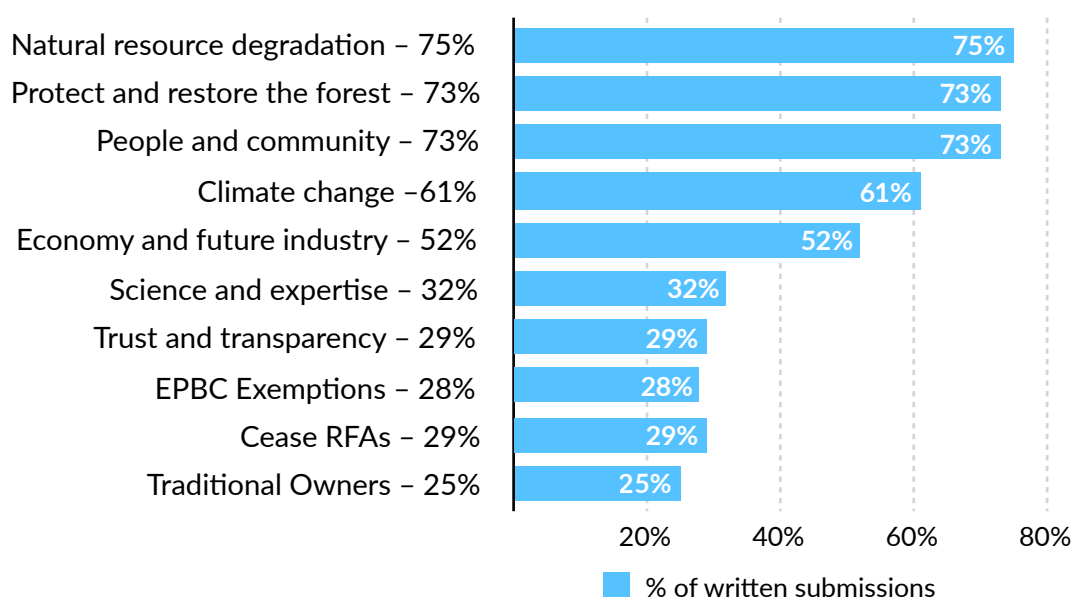
In addition to the survey and face to face consultation, community members and stakeholders could also provide a written submission to the process. The following key themes emerged from these submissions, with percentages showing how many submissions mentioned issues related to each theme:



## OVERALL ANALYSIS: WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

In addition to the survey and face-to-face consultation, community members and stakeholders could also provide a written submission to the process. There were 135 written submissions received and analysed during the consultation. In general, the content of the written submissions was more complex and had more depth than their online and face-to-face counterparts.

This analysis drew out 10 key themes covering a broad range of issues and key subjects:



Some examples of contributions in the written submissions included:

- *"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 RFAs have failed to provide protection of threatened species, protection of rain forests and certainty for the forest industry. The RFAs should be cancelled, and failing that, any new RFAs should be a plan to transition out of native forest logging. The EPBC exemption should not be rolled over."*
- *"The current RFAs have not provided the intended stability of supply and operation for the timber and forestry industry. The last 5 years in particular, have seen increasing uncertainty within the timber industry as the State Government has not committed to a clear vision for managing State forests for multiple uses."*
- *"Citizen Science is an excellent avenue for engaging the community and interest groups with the objective of increasing the human resources to achieve on ground action."*
- *"Our forests should be managed for the best use and highest value: this means managing for water and climate, as everyone needs clean drinking water and we all rely on a safe climate."*

The major themes are detailed as follows:

### **Natural resource degradation**

#### **Written submissions: 75%**

The loss and destruction of native forest since the introduction of the Victorian RFAs was a strong theme in written submissions. The cause of this damage was generally alleged to be either timber harvesting practices or severe bushfires.

The two were often interlinked, with comments referring to the impact of timber harvesting on forest resilience to fires. Timber harvesting was often attributed with compromising the forest's natural ecology, negatively impacting forest integrity. Some comments listed ongoing timber harvesting as a reason why RFAs should not continue *"... as they allow for the ongoing extractive practices to damage our remaining native forest assets."* There were strong condemnations of illegal or borderline timber extraction and the volume of timber harvesting. *"After the 2009 fires, clear fell logging climbed to over 200 hectares per annum despite the vast areas of forest killed as a direct result of these fires."*

Fire management also came under criticism, and whilst comments did not agree on a clear solution there were some common areas of disapproval, such as re-seeding coupes with inappropriate species and not managing the forest post-fire. Controlled burns, managing the understory, thinning and fuel reduction were also commonly discussed, with many methodologies proposed including:

- Perimeter burning: *"All of block shouldn't be burnt in one go".*
- Cool/low intensity burns: *"The intent should be small fires burning out and not a circle burning in that traps both birds and animals".*
- End fuel reduction burning (prescribed burns) *"...is a threatening process. Habitat is destroyed for a long time and in some cases altered significantly by burning".*
- Manage burns more responsively: *"An early detection and rapid response is necessary to prevent unplanned fires getting out of control".*

Around a quarter of responses within this theme (23/91) referred to the 2009 'Black Saturday' fires. Comments expressed remorse over the impact of these fires (to both environment and people) and were critical that not enough had been done to restore the forests and to protect the now increasingly endangered species as a result of the devastation. Despite there not being agreement on the most appropriate approach to fire management in responses, it was widely agreed that the RFAs should be more inclusive and cognisant of fire management for the regions. *"Given the extensive fires occurring over the last 10 years, and the likelihood these shall increase in frequency, impact and duration, the inability of RFA's to include fire considerations such as those listed above is inexcusable, especially as the water resources used to fight fires are also diminishing."*

Commonly referred to regions were the West (36/91), Gippsland (38/91), and Central Highlands (31/91). Comments discussed the success of the Great Otway National Park and pointed to this as an example of how to repair forest loss and destruction, particularly by the establishment of a Great National Forest Park (GNFP) in the Central Highlands. There was strong support for re-establishing intact forests as a drawcard for international and local tourism and associated business. Comments saw the destruction of native forest as having a negative impact on regions tourism and future business opportunities. Those who discussed

the West Victorian RFA often described it as “obsolete” , “outdated” and “unnecessary”, and wanted to see an end to timber harvesting in the region. Instead, many comments about the West Victorian RFA supported protection measures for the native ecosystem, *“The West Victorian RFA covers a huge area from Melbourne to the South Australian border and is rich in threatened species and endangered habitats which should be protected.”*

Forest loss and destruction was often discussed in the context of unique Australian wildlife, flora and fauna, that was either threatened or endangered. Of particular concern to around 28% of comments in this theme was the precarious future of Victoria’s state animal emblem, the Leadbeater’s possum. *“...we believe it is unconscionable for iconic species such as Victoria’s animal emblem, the Leadbeater’s Possum, to be forced into extinction during our lifetime through the destruction of their habitat by clearfell logging, leaving our children and future generations with vastly depleted local biodiversity.”* Other species discussed included the Greater Gilder, Lyrebirds, South Eastern Red-Tailed Black Cockatoos, Owls, Southern Brown Bandicoot and Heath Mouse.

Some comments also warned against the unknown impact of climate change, and that a more conservative approach to forest consumption was necessary to mitigate these impacts.

### **Protect and restore the forest**

#### **Written submissions: 73%**

One of the strongest themes in written submissions was the need for RFAs to enable the protection and restoration of native forests. Comments were concerned with the rate of decline and wanted to reverse this where possible and prevent it where able. Of particular concern was protecting biodiversity and safeguarding native forests for the future.

The rate of biodiversity decline and the increase in threats to native species, including climate change, habitat loss, invasive species and feral animals, was the most common motivation for increasing forest protection. Many of the comments in this theme discussed the EPBC Act exemptions and Matters of National Environmental Significance. The uniqueness of Australian flora and fauna was highly valued, with more technical submissions drawing attention to the specific species that can only be found in Victoria, including in some RFA areas. They were critical that *“Few of these species are listed or mentioned in the 2000 version of the RFA (other than some of the orchids) and few have relevant prescriptions in forestry codes or forest management plans.”* Comments championed the provision of protections for these species to be included in RFAs, as well as the removal of any exemptions granted through the RFAs.

Comments said that RFAs should enable conservation of forest biodiversity and maintenance of ecosystem health through robust protections and measures, and that the current model of RFAs not be repeated. There were criticisms that *“Efforts at conservation are insufficient to restrain the growing crisis.”* Some expressed embarrassment over the current state of decline and perceived lack of action, with some going so far as to accuse regulators of deliberately endangering forests through RFAs. They noted that Australia should be leading the way in conservation *“...we have world-class expertise and the majority of Australians support strong protections for our unique wildlife.”*

The scale and somewhat unrevealed nature of future challenges to forests was also a concern for submissions in this theme, with comments critical of the RFAs failure to achieve timber

security while ensuring sustainability. *“The RFA’s are consequently no longer fit for purpose. They certainly do not set Australia up well to face the major challenges of the future such as the current species extinction crisis and ongoing climate change.”* Preparing for the future and ensuring the forests have the best possible chance at survival was viewed as a critical function of the new RFAs, particularly to ensure their longevity for future generations *“Slowing the rate of decline only pushes the costs of remediation and restoration onto future generations.”*

Possible protection measures outside of the RFAs were also discussed, including the establishment of the Great Forest National Park and the Emerald Link. These options were supported where people were sceptical of the ability of the RFAs to achieve adequate forest protection. Many were also doubtful that if the protections above would actually be enforced if they were included within RFAs.

## **People and community**

### **Written submissions: 73%**

The role of RFAs in facilitating the link between forest management and people was a significant theme in submissions. Discussion focussed on recreational use, increased public consultation and engagement, community and forest user education, and the role of forests in human health.

The use of forests for personal recreation and enjoyment is arguably the most ubiquitous forest use and a strong driver for much of the discussion connected with forest preservation and access. Activities included biking, bushwalking, camping, canoeing, fishing, hunting and four-wheel driving. Comments remarked on the personal benefits many feel through *“An appreciation of the diversity of the natural world”* and noted that *“Passive recreation and relaxation is vital for our well-being.”* Much of the activities associated with the tourism industry in forests relies on recreational access and use. *“The forest has more economic value as a tourist attraction and for recreational purposes than as a source of revenue from timber.”* Not all comments agreed with this sentiment, cautioning that some recreational activities cause more harm and disturbance to forests. Passive activities such as bushwalking and camping were seen as more desirable than activities such as hunting and four-wheel driving. Other comments noted that even these can have negative impacts through litter, illegal access, and even possible fire hazards due to smoking and other inappropriate use.

Consultation and engagement of the public and local communities in decision making was commonly discussed. Some referred to the involvement of Traditional Owners, particularly in forest management and recovery planning. They encouraged *“Genuine consultation with communities to find out what they think and hear from grass roots users.”* The authenticity and accessibility of these activities were viewed as paramount, with comments cautioning that any engagement should have limited barriers to access. The review process of RFAs was frequently referred to as a mechanism to increase public involvement in RFAs, with suggestions to invite public comment on the performance of the agreement and reduce the review period to a more frequent basis (every 2 years, annually, interim reviews when circumstances change). Comments also pointed out that many locals voluntarily care for the forests in their area and the RFAs should provide opportunities to keep in touch with the community, citizen scientists and locals in their area.

Sharing knowledge and providing education opportunities was also a common suggestion when discussing people and community. There was a view that RFAs *“need to provide a plan of action to educate all users of forests in Victoria about the impacts their activities have”*.

Suggestions included:

- Involving local communities in assessments *“...to share expert local knowledge and experience”*
- Public education of current environment laws and effective enforcement.
- Community education of the value and importance of natural environments

The importance of forests for human health, the health of communities and surrounding areas was noted as an important inclusion for new RFAs. This was seen as important due to the links between *“...healthy forests and greater human health, healthy forests and greater social connectivity, healthy forests and greater sense of belonging for community”*. Comments highlighted the want for RFAs to recognise these links and develop an agreement that *“...transitions our community to a healthier future”*.

## **Climate change**

### **Written submissions: 61%**

Climate change was a recurring theme throughout 61% of the written submissions. Comments were concerned with its unknown impact, interested in the value of carbon storage and eager to mitigate any negative outcomes from irreversible human actions that could worsen its effects.

Often pointing to the ‘different time’ within which RFAs now operate, comments urged for climate change considerations to be built into RFAs, *“There is no mention of climate change or carbon reduction value of forests in any of the RFAs.”* Submissions were concerned with the impacts climate change may have on already destabilised forests and were cognisant of the fact that there are still many unknowns that require further research. Comments recognised that climate change will have significant impacts which are likely to increase if the risks are not addressed by RFAs. These impacts included reduced timber yields, increased frequency and intensity of bushfires, lower regeneration rates, species extinction, desertification, salination, and loss of water catchments. Submissions encouraged decision-makers to ensure *“That the implications and effects of climate change be included in the next RFA.”* Within this theme, comments also discussed practical ways in which the RFAs could address climate change impacts, suggesting adaptive management approaches, increased monitoring of forest ecology and actively developing strategies to reduce the impacts.

The impact of climate change on the State’s flora and fauna was a strong concern expressed in submissions. The loss and endangerment of native species was seen as an unacceptable risk as *“...climate change impacts shall simply speed up the risks faced by our indigenous species.”* Similarly to the above, comments encouraged surveys and monitoring native species populations and habitats on a continuous basis to *“...assess the status of species and the resilience shown to the effects of climate change.”* Others noted the loss of native species habitat through both natural and human destruction and listed this as a reason why *“Climate Change needs to be addressed on a long-term non-political basis”*.

Water security, the health and supply of catchments and ongoing resourcing was viewed as an important function to build into RFAs. Some comments pointed to the volume of water used in timber harvesting and noted that the cost of that was inappropriate due to the resources' scarcity. Others noted the impact of timber harvesting on catchment supply and flow, *"This [harvesting] creates a situation of reduced water available to the catchment at a time of increasing climate change and drying of forests and reducing water supply."* Also discussed in this theme was the economic value of water resources to RFA areas and surrounding towns, *"This is because we now understand the importance of that forest on both the quantity and quality of Melbourne's water."* The value of water resources aided by intact forests was seen as having greater importance than the value derived from timber harvesting and development of water resources was encouraged.

The role of forests in carbon storage and sequestration, as well as the future economic benefits and industry value of carbon, was strongly advocated for. *"The RFAs must properly value and account for carbon, and the critical role forests play in mitigating climate change when they are left standing."* Comments recommended RFAs support protection of old-growth trees as carbon sinks. *"The RFAs should take into account the valuable carbon stocks and flows in Victoria's native forests"*

### **Economy and future industry**

#### **Written submissions: 52%**

Over half of written submissions discussed forests in the context of the economy, referring to key terms such as jobs, employment, business, work, resource, production and supply. Intertwined with this discussion was the future of forest-based industry—most notably timber—but also tourism, beekeeping, cultural experiences, recreation, research and health.

The future of the timber industry was frequently discussed, with comments encouraging a move to plantations and other viable alternative materials for wood products. They were sceptical of the arguments against a transition, pointing to other successful cases across the country and noting the wealth of information and support available. *"The opportunities are there – we must choose to make change."* Respondents pointed out that plantations would generate greater returns than native-forest timber harvesting and supported plantations on disused farmland and private holdings. It's important to note that they were not supportive of clearing native forests for plantations.

Respondents also indicated that if the forest degenerates too rapidly or too severely, all forest-based work would cease, *"These losses are serious for a small rural town, especially where many of these jobs are held by young people for whom there is limited employment in the area and businesses are often run by local families."* They were critical of native forest destruction via current timber harvesting practices and regulator's lack of monitoring and supervision. This alleged destruction of otherwise intact forest was seen to devalue the regional area for tourism and associated business. Others raised that the timber industry does have a future within a well-managed forest as not all timber products are used for pulp and wood-chips, but also for high-value craftsmanship of furniture, art and even Maton guitars. Although there was not agreement amongst submissions, discussion around employment revolved around ensuring the sustainability of forest-based employment. Whether this was for timber-harvesting, tourism, hunting or beekeeping, the key point was that all these industries and jobs require a sustainable, well-managed forest in order to continue their work.



Tourism (and its flow on businesses) was generally valued higher than any other future industry discussed in written submissions. Comments were often critical of the 'short-sightedness' of decision-makers to harvest forests for a quick economic gain rather than a long term sustainable future, and blamed the visual impact of these activities for discouraging visitors. *"We haven't seen the increase in the tourism dollar that would have occurred if the forests were in a more natural state."* They also pointed out that many regional towns depend on tourism for their business and employment and rely on undamaged skylines and visual amenities to attract visitors. Many saw eco-tourism opportunities as the way forward for the forest economy and urged regulators to recognise this and support protection of forest to encourage international and local visitors.

Also discussed were the smaller industries of beekeeping, hunting and other food production. Access to healthy forests was noted as essential for all these industries in order to make commercial operations viable.

### **Science and expertise**

#### **Written submissions: 32%**

Science and expertise emerged as a smaller, but significant theme in written submissions. Comments focussed on the application of science and its use for future forest management.

In particular, citizen science came through as a way for Government to engage scientific methods of monitoring and surveying. This was partly due to the perception that not enough monitoring was being done, and what was being done was not sufficient *"The DELWP Forest Protection Survey Program no doubt means well, but better results seem to be achieved by citizen science."* Comments noted the effectiveness of citizen science although lamented the legal consequences some had experienced via trespass charges. They encouraged regulators to enable access and support for *"the use of Citizen Science, in addition to technical and structured scientific methods, to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of RFA recommendations."* People saw the benefit of this in two ways. Firstly they felt that citizen scientists would be less costly, although they did encourage some financial support *"...the growth of citizen science efforts by conservation volunteers... should be further encouraged with financial support."* Secondly, citizen science was seen as an opportunity to re-establish trust between institution and public for forest management related issues, *"Citizen Science is an excellent avenue for engaging the community and interest groups..."*

The use of scientific methods for forest management, including research, was also a strong topic throughout this theme. Comments saw the role of scientists and other experts (botanists, ecologists, conservationists, biologists, naturalists) as being essential to the effective monitoring and evaluation of RFAs, *"Engagement with scientists is essential..."* They noted that engagement was simply the first step, *"...actually applying the science and knowledge to make change is critical."* Also discussed was the engagement of scientists for research as part of evaluating the impact of the previous RFAs, in areas such as:

- *"...developing alternatives to native timber for fibre needs of paper production, building and other traditional timber based products..."*
- *"...the role of non-flowering plants..."*
- *"...the role of invertebrates in healthy forest ecosystems..."*

- *“...the effect of management practices, such as fire regimes.”*
- *“...changes in forest structure, biodiversity loss, ecosystem health and the strategies needed to give the best results.”*

Respondents alleged that existing science, research and evidence is often ‘ignored’ by regulators *“...the Government ignores mounting scientific evidence from noted botanists, flora and fauna specialists across Australia.”* They were critical of various agencies not ‘listening’ to research and for blatantly ignoring the fragmenting landscape, which many comments accused those agencies of enabling. *“There is so much visual evidence of failed regeneration and seeding in our once pristine natural forest...”* Some argued that this was in contradiction to the original RFAs tenants and expressed bewilderment with the Government’s supposed unwillingness to apply existing, clear, research-based evidence.

Responses in this theme urged regulators towards evidence-based, scientifically informed decision-making, *“Base all future policy development and planning on independent peer reviewed Science, not on ‘in house’ advice that caters for vested interest.”* The independence and robust nature of this evidence was seen as paramount, alongside its transparency and accessibility for all stakeholders.

### **Trust and transparency**

#### **Written submissions: 29%**

Improving and developing trust and transparency between agencies and the public was seen as an important thing to incorporate into RFAs. Suggestions can be grouped into four broad categories: working together, being flexible, confidence in systems, and monitoring and independence.

Submissions which discussed trust and transparency often referred to key terms such as collaboration, consultation, conversations, engagement, and meetings. People wanted to see more public involvement in the management of forest, with suggestions to involve the public as ‘citizen scientists’ in *“gathering data, analysing it, translating it into practice and scrutinising the process...”* Involvement of local communities in forest management was seen as an important step forward in building lost trust. Working together with people was noted as critical, *“Failure to involve those who own the forests (the public) in how they are managed in the future will result in increased public mistrust of the process.”* There was however some warning with this approach, particularly to be mindful of how people are included, *“Many people who are not local also have an interest in, and ownership of, our forests”*.

Throughout the consultation process, RFAs have regularly been scrutinised for not being flexible and adaptive. Written submissions in this theme often pointed to the amount of unknowns in the current global context, stating new RFAs should aspire to be more responsive to changing conditions and more open to interim reviews. There was strong support for adaptive management approaches and that the RFA review underway should be genuinely inclusive of this approach, claiming *“We can no longer continue business as usual.”*

Improving trust and confidence in the processes and systems of forest management through the mechanisms of RFAs was also frequently discussed. Much of this discussion centred around introducing transparency measures *“It is crucial that there is transparency and evidence-based decision making to help restore trust from the wider community that the Victorian*

*Government is acting in its interests....*" There was strong criticism of the behaviour of certain agencies, particularly of vested interests and competing priorities. Whether these accusations are founded or perceived, their volume suggests a significant percentage of the public do not trust the current process for management. This could be in part due to the perceived failure of the RFAs (particularly in the West) to meet their objectives and therefore *"...we cannot trust that any undertakings made in the proposed rolling over of the RFA would be adhered to by the State Government."*

Monitoring, reporting and reviews were often suggested as ways to counter this. This included making the results of RFA milestone reports public, as well as their audits and other reports. Independent monitoring of forest management activities was also frequently mentioned, with comments calling for third-party, unbiased reviewers to assess forest health and sustainability as part of RFA renewals. Also suggested was to *"Improve the alignment between the various forest-related reporting systems, including the State of the Forests Reports, the State of the Parks Reports and the RFA reports and reviews, to enable stakeholders to have a more transparent view of the state and trends of the entire forest estate."*

### **EPBC Exemptions**

#### **Written submissions: 28%**

Just over a quarter of written submissions discussed the EPBC Act exemptions. This theme was by far the most uncontroversial, with all submissions in the theme calling for an end to the EPBC Act exemptions granted to the timber industry.

Respondents strongly disapproved of the alleged *"special treatment"*, stating that *"No other industry or activity is exempt from the EPBC in Australia."* Reasons given for this included that these exemptions stifle innovation, handicap other alternative industries, give an unfair advantage to one industry. Comments urged for *"More work and attention needs to go into supporting industries to be self-sustaining"* and saw the removal of exemptions as a vehicle to accomplish this.

Also embedded in the submissions from this theme was the notion that biodiversity and conservation are more important than economic gains from timber harvesting. *"These long-term interests need to take precedence over short term financial and political factors."* As seen throughout the consultations on the renewal of the RFAs, the protection and preservation of Victoria's forests was seen as the highest ambition. People were anxious about species loss and wanted to see this included in any renewal of RFA agreements. Not all agreed that RFAs should continue as if they were to expire people assumed the exemptions would also. Regardless, many acknowledged that RFAs could support environmental conservation, and that *"The best way for the RFAs to support Matters of National Environmental Significance, like Federally-listed species and their forest habitat, is to make logging subject to this law—which, under the current RFAs, it is not."*

The concept that RFAs in their current form (and the EPBC Act exemptions they enable) are out of date was a strong theme throughout responses. Decision-makers were accused of being *"out of touch"* with community values and for not taking sufficient action to plan for and respond to the current global context. *"Our Government forest logging industry will continue to uniquely operate outside federal environment protection for another 20 years. This is no longer acceptable in 2018 where we face major challenges including climate change and a native species*

*extinction crisis.”* Alongside demanding that the EPBC Act exemptions are not rolled over as part of the RFA renewal process, comments also called for *“vision and leadership from our elected members that is in keeping with community attitudes.”*

## **Cease RFAs**

### **Written submissions: 29%**

Allowing RFAs to simply expire and not be renewed was suggested in over a quarter of written submissions (29%). Especially criticised was the lack of follow through in cancelling the West Victorian RFA, overdue reviews, the effectiveness of the CAR system and links to timber harvesting.

Cancelling the West Victorian RFA, the ineffectiveness of the West Victorian RFA and the alleged broken election promise to cancel the West Victorian RFA was raised by almost 20% of responses. It was pointed out that as part of a 2008 State election promise the West Victorian RFA should have been cancelled but this had not been actioned. They expressed disappointment and exacerbation with this, claiming the West Victorian RFA is no longer necessary due to the small contribution it makes to the timber industry and the importance of its wildlife and ecosystems. Comments also pointed to a 2010 ‘Independent Review on Progress with Implementation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements Final Report’, which recommended the West Victorian RFA be cancelled. Discussion in this theme was uniform, people did not want an RFA in the West *“I see no reason it should not be now honoured as part of the current review of the Victorian RFAs.”*

The five-yearly RFA reviews were also a highly contentious theme for those who wanted RFAs to cease. They remarked on the inefficacy of completed five-yearly reviews, criticising them as being infrequent, biased, insufficient and not peer-reviewed. Comments also noted that reviews are often not done on time, if at all, or are late. There was some positivity when it came to the current modernisation process underway, *“The looming expiration of the RFAs provides a once-in-two-decades opportunity to put in place improved, modern and transparent arrangements for management of Victoria’s publicly owned native State forests.”*

RFAs were criticised for failing to provide biodiversity protection and protection of Victoria’s unique natural environment. Especially scrutinised in this theme was the CAR system, with some comments claiming the reserve system has not been delivered by the RFAs. Comments were highly condemnatory that biodiversity continues to be lost and referred to this as a primary reason why RFAs should not be renewed. There was some support for continuing RFAs provided new agreements acknowledged *“...the [existing] CAR reserve system is inadequate as the majority of areas of the highest biodiversity value are not in the formal reserve system. If the CAR reserve system is to achieve improved outcomes for the conservation of biodiversity it will need to be expanded to protect the areas of highest biodiversity value.”*

There were criticisms that the RFAs served the interests of timber harvesting and commercial benefits, where some argued they should have served the wider community. Within this theme there were also criticisms of the timber industry in Victoria, with comments ranging from denouncing the size and profitability of the industry through to allegations of over-cutting and irreversible natural resource degradation. Respondents urged decision-makers to phase out native timber harvesting as part of any new RFA agreements. Also discussed with

some frequency in this theme was the EPBC Act exemptions, with comments often calling for an end to the exemptions and the universal application of environmental law.

### **Traditional Owners**

#### **Written submissions: 25%**

The role and involvement of Traditional Owners was discussed by around 25% of respondents. Comments in this theme can be broadly grouped into recognition, title, economic opportunities, joint management.

There was strong support for formal recognition of First Nations people's continued connection to country, with comments drawing attention to the cultural and historical significance of sites throughout the RFA regions. *"Protect Aboriginal cultural heritage and respect native title and traditional land use rights"* Re-naming and marking these sites was a common suggestion, in the spirit of reconciliation and conservation of Australia's history. *"We also need to begin the process of renaming forests and regions with their indigenous names; acknowledge places of Aboriginal massacre within these forested areas and sensitively conserve these cultural and historical values."*

Likewise, comments raised that *"Traditional Owners land rights, ownership and management should be recognised and encouraged."* Native Title was referred to by around 22% of written submissions within this theme, with comments encouraging the Government to *"support the fundamental right of Traditional Owners to claim title..."* as well as to *"Protect Aboriginal cultural heritage and respect native title and traditional land use rights."* There was some concern over how Native Title could affect forest access for recreation, non-Indigenous land holders and commercial interests. Respondents were eager to ensure ongoing access for the enjoyment of nature, and some raised concerns about the state of what would be returned under native title and suggested a joint-management approach, *"...rather than give Aboriginal people degraded land, help restore landscapes under the guidance of aboriginal people."*

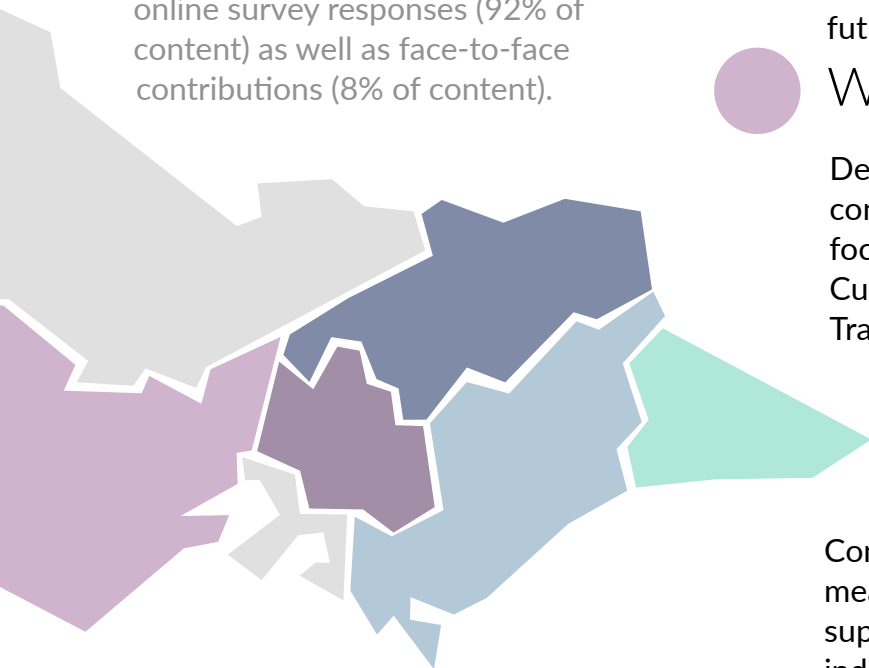
Supporting Traditional Owners to benefit from activities on country *"that generate economic, social, cultural and environmental outcomes"* was also captured in submissions. Suggestions included forest management opportunities such as rangers and fire management, as well as industry partnerships in timber and tourism *"Where Traditional Owners own land suitable for timber production, partnerships with industry can offer substantial business and employment/training opportunities at the local level."* Comments proposed that there would be many benefits associated with this including *"economic development opportunities for owners, greater labour force diversity, and greater cultural awareness through social partnerships."*

There was also strong support for joint management and partnership programs. *"We need to promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership."* Respondents saw RFAs as a possible vehicle to accomplish this, *"Where Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people want co-, joint- or sole-management of forests, RFAs should support and facilitate agreement making with government on those matters that meet the aspirations of Traditional Owners."* Submissions also stated that RFAs should also enable consultation and collaboration between Traditional Owners and the State Government, and that there should be ongoing process of consultation and negotiation including *"...for the identification, creation and management of new parks and reserves, and for Traditional Owner-directed land management, including the broader cultural landscape and ecosystem processes."*



# REGIONAL: KEY THEMES

This section of the report aims to identify and consider aggregated regional concerns, themes and matters of importance. Responses were broken out by RFA region and then analysed to surface region-specific feedback, concerns and issues. Analysis was conducted on the online survey responses (92% of content) as well as face-to-face contributions (8% of content).



## Central Highlands

Place a greater focus on research, frequency of reviews and developing knowledge to better manage forests for the future.

## West

Deterioration in forests means that conservation and restoration should be the focus. Increase in uncertainty for industry. Custodianship should be restored and Traditional Owners recognised.

## Gippsland

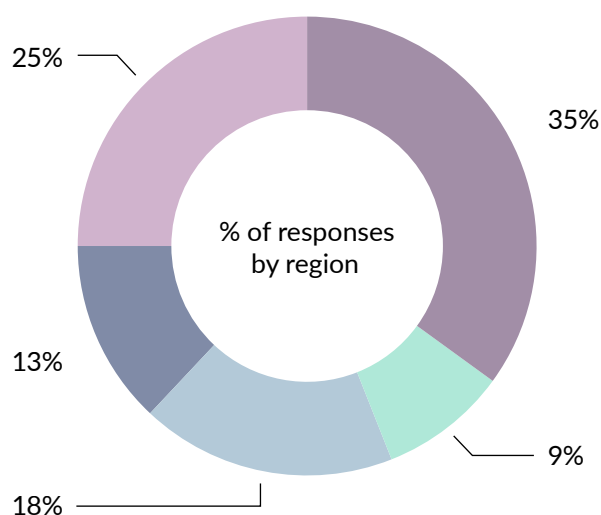
Continued environmental degradation means RFAs should lapse. Research and support other viable forest uses and industries (water, beekeeping, seed supply, tourism).

## North East

Advocacy for scientific, evidence-based decision making. Stronger focus on Traditional Owner roles and involvement, and an end to timber harvesting.

## East Gippsland

Support transition to forest-based tourism and eco-services (carbon capture) as future industries. Adequate funding for plantations for timber and paper/pulp.



# REGIONAL

## Analysis of responses by region

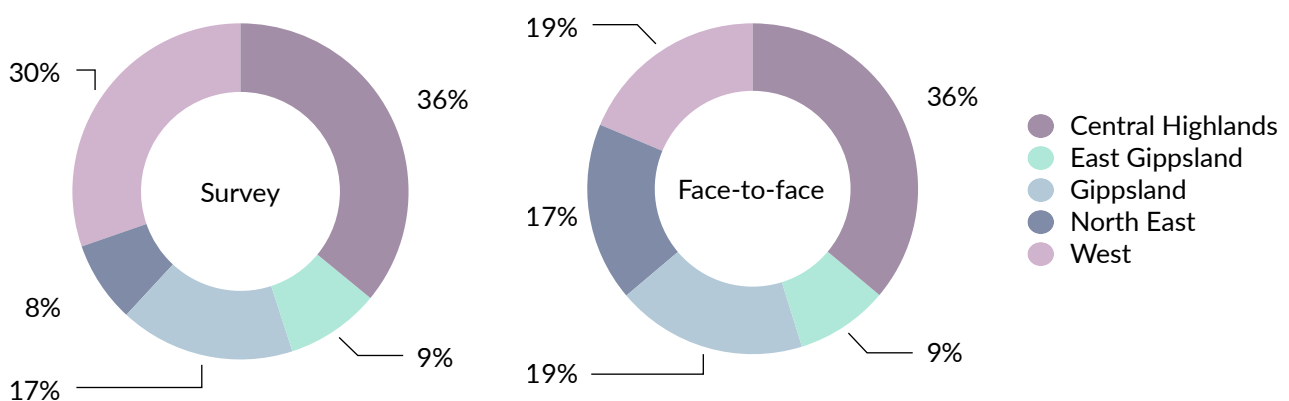
Responses were broken out by RFA region and then analysed to surface region-specific feedback, concerns and issues. Analysis was conducted on both online survey responses as well as face-to-face contributions, noting that the survey responses represented about 92% of the content contributed by number of words.

This section of the report aims to identify and consider aggregated regional concerns, themes and matters of importance. To achieve this, we identified those contributions that were specific to a given region, and then combined the questions into a single block response for each submission, and finally analysed each of the five RFA regions, to highlight specific regional concerns for:

1. Central Highlands
2. East Gippsland
3. Gippsland
4. North East
5. West

## Overview

There were 321 online survey responses from the five RFA regions, and 3,040 comments from the face-to-face RFA regions. The face-to-face comments were substantially shorter in length than the online survey responses, the latter accounting for 92% of the volume analysed and is given priority for its relative depth and weight in terms of contribution to the analysis. The majority of responses came from Central Highlands and West regions, as shown below.

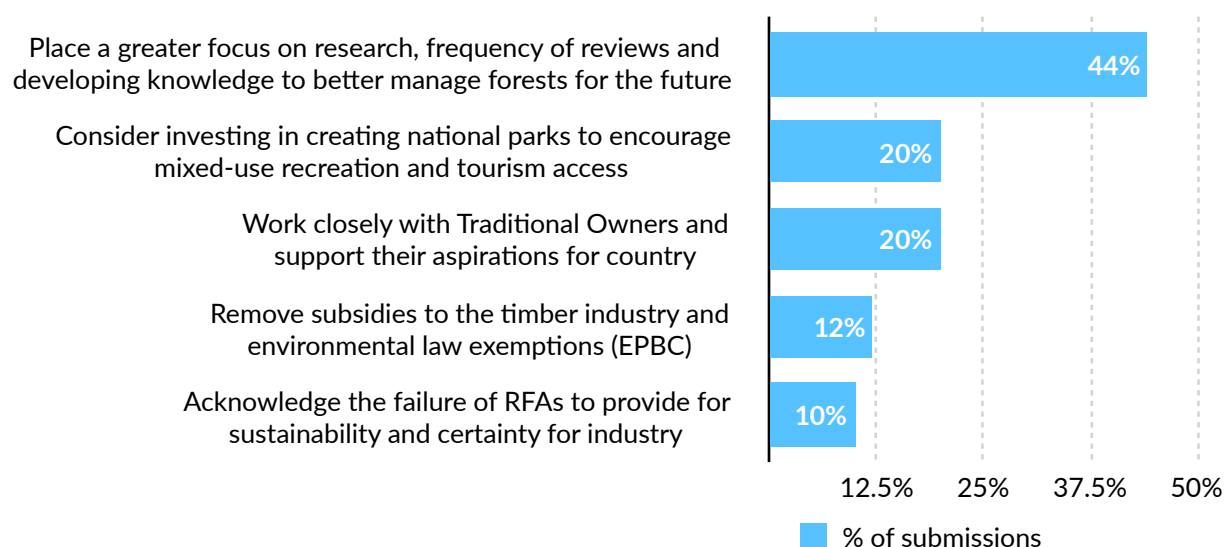




## Central Highlands Region Summary

### Online Survey responses

There were 115 responses from the Central Highlands, representing around 35% of RFA regional survey responses. The Central Highlands had the highest numbers of responses in both the online and face-to-face consultations. Themes emerging from online responses included:



Some examples of contributions from the online responses included:

*"The changes I have witnessed is massive clear-fell logging which is visible from just about every directions you can see the Central Highlands... Even when you look at Google maps which are at least 5 years old it is very clear where there are forests of alpine ash, mountain ash and suitable mixed species there are logging coupes throughout all of these areas. Around the Central Highlands (Marysville area) which has been burned by the 2009 bushfires logging is finishing off the rest of the forests right across to the Eildon State Park."*

*"Recreation and conservation are best supported when forests are left standing, and are not logged—and this is good for livelihoods and the economy, as well. Millions of dollars would be injected into the communities that used to depend on native logging through the creation of the Great Forest National Park and the Emerald Link. The Central Highlands region already draws 3 million tourists per year—a new multi-use park would bring nearly 400,000 more."*

### Face-to-face comments

There were 1,094 face-to-face comments recorded from the Central Highlands region, which clustered around 6 broad themes:

#### **Consider the benefits and consequences (economically, socially and environmentally) of National Parks and reserves: 19%**

Participants supported further research and feedback into National Parks—their management, impact, attractiveness for visitors, and potential opportunities for alternative industries.

However, there was some criticism of the 'turn it into a park' idea, with comments pointing out that National Parks don't always include forest management and may not provide the jobs and employment local towns are hoping for. Others alleged that reserves and parks are often mismanaged and are not the solution.

**Ecosystem services: 18%**

Changes to ecosystem services, particularly around water yields, was a concern in around 18% of face-to-face comments. Participants pointed to logging, increased intensity and impact of bushfire, and the effect of invasive species as having had a detrimental affect on water catchments and yields. Others were worried about the impact of climate change on already decreasing yields, and urged for climate change mitigations to be prioritised due to their potentially disastrous impacts on all forest-dependent services/industries.

**Improve compliance and social licence through education and good management: 17%**

Some participants expressed frustration with the level of mis-information and 'spin' around forest management and were disappointed that work by the industry to innovate and protect forests had not been acknowledged. Comments often pointed to environmental groups having significant influence in the region. They suggested community education programs to demonstrate the facts and show ways in which the timber industry was assisting with fire management, forest regeneration projects and infrastructure support.

**Transition to plantations and stop native forest logging: 17%**

A common difference between online responses and face-to-face responses was that rather than completely removing the timber industry, participants supported innovation and changes in practices to ensure the longevity and sustainability of the industry. They saw many benefits of this, including ongoing employment and security of livelihood. Most commonly suggested was a transition to plantation—particularly for pulp and paper supply, as well as introducing more selective harvesting in native forests and moving away from clear-felling.

**Restore biodiversity and improve conservation: 13%**

Restoring previously harvested forests and recovering biodiversity was another common goal expressed by participants. They expressed the view that if RFAs were to continue then environmental exceptions should not. They viewed the ongoing and increasing decline a crucible for extinction of unique native species and surmised that conservation and protection should be of utmost importance in any RFA renewal scheme.

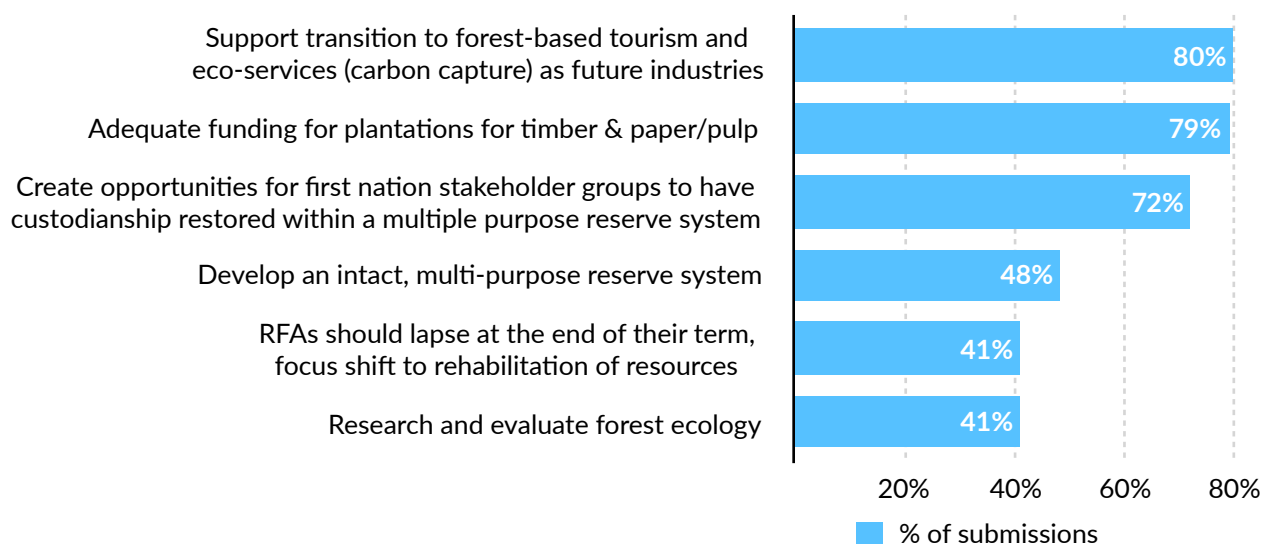
**Create certainty and security for forest-dependent industries and livelihoods : 13%**

Supporting the stability and certainty of forest-based industries was seen as a key element in securing investment and funding. Participants suggested many ways to achieve this, including moving to plantations to guarantee supply; training and up-skilling local staff; stronger accountability and compliance mechanisms and support for emerging markets in tourism and carbon.

# East Gippsland Region Summary

## Online Survey responses

There were 29 responses from East Gippsland, representing around 9% of RFA regional survey responses. Commonly, responses from this region advocated for a landscape-based approach to forest management. Suggestions to achieve this included expanding the CAR system, innovations in the timber industry, building forest resilience (fire management), and greater involvement of Traditional Owners. Focus areas for East Gippsland included:



Examples of contributions from the online responses included:

*"I live in East Gippsland and enter local forests regularly for bushwalking, photography and animal survey (Citizen science) pursuits. These travels in the forests bring me into contact with the effects of the forestry industry which is so active in East Gippsland. I am regularly horrified seeing logging coupes after harvest and the destruction that is visited upon the earth."*

*"I live near Lakes Entrance in East Gippsland and was considering starting a Forest Bathing/Forest Therapy tourism business for national and international guests, but I cannot do so with the forestry industry so active in East Gippsland. Tourists are horrified seeing both the logging trucks on the roads, but especially seeing logging coupes when they are going for a country drive on the back roads."*

## Face-to-face comments

There were 275 face-to-face comments recorded from the East Gippsland region, which clustered around 4 broad themes:

### **Timber harvesting practices (clear-felling, selective harvesting, by volume): 38%**

Face-to-face participants wanted to see changes in timber industry practices, particularly to stop clear-fell harvesting and focus on high quality, high value timber through selective harvesting processes. There were concerns about re-skilling to alternative employment in

tourism and job loss resulting from timber industry changes. People wanted to ensure jobs 'stayed local' and that this was supported via RFAs.

#### **Fuel reduction and fire management:** 30%

Fuel reduction burning and other fire management approaches were frequently discussed, however there was not agreement on how this could best be achieved. Suggestions included cultural (stick) burning practices, thinning, and reducing fuel loads. Not everyone supported this, with comments urging the Government to conduct surveys on the impact of planned burns on wildlife and old-growth forests to assess their efficacy and potential consequences.

#### **Surveys, assessments and controls:** 24%

Increasing frequency of surveys and assessments to measure the viability of controls and regulations was also a key theme in face-to-face comments. The professionalism, qualification and independence of who conducts the survey was strongly emphasised, with participants sometimes critical of the bias or haphazardness of previous surveys.

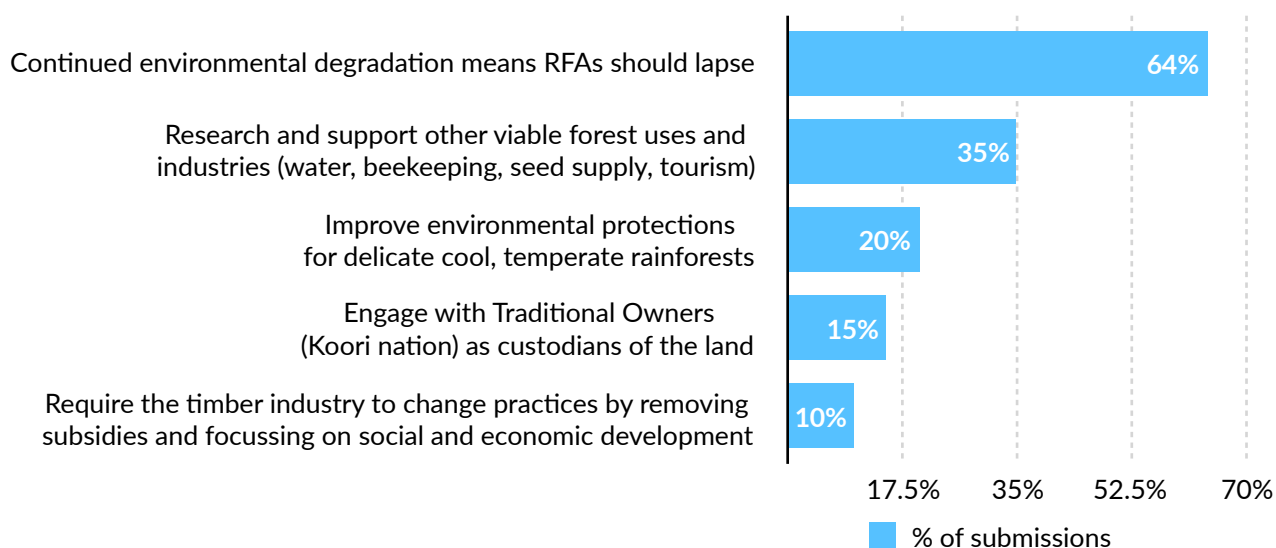
#### **Reserves and park system** - 14%

The role of the CAR system and its criterion, alongside the role of National and State parks was deemed by face-to-face comments as needing review and assessment. People were interested in whether there was adequate wood supply, creating larger reserve areas, revisiting the principles of the CAR system, and engaging National and State parks to provide a wider view of the forest and alternative employment opportunities (tourism, apiculture, recreation).

## **Gippsland Region Summary**

### **Online Survey responses**

There were 54 responses from Gippsland, representing around 17% of RFA regional survey responses. Online responses were much more focussed on the experience of forests than their regulation and governance, frequently discussing the impact of timber harvesting, the ecology of the forest, Traditional Owners, yields and emissions and forest degradation. Areas of interest and suggestions included:



Examples of contributions from the online responses included:

*“Areas of logged forest on the north eastern edge of the Errinundera plateau, along the Queensborough river/road, which seemed quite mature and well worth saving. This forest was completely destroyed and then burnt. It was hard not to think that forest of this calibre would not have been treated this way if it was closer to Melbourne.”*

*“Restoration of Cool Temperate and Warm Temperate rainforest species reduces fire risk.”*

*“Pollution of Gippsland lakes system and rivers with silt and debris as a result of logging of catchments”*

#### Face-to-face comments

There were 565 face-to-face comments recorded from the Gippsland region, which clustered around 5 broad themes:

#### **Change to less intensive timber harvesting practices and leave old-growth forest intact: 48%**

There were suggestions to shift to less intensive harvesting practices (i.e cease clear-felling and coupes). Alternative sources included salvage harvesting after fires and other natural disasters, as well as thinning and selective harvesting methods.

#### **Increase in bushfire intensity and impacts, leading to less area available for industry: 40%**

Participants expressed concern over the increased intensity and frequency of bushfires and the impact this is having on forest availability—not only for harvesting but for habitat and recreational enjoyment. Often discussed was the shrinking area of forest for multiple-use and concerns around sustainability of supply if fires were to continue in this way.

#### **Explore carbon capture and storage as a climate change mitigation - 18%**

Climate change was mentioned with some frequency, with participants drawing attention to the potential economic value of carbon storage. To get the most value out of this many comments urged for old-growth forest to be left alone. They also advocated for detailed research and evaluation of the dollar value of these forests in terms of carbon storage and other ecosystem services (water, soil) that could provide a revenue stream.

#### **Landscape and reserve systems: 14%**

A small number of face-to-face comments discussed the zoning and management systems in place. They were critical of detection based systems and advocated for a move towards a landscape scale approach *“Detection based management has resulted in more intensive harvesting in remaining areas.”*

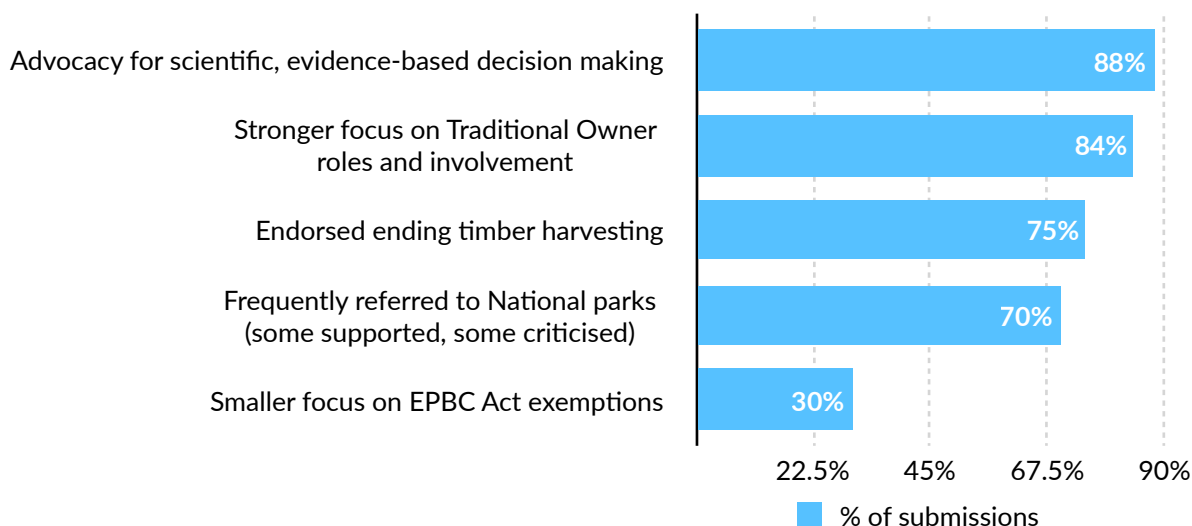
#### **Engage with Traditional Owners: 6%**

Face-to-face comments supported a move to stronger partnership with Traditional Owners in a joint-management forestry approach. They advocated for Government to utilise traditional knowledge and practices, particularly around fire management and controlled burns. People encouraged creation of opportunities for Traditional Owners, including as rangers, facilitating community engagement, sharing cultural knowledge, conducting surveys.

## North East Region Summary

### Online Survey responses

There were 25 responses from the North East region, representing around 8% of RFA regional responses. Generally responses from this region focussed responsibility back to community and advocated for more on-the-ground involvement. They key differences in the thematic analysis between North East and the main dataset included:



An example of a contribution from the online responses:

*"In Strathbogie forest in NE forests the changes have been significant with lasting negative impacts"  
"I have seen intrusion into greater glider and powerful owl habitat in the Strathbogie ranges. It makes me sick to see the logging of Rubicon and Royston valleys and the back of the blue range."*

### Face-to-face comments

There were 531 face-to-face comments recorded from the North East region, which clustered around five broad themes:

#### **Sustainability and future of timber under RFAs: 33%**

Participants in this theme were concerned over how the timber industry could continue in a sustainable, well-managed way. Frequently discussed was the role and management of plantations, controlled burning, yield and volume figures, and increasing training and education.

#### **Management of invasive and feral species: 25%**

Ways to manage increasing invasive weed species, growing populations of deer, and increased incidents with feral animals was mentioned by around a quarter of face-to-face comments from the North East. Participants remarked on the increase in pest numbers and wanted to see more investment in weed containment and animal management controls.

### **Stability and long term planning: 17%**

A focus on future planning and ensuring the longevity of forests through the RFAs was present in around 17% of face-to-face comments. Participants encouraged future-focussed research with a view to build certainty and continuity for the area.

### **National parks and robust management: 15%**

As seen throughout the online survey responses, the role of national parks in forest management was a theme in face-to-face comments, accounting for around 15% of discussion. Participants noted that national parks aren't a cure-all and need to be properly managed to ensure adequate protection and appropriate use of forests. They didn't want to see forests 'locked up' but suggested including a fee for access to deter illegal activity and to more easily control access.

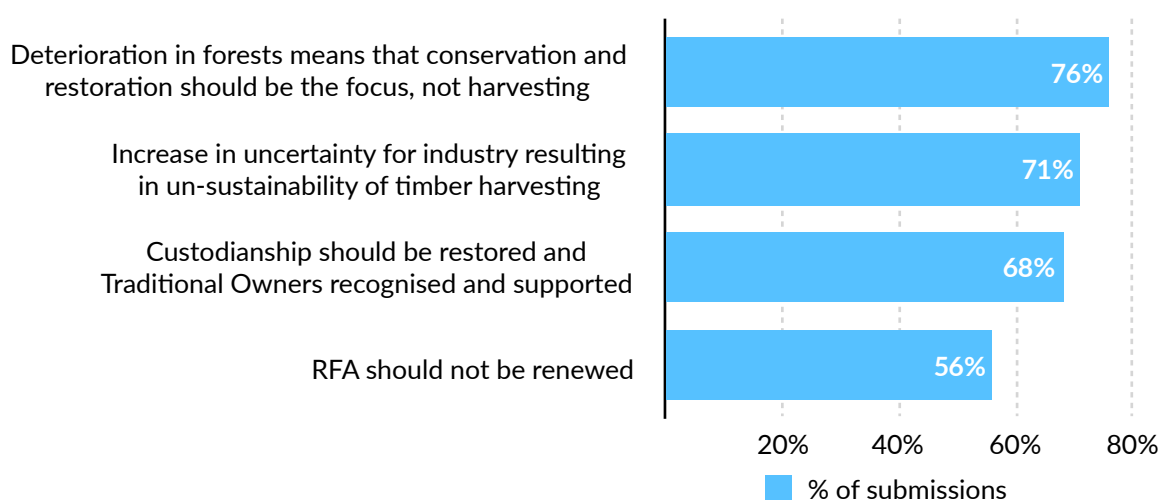
### **CAR system - 10%**

Comprehensive Adequate Reserve (CAR) systems were also discussed in face-to-face comments with some frequency. Commonly referred to was the need for these systems to be more flexible and adaptive to changes on the ground, as they were viewed to have a 'disconnect' under the current program.

## **West Region Summary**

### **Online Survey responses**

There were 98 responses from the West region, representing around 30% of RFA regional survey responses. The strong sentiment coming from online survey responses in this region was that both the timber industry and forests were in decline. There was very strong support for the West Victorian RFA to be cancelled. Responses from this region demonstrated high levels of agreement, with significant cohesiveness across responses in relation to action-based themes. In particular, online submissions from the West discussed:



An example of a contribution from the online responses:

*"...given that the forest agreements currently have no mechanism for ensuring compliance of forestry practitioners and fire-wood collectors to ensure that the principle of conservation and biodiversity are not only the highest priority, but that they are also the principle that governs the actions of wood extractors. I have very little confidence in the Regional Forest Agreement to ensure the conservation of our forests."*

#### Face-to-face comments

There were 566 face-to-face comments recorded from the West region, which centred around five broad themes:

#### **Develop support mechanisms for threatened species and ecosystems, restore biodiversity:** 25%

Frequently mentioned in comments was the state of biodiversity and native flora and fauna in the West. Participants were concerned at the rate of decline and urged Governments to take action to remedy this as soon as practicable. People were eager to ensure unique species of the region weren't lost or further endangered through inaction.

#### **Investigate the impact and mitigations of climate change (water and carbon):** 20%

There were some suggestions to consider the value of water catchments and carbon storage. Comments noted that more knowledge and research was required in order to fully capitalise on this. Climate change was also discussed in the context of the impact it could have on an already delicate forest ecology, this was cited as a reason to urgently move to protect what was left and research possible climate change impacts.

#### **Create opportunities for employment in alternative industries:** 20%

Ensuring livelihoods for regional communities through alternative industries (including tourism and apiculture) was viewed as a top priority. Interestingly, harvesting Blackwood to create musical instruments was raised by participants from the west, who expressed pride in the quality and global standing of these products and promoted small scale harvesting to ensure the continuation of this business.

#### **Move to plantation timber and create timber supply certainty:** 16%

Guarantee of supply was also a concern. Despite strongly opposing native forest harvesting in the West, many participants supported an industry shift to plantation in order to provide certainty for the industry.

#### **Improve control of invasive plants and feral animals:** 15%

Around 15% of face-to-face comments centred around the idea of introducing stronger control measures for invasive species of weeds and increased numbers of pests. They expressed concern of the impacts these species were having on native animals and habitats. Suggestions included hiring private contractors, researching the best methods into eradication and allocating greater funding.



# Appendices

- A. Other comments/concerns
- B. Survey Questions
- C. Promotion of consultation opportunities
- D. Consultation Schedule

# Appendix A - 'Other comments/concerns'

There were 437 comments/other concerns from face-to-face consultations. These didn't necessarily relate to the RFA renewal process but were nonetheless important for informing forest management more broadly.

We have presented these in a more generalised form, as follows: the theme; its percentage prevalence in the submissions; key terms in those submissions; and notable quotes to represent the direct feedback from participants.

The comments were scattered across a wide range of themes, but can broadly be grouped in to the following categories:

## **Relationship between communities and Government agencies: 27%**

Key terms: engagement, VicForests, process, Government, rfas, community, engage, vic, staff, department DELWP shire compliance

Notable quotes:

- *"Can we get visibility of this as it progresses."*
- *"Consultation fatigue, same questions being asked at multiple events. Feels like a 'tick box' exercise and not genuine."*
- *"Politicians seem disconnected from the reality in our forests, come and see what is being lost."*

## **Timber industry management and practices: 24%**

Key terms: rotation, harvesting, timber, security, certainty, clear-felling, release, planation, logging, pulp, paper

Notable quotes:

- *"As a business Otway Tonewoods has invested for the future and is concerned about ongoing security of access and supply."*
- *"Salvage burnt timber and regrowth from national parks should be considered (1939)"*
- *"Timber industry - does not have a voice about decision regarding areas being locked up."*
- *"RFA has been taken over by timber industry."*
- *"Tell the industry what the long term plans are."*

## **Importance of conservation and environmental protection: 15%**

Key terms: conservation, environment, protection, exemption, act, biodiversity, continue, glider, possum, ecologically

Notable quotes:

- *"Water management and regeneration is vital - continues and connects areas - Natural pathways."*
- *"We have concerns about using poison to control weeds in forest (phosphate)."*
- *"How will feral animals be controlled?"*

### **Bushfires combat and management: 12%**

Key terms: burn, front, mosaic skill, rely, experience, equipment, response, contractor, fighter, burns, prescription

Notable quotes:

- *"Keeping access roads open to assist in fire management."*
- *"The hazardous tree removal + trees removed for planned burnings should be utilised for product rather than left to add to fuel hazard."*
- *"Contractors needed for fire response and for bush experience."*
- *"How to model for bushfire risk in the timber release plan? By 2021, integrated forest fire management framework."*

### **Need for scientists and other experts, evidence-based decision making: 10%**

Key terms: Emotional, research, investigate, fact, data, citizen science

Notable quotes:

- *"Public collecting data 'Citizen Science' should be considered."*
- *"Need accurate modelling of sustainable yields and have them open to scrutiny."*
- *"Decisions around the RFA should be based on fact rather than emotion."*

### **Forests, population and health: 8%**

Key terms: Mental, health, wellbeing, calm, clean, energy, population

Notable quotes:

- *"A new Ballarat every year - 122,000 added to Victoria's population"*
- *"Day out option for families."*
- *"Recreation uses beyond walking, riding and driving."*

### **Education and communication with public on forestry: 6%**

Key terms: practice, education, knowledge, sharing, tell

Notable quotes:

- *"Forest industry supports the town (i.e. financially), but not recognised or reciprocated."*
- *"Need to have better advertising for drop in centres (i.e. letter box drops, notice outside supermarket)."*
- *"Should give more support to the Forest Discovery Centre, as it has recently reopened."*
- *"I would like to see state government do more to tell people about how forests need to be managed. Talk to the community about how the industry is more than just timber harvesting. We do road maintenance, tidying up the bush, fight fires and bush fire recovery."*

### **Employment and business opportunities: 4%**

Key terms: Job, work, tourism, carbon, markets, emerging

Notable quotes:

- *"Recruitment is challenging, trying to find qualified and quality of staff is challenging."*
- *"Great opportunities with the Sea to Summit trail if locals are involved and reap the benefits."*
- *"Stop protestors at work sites, it has created a very stressful situation for individuals and families."*

# Appendix B – Survey questions

## Overarching questions:

1. What changes have you seen in the RFA regions?
2. What should the Victorian RFAs aim to achieve over the next 20 years?
3. What are the potential improvements you think should be made?
4. How could the potential improvements in the consultation paper help modernise the Victorian RFAs?
5. Do you have any views on which potential improvements are most important?

## Theme 1: Ecologically sustainable forest management

### 1.1 *Recognise all forest values*

6. How do you use forests in your region?
7. How could the RFAs better provide for multiple forest uses (i.e. recreation, conservation, livelihood and economy)?

### 1.2 *Conserve forest biodiversity and maintain ecosystem health*

8. What are your views on existing environmental protections afforded across the entire forest estate (including parks, reserves and State forests) through the RFAs?
9. How could the environmental protections be improved?

### 1.3 *Promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership*

10. What opportunities could the RFAs provide to support access to and traditional use of forests by Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people?
11. How could the RFAs enable the legal rights of Traditional Owners to partner in land management and seek economic and cultural opportunities to be realised in future forest management?

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

### 2.1 *Address climate change and other large-scale disturbances*

12. How could the RFAs consider climate change and other large-scale natural disturbances (including bushfires)?

### 2.2 *Support the development of forest dependent industry*

13. How could the RFAs better address industry sustainability?
14. How could the RFA's encourage investment and new market opportunities for forest-based industries (including the forests and wood products industry, tourism, apiary and emerging markets such as carbon)?

## Theme 3: Governance and management of Victoria's forests

### 3.1 *Support the Victorian Government efforts to improve forest management planning*

15. How can the RFAs support the adaptive management of Victoria's forests in response to emerging issues (e.g. major bushfires) and opportunities (e.g. emerging industries)?

### 3.2 *Identify research priorities*

16. What areas of research would better equip us to sustainably manage Victoria's forests?

### 3.3 *Improve monitoring and reporting*

17. How could RFA monitoring, review (including five-yearly reviews) and reporting arrangements be improved?

## Appendix C – Promotion of consultation opportunities

### Website Interaction

Website	Web address	Visits	Visitors
Modernisation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements - Engage Victoria	<a href="https://engage.vic.gov.au/future-of-our-forests/rfa-consultation-paper">https://engage.vic.gov.au/future-of-our-forests/rfa-consultation-paper</a>	6184	4967
Future of our Forests - Engage Victoria	<a href="https://engage.vic.gov.au/future-of-our-forests">https://engage.vic.gov.au/future-of-our-forests</a>	1147	904
Future of our forests Website	<a href="https://www2.delwp.vic.gov.au/futureforests">https://www2.delwp.vic.gov.au/futureforests</a>	11,336	N/A

### Social media

Social media posts referring to the consultation sessions and including the public lecture series.

Platform/Total	Posts Sent	Impressions	Engagements	Shares	Likes
Total	24	53,387	305	64	222
Facebook	11	21,320	123	30	76
LinkedIn	6	13,076	74	7	65
Twitter	6	17,302	51	27	24
Instagram	1	1,689	57	0	57

Impressions – the number of times content is displayed

Engagements – interactions on a piece of content

### Print media

Paid display advertisements in early general news sections of regional and metropolitan newspapers:

- Alexandra & Eildon Standard
- Ararat Advertiser
- Bairnsdale Advertiser
- Beaufort Pyreness Advocate
- Benalla Ensign
- Camperdown Chronicle
- Colac Herald
- Corryong Courier
- East Gippsland News
- Euroa Gazette
- Geelong Advertiser
- Latrobe Valley Express
- Lilydale & Yarra Valley Leader
- Mansfield Courier
- Melbourne Herald Sun
- Mountain View Mail

- Mortlake Dispatch
- New South Wales The Border Mail
- Seymour Telegraph
- Snowy River Mail (Orbost)
- Surf Coast Times
- Tallangatta Herald
- Terang Express
- The Alpine Times (Myrtleford)
- The Ballarat Courier
- The Cobden Times
- Upper Yarra Mail
- Wangaratta Chronicle
- Warragul Gazette
- Warrnambool Standard
- Yea Chronicle

Known articles published in local media outlets after media release:

- Ararat Advertiser – 14/6/19
- Hamilton Spectator – 15/6/19
- Stawell Times News – 14/6/19
- South Gippsland Sentinel Times – 12/6/19
- Pyrenees Advocate – 7/6/19
- Snowy River Mail – 5/6/19

## Postcards

Postcards promoting engagement opportunities were distributed via DELWP staff across Victorian regions.

## Radio Interviews

There were two radio interviews with the DELWP RFA Program Director throughout the consultation period including:

- UGFM Community Radio station for the Murrindindi and Mansfield Shires
- ABC Warrnambool

## Appendix D – Consultation Schedule

Date	Activity/Event	Location	Stakeholders Invited	Attendees
<b>Western Victoria</b>				
3 June 2019	Workshop	Daylesford	Environmental NGOs (ENGOS)	6
3 June 2019	Drop in session	Beaufort	General Public*	20
4 June 2019	Drop in session	Forrest	General Public*	30
4 June 2019	One on ones (three groups)	Geelong	ENGOS, local government and timber industry	4
29 June 2019	Drop In	Geelong	General Public*	25
<b>Central Highlands</b>				
11 June 2019	Drop in Session	Healesville	General Public*	13
11 June 2019	Workshop	Healesville	ENGOS	9
12 June 2019	Drop in Session	Powelltown	General Public*	18
12 June 2019	Workshop	Powelltown	Timber Industry	13
13 June 2019	Drop in session	Marysville	General Public*	5
13 June 2019	Workshop	Marysville	Local Government, Water Authorities and CMAs	4
13 June 2019	Workshop	Marysville	ENGOS	2
14 June 2019	Drop in session	Alexandra	General Public*	27
14 June 2019	Workshop	Alexandra	Timber Industry and Local Government	6
<b>North East</b>				
19 June 2019	Workshop	Benalla	ENGOS and recreation user groups	6
19 June 2019	Workshop	Benalla	Timber industry and other commercial forest users	11
19 June 2019	Drop in session	Benalla	General Public*	7
20 June 2019	Drop in session	Corryong	General Public*	5
20 June 2019	Workshop	Corryong	ENGOS and recreation user groups	5
20 June 2019	Workshop	Corryong	Timber industry and other commercial forest users	8
<b>Gippsland and East Gippsland</b>				
24 June 2019	Drop in session	Orbost	General Public*	9
24 June 2019	Workshop	Orbost	ENGOS	1
24 June 2019	Workshop	Orbost	Timber Industry	11
25 June 2019	Drop in session	Bairnsdale	General Public*	10
25 June 2019	Workshop	Heyfield	Timber Industry	21
26 June 2019	Workshop	Traralgon	Local Government, Water Authorities and CMAs	13
26 June 2019	Workshop	Traralgon	ENGOS	4
<b>Melbourne</b>				
27 June 2019	Workshop	Melbourne	Timber Industry	11
27 June 2019	Workshop	Melbourne	ENGOS	5
27 June 2019	Workshop	Melbourne	Recreation and other commercial forest users	14
28 June 2019	One on ones (four groups)	Melbourne	ENGOS	4
28 June 2019	One on ones (three groups)	Melbourne	Timber Industry	3
19 July 2019	One on ones (seven groups)	Melbourne	ENGO and Timber Industry	7
30 July 2019	One on ones (one group)	Melbourne	General Public	1
*Community members, ENGOS, timber industry, recreation and commercial forest users				