



SCIENCE FOR ALL

Modernisation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements: Science for All Submission

About this submission

This submission has been written by [REDACTED] the Director of 'Science for All'. It has been written based on multiple public events and a process of involving the public in writing and commenting on aspects of the response. This includes a free public 'Campfires and Science: Future Forests' event held at a RFA consultation meeting, in partnership with the Royal Society of Victoria, where we heard from experts from DELWP, researchers and people from the logging industry.

It contains Science for All's responses to the survey questions using the organisation's public values as a foundation.

'Science for All' is a not-for-profit organisation that supports everyone in the world to get involved in shaping the future of human knowledge. We recognise that many of the challenges facing the planet today do not have solutions which fall into categories such as 'public health', 'environmental studies' and 'education'.

We recognise that knowledge takes many forms - this includes people who are subject area experts, people with traditional, indigenous or local knowledge – and those with big dreams and big ideas.

We support decisions and policies which are informed by evidence, preferably created from open data, shared freely and peer-reviewed by those who are collectively defined as experts. We do not support decisions or policy which appears to be informed by real or perceived conflicting or competing interests. We do not align with any political 'parties' or ideologies, and will only work with elected representatives to help uphold our values.

Science for All responses are in blue text

Survey responses

1. What changes have you seen in the RFA regions?

'Science for All' has no data on this as we are a relatively new organisation. We refer readers to peer-reviewed literature on longitudinal studies which assess current management practices:

'Ecosystem assessment of mountain ash forest in the Central Highlands of Victoria, south-eastern' Australia - <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/aec.12200>

2. What should the Victorian RFAs aim to achieve over the next 20 years?

A way of transparently over-seeing evidence-based management of the forests, by involving the public in gathering data, analysing it, translating it into practice and scrutinising the process in order to improve public trust.

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

Funding independent organisations to oversee public involvement in every aspect of the RFAs and associated activities. Overseeing the RFAs and how they are enforced will extend to powers which will mean that some activities can be halted until there is evidence they are aligning with evidence-based management.

Similarly, best-practice should be identified by the independent organisation and shared publicly, to help similar practices around the world.

In addition, current experts state that whatever the outcome measures are for the forest, the current evidence suggests that restoration is currently not effective, thus making any removal of trees likely to be unsustainable and likely to negatively impact on biodiversity.

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

The independent auditing process stated the 'environmental, social and economic sustainability of timber resource management could be enhanced'. 'Science for All' believes that formally creating a budget for independent organisations to assist in assessing outcome measures would improve public scrutiny and accountability. Outcome measures should be set by the public (with specific funding to involve Aboriginal people in culturally appropriate ways).

'Science for All' has been doing this informally as part of our projects 'Campfires and Science' and 'Wild DNA' - which train the public to assess biodiversity and restore habitat.

We believe the suggested potential improvements in the RFA could be achieved more effectively by working in partnership with more community organisations, in a transparent process.

This may promote a sense of 'partnership working' and reduce some community perceptions of an 'adversarial' relationship between various stakeholders with perceived or real competing or conflicting interests.

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

6. How do you use forests in your region?

The wording of this question could be refined to 'how are the forests useful'. People drink water every day and much of Melbourne's water comes from the forests.

'Science for All' runs regular free events in the forest and evaluates them. People often report feeling benefits from being in the forest, and a sense of community when helping learn about the forest and restore it.

The potential for employment and tourism in the forest could be developed significantly and organisations like 'Science for All' are well-positioned to help ensure such activities involve all stakeholders in the planning and evaluation of how forests are used in this way.

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

The interest in 'Science for All' 'Campfires and Science' events shows that people enjoy going into the forest, but for many it is inaccessible for many reasons.

Creating more inclusive opportunities for the public to enjoy and value the natural heritage of Victoria should be a focus of future research and funding.

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

'Science for All' seeks to position itself as an organisation which can facilitate a transparent, neutral dialogue with multiple-stakeholders.

'Science for All' has a values statement which supports evidence-based policy. We rely on experts and peer reviewed literature for our position on this.

We have run many events, bringing hundreds of people into the forest and worked with a number of experts, including researchers from the Australian National University. They have spoken at our events and informed the public that current environmental protections are not in line with evidence-based management.

In addition, at many of our events, members of the public state that they perceive conflicting or competing interests in how the environment is protected in Victoria (including parks, reserves and State forests).

'Science for All' does not wish to comment on the veracity of these perceptions and whether the conflicting or competing interests are real or perceived, but would like to state that the very fact that considerable numbers of our event participants (including experts and researchers) state that they perceive these conflicting or competing interests suggests a significant percentage of the public do not trust the current process for management. While this area requires more data, our data suggests that the way that environmental protections are currently managed are not creating the impression among the public and experts that they are evidence-informed practices immune from political or financial outcome measures.

9. How could the environmental protections be improved?

Independent organisations assessing management, involving the public in every stage including data collection, analysis and scrutiny of the management of the process.

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

Working in partnerships with councils to co-design opportunities for Aboriginal people to get involved in shaping every aspect of future management is essential.

'Science for All' has attempted to do this at a number of events, however our current limited funding creates barriers to paying Aboriginal people in order to ensure our opportunities are inclusive.

State funding for such activities is essential - working in partnership with Aboriginal communities to design and evaluate them.

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?

'Science for All' believes that involving Traditional Owners in answering this question is the most effective strategy.

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

Working in partnership with experts and people with traditional knowledge in order to create policies which are informed by both peer-reviewed literature and traditional knowledge.

13. How could the RFAs better address industry sustainability?

Evidence from medical research suggests that by involving the public in co-creating outcome measures that reflect values other than financial outcome measures or employment figures, the process for working with industry is likely to be more trusted by all stakeholders. These principles are the same for forestry management and should be urgently heeded.

'Science for All' works with both health organisations and environmental research organisations, working to share best practice between multiple disciplines.

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)?

A process which is informed by independent peer-reviewed research that is free from bias or influence from conflicting or competing interest should guide any decision making in this important area. In addition, imaginative new ways of involving the public in helping generate ideas should be encouraged through public dialogue processes.

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)?

Public dialogue and overview and scrutiny should be an ongoing activity, not a one-off. Funding for such activities should ensure that the management practice of the forests is able to respond to future opportunities in a way which is perceived as positive by those who own the forests (the public).

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

Research into effective ways of involving the public in every stage of research.

'Science for All' works to create evidence-informed ways of involving people, and measures the impact. We would welcome the opportunity to work with those managing the forests in order to ensure that the above recommendations can be enacted in an effective and cost-efficient way.

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. Using the best current evidence to inform how people are involved (by learning from other disciplines) will ensure that trust is maintained.

We refer the readers to this recent scoping review published by the Director of 'Science for All', which has lessons relevant to forest management.

Facilitators of involvement include 'governance which is trusted by all stakeholders to be able to manage real or perceived competing or conflicting interests' [from 'Public Involvement in Global Genomics Research: A Scoping Review' -

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2019.00079/full>]

3.3 IMPROVE MONITORING AND REPORTING

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

As above - public involvement in every stage of reporting, with independent organisations involved in assessing the process and ensuring it is transparent and thus helping improve public trust.

Contact

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