

The case against continuance of RFAs



It's time to ditch the RFAs

The five Victorian Regional Forest Agreements that allow the logging of public native forests without requiring approval under national environmental laws must be allowed to expire.

The five-yearly review currently underway is not only woefully overdue but is based on spurious and irresponsible arguments. In essence:

- None of the RFAs have met their objectives, with numbers of forest-dependent species listed as threatened continuing to rise.
- Forest health is declining and will only get worse under climate change. This poses direct threats to safety (bushfire threats) and much more fruitful and sustainable economic activities in regions (tourism).

Paradoxically, all this is happening while the native forest industry is stagnating and in decline as their main resource runs out or is reduced through landscape-scale fire.

Fewer issues can be more important to our community's longer term interests than environmental sustainability, and yet the RFAs allow the logging industry virtual *carte blanche* to continue with their unsustainable practices.

Native forest logging is strongly contested, based on conflicting and out of date information and concepts. In many ways, an appropriately constituted judicial and expert review would be a fairer process, if a review is undertaken at all.

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 – based on current science, and on community views about how our state forests should be valued, used and managed.

Why the RFAs have failed

The RFAs have failed because they:

- **Are obsolete and out of date.** Many of the RFAs' standards for the protection of ecosystems fall below international and national benchmarks. The agreements do not even mention climate change and its potential catastrophic effects.
- **Threaten species and ecosystems.** In 2015, mountain ash forest, one of the key target species for logging, was listed as critically endangered on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Ecosystems. The Leadbeater's possum has been up-listed to critically endangered, and the greater glider added to federal and state lists as vulnerable to extinction. While the RFAs have been in effect in East Gippsland, populations of the greater glider have declined by 50 per cent in that region.
- **Ignore fire impacts.** RFAs ignore the successive or cumulative impact of bushfire, even though there have been extensive fires in the last 10 years.

- **Ignore other forest values.** They do not recognise, include or account for non-wood forest values (such as water, ecosystem services, recreation and tourism) that are contributing significant sums to the state's economy, and could contribute further.
- **Ignore their own previous reviews.** Recommendations relating to improved threatened species outcomes, from the previous RFA five-yearly review in 2009, have still not been complied with.
- **Give unjustified special treatment for native forest logging.** Most industries have to follow the law, yet RFAs 'turn off' national environmental laws. The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) is the main piece of federal environmental legislation, yet the Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002 provides that RFAs, and by extension the native forest industry, are exempt from the EPBC Act.
- **Stifle innovation.** The method of harvesting native forest, clear fell logging, has not changed significantly in 30 years and has a dramatic impact on the native habitats and drinking water production. The amount of saw timber used in construction has dropped dramatically and supply is shaky, to the point that the Victorian Government had to buy out the main native hardwood sawmill in 2017.
- **Are inconsistent with more important and fruitful community economic and national activities.** Many of the communities in Victoria's forest areas rely heavily on tourism, and yet the various RFAs allow logging and related activities that degrade and impede opportunities for such tourism. This ranges from removal of scenically pleasant forest areas to reduction of relatively unspoiled areas through which people can hike and cycle.

Minimum steps forward

The RFAs should be abandoned, and hence:

- end the regulatory relic which is the Western Regional Forest Agreement and comprehensively review proposed logging plans;
- discontinue the industry's exemption from national environment laws in all RFAs;
- account for other forest-dependent industries—such as conservation recreation, tourism, agriculture, water, and carbon – in any future arrangement or agreements;
- strengthen management prescriptions for threatened species, climate change impacts, and fire; and
- make substantial additions to the formal reserve system.

Conclusions

The protected nature of the industry has entrenched a method of timber harvesting almost to the exclusion of all else, without the exploration of more ecologically or socially acceptable methods. Few businesses dependent on native forest are profitable, many make very small or neutral profits in the normal business sense, and many have also been recipients of extensive direct and indirect government support.

It's time to move forward to a greener future. **For the community's sake – for the nation's sake – please do so.**

