

Submission in response to the so called 'Modernisation' of the Regional Forest Agreements – June /July, 2019

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FOE Forest Collective

Introduction: why the RFA's need to be expired as soon as possible

The Regional Forest Agreements (RFA's) in Victoria have been an economic, environmental and social failure and should be allowed to expire via a short-term plan to transition the remaining jobs across to the plantation, tourism and conservation industries. I am grumpy about the term 'modernisation' set out in this consultation (and the guidelines that assume the RFA's will continue) because for RFA's to be 'modern', they must include the development and implementation of a plan to transition to plantations.

The French government has been managing 200 year-old oak plantations since the 17th century for their wine casks and industry. Why is it that we as a nation and a State continue the deforestation rampant from colonial times and ignore the science and potential of our plantation and alternative fibre industries to provide our wood, fibre and employment needs for the future *without further native forest logging*? We have the science, we already have 85% of our wood needs from our poorly managed plantations, we can devise transition plans so forest workers do not lose their jobs: all we need is well articulated leadership to manage a new forest future in Victoria. I am clearly advocating that you provide that leadership for Victoria and future generations by listening to the scientists and transitioning out of the Victorian RFA's.

In addition, any future forest logging in the state of Victoria must also be subject to the federal environment laws: the EPBC Act or equivalent. No other industry is exempt from EPBC Act requirements and the logging industry should be no exception. The repeated failure of FSC process is an example of this failure. The flagrant abuse of any environmental guidelines and failure to protect or plan for the management and protection of our forest biodiversity is well documented and is currently before the Federal court with the Leadbeater's Possum case. DELWP has failed to regulate the flagrant abuses of the Forests Act in all areas of Victoria.

Asking for public responses is no substitute for a formal review by credible peer reviewed scientists which has been one of the many failures of DELWP, VicForests and the so-called RFA management system. The situation is so serious that it requires a moratorium of all native forest logging in Victoria while the forest estate is reviewed. Credible scientists have repeatedly warned of the disastrous impacts of logging what is left of our native forests in Victoria but as with other scientific advice, successive Victorian Governments have ignored this advice for short term political motives.

Issues that concern me

As a scientist and biologist, I have a lifelong passion and interest in forest and marine ecology and our unique biodiversity. The following issues are of uppermost concern to me and overlap with my own expertise in relation to Victoria's forests:

Climate Change and Carbon sequestration through our forests

We need to plan for the impacts of climate change now and Victoria is at the forefront nationally of action on climate change, but to date this has focused primarily on reducing Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions via replacement of fossil fuels with renewables in the generation of electricity. Scientists are also strongly advocating that we link the management of forests and other wood reserves or tree-based resources with reducing Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions. The outcomes of the recent Combet report (2019 Climate Change: Reducing Victoria's Greenhouse Gas Emissions <https://engage.vic.gov.au/climate-change-reducing-victorias-greenhouse-gas-emissions>) puts the two together directly, and it suggests ways in which forest management and afforestation / reforestation can be included as part of Victoria's strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting forests and water supplies, and providing just transition for workers industries in decline.

Our forests have a great ability to store carbon: particularly our old forests. Protecting and restoring forests is a key approach to climate change mitigation. The 2018 IPCC report warned that we have 12 years to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 C. Forests have been predicted by the world's best scientists to contribute approximately 18% to the emissions reductions required to limit warming to 1.5 C. We need our huge carbon sinks left standing in our old forests and we need to drawdown more atmospheric carbon into revegetation and better plantation management.

Just Transition, Skills Transfer and Regeneration

A major independent report by the Nous economic evaluation group clearly contrasts the minimal value of continued logging against those of preserving forests and the creation of a Great Forest National Park: https://www.greatforestnationalpark.com.au/uploads/1/5/5/7/15574924/great_forest_national_park_-_economic_boon-press-medium.pdf .

Skills training required for existing native forest workers for this type of shift will depend on how the protection and enhancement of native forests is framed. If the frame is primarily around creation of national parks for recreation, there will be jobs, with appropriate skills training, for those building tracks and trails, and maintain these, those managing fire, and interpretive services. If the frame is widened to include protection, management and re-

afforestation areas for a combination of carbon capture, water production, and biodiversity protection per se, as well as for tourism, then the likelihood of transfer and re-purposing of existing skills is likely to be much larger.

Transfer of workers from native forest harvesting to plantation type industries, for wood production, and for carbon capture and biodiversity enhancement (for example on private land and in existing plantation-oriented holding) is likely to require mapping of new areas some skills training, but not extensive. A recent report from University of Canberra for Forest and Wood Products Australia concludes (pg. 50): “Businesses operating in different forest types (softwood plantations, hardwood plantations and native forests) reported similar skill requirements in many competency areas ... [with] some exceptions ...”

https://www.fwpa.com.au/images/OtherReports/Vic_Report_FINAL.pdf

Transfer of workers to jobs repairing native forest areas, primarily for carbon sequestration, in combination with biodiversity protection, would probably generate some or even many jobs that could also allow reasonably easy transition from existing logging jobs.

In addition, there are examples of where diversified on-farm development can combine with other farm-related activities to reverse carbon emissions and enhance biodiversity at the same time. In the La Trobe Valley there is now strong emphasis on a just transition for the existing coal-oriented workforce – for example, see <https://environmentvictoria.org.au/2019/06/05/moving-beyond-just-transition-towards-transformation/> .

A similar approach could be applied to those working in the existing native forest logging industry, and with good planning this could be folded into the existing La Trobe Valley transition plans. This work could be facilitated by a future State Labor Government having a focus on skills training, transfer and regeneration, via the revitalization of the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Higher Education systems.

Fire threats and deforestation / clear felling

The past 20 years lack of management of RFA's in Victoria have seen the failure to respond to climate change impacts and projections in relation to both fire and water. Forest management must embed adaptive management to respond to impacts of bushfires on sustainable yield and manage sovereign risks (e.g. not replicate the sovereign risks such as the supply commitments in the Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act 1996. Inappropriate commercial contracts create management conflicts when bushfires impact on [reduce] timber resources. VicForests changed some wood supply contracts, but changes have not been applied to Australian Paper contracts. eNGOS recommend process leaders and managers refer Victorian Forest Industry Taskforce information: Fire and VicForests modelling and oral presentation by VicForests.

Biodiversity / Extinction threats

The two cases of our critically endangered Leadbeater's Possum and the vulnerable status of the Greater Glider illustrate the threat of the RFA's and the failure of DELWP and VicForests to manage our forests. Below are quotes from the Wilderness Society report on our threatened species and the critical impacts of logging in Victoria on just two of our threatened species (Abandoned: Australia's Forest Wildlife in Crisis, March 2019)

Leadbeater's Possum (Vic) - *Gymnobelideus leadbeateri*

Critically endangered

Threats: Logging “**reduces habitat suitability, extent and connectivity in Leadbeater's Possums' montane ash forest environments...** *Leadbeater's Possums do not occur in recently clear-felled areas... On average approximately 800ha of ash forest is currently harvested per year within the range of Leadbeater's Possum.*” (EPBC Draft recovery plan, 2016)

In 2015, then Federal Environment Minister Hunt, listed the Leadbeater's Possum as Critically Endangered. The advice of the Threatened Species Scientific Committee, approved by Minister Hunt, concluded that: “*The most effective way to prevent further decline and rebuild the population of Leadbeater's Possum is to **cease timber harvesting** [logging] within montane ash forests of the Central Highlands.*”

Minister Hunt prioritised the species for 'emergency intervention', and promised a revised recovery plan for the species within twelve months.

In 2009 “severe bushfires in large parts of the Central Highlands [...] substantially reduced the overall population and the available habitat for Leadbeater's Possum.” (Leadbeater's recovery plan review 2016)

Greater Glider (NSW/Vic) - *Petauroides Volans volans*

Conservation status: **VULNERABLE** (EPBC Act)

Uplisted since RFA commencement? **YES**, in 2016 (from unlisted to 'Vulnerable')

EPBC recovery plan? **NO** Recovery Plan for this species; there is a 'Conservation advice'

Greater Gliders, Australia's largest gliding possum, were once abundant along the east coast, but populations have crashed 80% in the last 20 years due to logging, land clearing, and the rising threat of bushfires linked to climate change.

Threats: “Habitat loss (through clearing, **clearfell logging** and the destruction of senescent trees due to prescribed burning) and

fragmentation. **Consequence rating: Catastrophic.** Prime habitat coincides largely with areas suitable for logging; the species is **highly dependent on forest connectivity and large mature trees**... There is a progressive decline in numbers of hollow-bearing trees **in production forests** as logging rotations become shorter and as dead stags collapse (Ross 1999; Ball et al., 1999; Lindenmayer et al., 2011).”

www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/pubs/254-conservation-advice-20160525.pdf

Impact on local economies and employment

Intensive clear felling destroys local economies, leaves communities more vulnerable to wildfire and destroys local jobs built around recreation, tourism and alternative industries. Our native forests and parks provide sustainable long-term jobs and the tourist development has far greater economic potential than highly mechanised and centralised timber harvesting and processing. The government must establish a credible methodology for quantifying the economic benefits to local communities that benefit our State along with water and carbon monetary gains from retaining our remaining native forests for current and future generations.

Importance of water from our forests

The science is incontrovertible that logging leads to decreased water yields and lower water quality and the Victorian government continues to ignore this advice. The impacts of lower water yield should be considered against the price of replacing this water. VicForests has not been acknowledging let alone paying for any water loss incurred by logging activities. We need to know what the price of water is (e.g. Melbourne Water commercial or domestic rate) so we can calculate the monetary value of water gained each year from *stopping clear felling our native forests.*

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