

SOUTH EAST TIMBER ASSOCIATION SUBMISSION TO THE RENEWAL OF THE VICTORIAN REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENTS

Regional Forest Agreement Principles.

The principles underpinning the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) were to:

- *establish a framework for the management of forests in the RFA regions;*
- *identify areas and regions that the Parties believe are required for the purposes of a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserve system, and provide for the conservation of those areas;*
- *provide for the ecologically sustainable management and use of forested areas in the Regions: and*
- *provide long-term stability of forests and forest industries.*

The South East Timber Association (SETA) agrees with and supports those principles. While the first principle has been met, SETA believes that the second principle has been over-subscribed. With about fifty percent of public land in Victoria being in formal parks and reserves and an increasing percentage of state forests being unavailable for timber supply, due to environmental requirements, the RFAs have failed to provide long-term stability for rural communities dependent on the forests and the associated processing industries. The lack of active and adaptive management is also inhibiting ecologically sustainable forest management

Recommendation 1: Place a balanced focus on the social and economic aspects of the RFAs and commit to undertaking social and economic impact assessments before any changes are made to the to the State Forest land base or the log supply levels in future.

1. Five-Year Rolling Extension Mechanism.

The South East Timber Association (SETA) supports a five year rolling renewal mechanism. As part of the process, reporting will need to be timely and not involve the excessive delays associated with the current RFA reviews.

2. Modernising Structure and Content

SETA supports modernisation and believes the structure and content must focus predominantly on outcomes relating to the four principles underlying the RFAs. The content and reporting should not continue to be cluttered with an extensive activity list. More detailed actions might best be contained in action plans that sit under the Principles Document. that reports against the 4 RFA Principles. If the underlying actions are relevant and completed in a timely manner, high level reporting should then be relatively simple and less expensive than the current process.

3. Updating references.

SETA has a view that updating of relevant documents should be done as part of the 5 yearly reviews.



Recommendation 2: It is recommended that a five year rolling extension be introduced and the structure and content of the RFAs be modernised.

4. Addressing Emerging Issues

A number of SETA members have experience in forest ecology, fire science and other fields. Many SETA members have observed the forests for decades. There have some positive improvements in forest management over the past two decades. See 4(a) and 4(b).

4.(a) Predator Control

Over the past 10 to 15 predator control has become more regular and applied broadly across large areas of state forests and adjoining private property. This program specifically targets foxes and wild dogs. The response of some critical weight range (CWR) mammals such as potoroos and bandicoots has been remarkable and makes a mockery of activist claims that harvesting is THE threat to these species. Feral cats are a growing concern and their predation offsets some of the gains made in controlling foxes.

4.(b) Threatened Species Survey & Monitoring

Monitoring of threatened and other species in advance of harvesting operations has added significantly to the understanding of threatened species numbers and distribution in state forests.

There are concerns that protection and monitoring of threatened species in parks and reserves do not consistently meet the standards applying to state forests. Where information is publicly available, it reveals the levels of protection that the general public expect of our parks and reserves are not being delivered. For example, the advice regarding the status of Southern Brown Bandicoots to the Federal Environment Minister in May 2016 contained the following table.

Available quantitative data are summarised in the table below.

Population	State	Decline
Ben Boyd National Park	NSW	44% (1999 to 2008)
Nadgee Nature Reserve	NSW	47% (1999 to 2008)
Port Campbell	Vic	>70% (past 10 years)
Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve	Vic	100% (extirpated around 2006)
Mt Lofty Ranges – northern metapopulation	SA	100% (extirpated around 2009)

This table highlights delivery underperformance of threatened species protection is not just an issue in Victorian parks and reserves.

Unfortunately, there is no specific targeting of feral cats across the broad landscape and consequently species at the bottom of the CWR continue to decline, despite the large increase in the area of "protected" parks and reserves.

A key part of the RFAs was the establishment of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve (CARR) system. Given the issues raised above, 5 yearly



reporting under the RFAs must include reporting of the biodiversity protection performance of the CARR system, if the ongoing decline in many threatened species is publicly recognised and then adequate funding provided.

Recommendation 3: It is recommended that the performance monitoring of the CARR be included in the RFA 5 yearly reports.

Recommendation 4: It is recommended that the remaining Victorian threatened species actions plans be completed (currently 80 percent completed) and all plans actioned.

A number of other negative issues are affecting Victorian native forests including a significant percentage of the CARR.

4(c) Wildfires and Megafires

Over the last 16 years fires over 10,000 hectares and up to 1, million hectares are occurring with increasing frequency.

In the summer of 2002-03, over a 60 day period, about 2,400,000 (2.4 million) hectares of mostly forested land along the main range in NSW and Victoria was burnt by wildfires. The CSIRO estimated 370,000,000 (370 million) birds, mammals and reptiles were killed in that period.

In the Canberra Times on 28 January 2007, four years after the fires, retired CSIRO scientist Noeline Franklin was interviewed. The article in part reported: *For every 1 ha burnt, 19 birds, four mammals and 178 reptiles were killed, according to her research.*

Those not burnt to death were killed by smoke-related ailments.

"Birds can't escape it either, because temperatures reach up to 1600 degrees. – they can't fly above it," she said.

She said it would take up to 100 years to recover the numbers of animals lost.

"The losses are huge. You walk through the Cotter catchment area now and you won't see a single lizard.

"You used to hear birds singing to wake you up in the morning, but now if you even hear one you would record it in a diary entry."

Ms Franklin said governments and the media were quick to address the issue of property damage but wildlife preservation had been neglected". We've got to do something – What wildlife is left needs to be looked after."

SETA members observed what can be best described as a **Silent Summer**, when travelling through some remote parts of the 2003 fire area in the summer of 2018.

In 2006-07, another million hectare wildfire, overlapped the southern boundary of the 2002-03 fire area. *Over 10,000 hectares of alpine ash and some areas of snow gum forests in North East Victoria have burnt three times in the 10 years prior to 2014.* (Department of Environment and Primary Industries 2014)



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2002-03 Fire Devastated Protected Forests – Not Sustainable, Recovery Not Monitored



15 Years After the 2002-03 Megafires Large Areas of Forest Remain Scarred & Eerily Quiet

In the past 20 years, there has been a massive increase in forest fuel loads, as fuel reduction burns have dwindle in area treated. It is only a matter of time before devastating fires will impact much of the remaining unburnt Victorian forests, unless there are significant reductions in forest fuel loads.

Since the 2002-03, there has not been enough focus on biodiversity recovery on much of the more than 3 million hectares of public land devastated by fire over the 16 year period. This is placing an unsustainable burden on flora and fauna in the fire affected areas.

Recommendation 5: A new monitoring and audit framework put in place across both State Forest and National Parks, which has a focus on key threatened species.



Recommendation 6: The information arising from this framework should then be used to prioritise expenditure on biodiversity recovery programs.

SETA is concerned by the loss of firefighting capacity with the wind down in the timber industry and forest services over the past 20 years. More and more water bombers might make a great media announcement, but do not replace lost on ground machines and experienced operator firefighting capacity.

Recommendation 7: That the number of available forest industry firefighting machines and experienced operators be recorded for the years 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015 and each subsequent 5 year period, so the public, governments and government agencies better understand the loss of firefighting capacity.

4(d) Decline in General Forest Health

Another widespread, but more insidious issue, is the general decline in forest health across large areas of the native forest estate. outside those decimated by high intensity fires. This issue links back to the megafire issue, as the elimination of frequent low intensity burns not only exacerbates megafire risk, it also changes soil chemistry, which impacts on general tree and forest health.

Insects that overwinter or otherwise reproduce in the litter layer also benefit from loss of low intensity burning. Due to higher survival rates, these insect cause abnormal levels of defoliation in many forest areas. Intense competition from historically high tree numbers and understorey also contributes to the stress.

Unhealthy forests have excessive numbers of trees with crowns dominated by epicormic growth. Epicormic shoots are a response to significant stress and have significantly less flowering capacity than normal healthy crowns. Loss of flowering capacity potentially impacts on food resources for threatened species such as the Swift Parrot, as well as native and introduced bee species and other flower and nectar dependent species.

The conservation model involving the transfer of state forest to the parks and reserves network has proved to be ineffective. Parks and reserve underperformance in the delivery of environmental services has been hidden by a failure to monitor key indicators across most of the reserve estate.

While this lack of transparency continues, governments and government agencies will continue to cut back the productive forest land base, to the detriment of remote and regional timber dependent communities.

5. Promote Traditional Owners Rights and Partnership

The current conservation framework appears to have roots in the concept of *terra nullius* (nobody's land). Conservation management language, concepts and practices that underpin the *terra nullius* approach, include wilderness, precautionary approach and passive management. The precautionary approach is too often used, as an excuse to do nothing.



In a practical sense, 21st century conservation management largely defaults to passive management, with some fuel reduction or ecological burning across a small percentage of the estate each year.

Consequently, understorey in many forest areas is much denser and there is much more competition for soil water. With altered fire regimes, nutrient cycles have changed and flammable litter levels are at an all-time high, compared to historical (more than 200 years ago) times.

Evolution of much of the Australian biota has occurred in a disturbance environment driven by Aboriginal and naturally occurring fires. Consequently, returning low intensity cultural/ecological/low intensity burning into the broad landscape is a necessity, if the negative impacts of wildfires and forest decline are to be addressed.

Recommendation 8: That plans be developed and implemented to transition current fuel reduction burning operations to traditional burning practices to the maximum extent possible.

This recommendation will provide enhanced cultural and biodiversity outcomes across the forested areas of Victoria and help to manage threats to many threatened species.

6. Water Quality and Yield

Wildfires can have a major impact on catchment water quality and the regrowth following fires impacts on catchment water yield. These impacts can last for several years in the case of water quality and catchment water yield can be suppressed for decades. These issues also highlight the urgency needed in implementing Recommendation 8.

During the 2003 fire campaign storm rain fell over a catchment that had been totally denuded of ground cover from ridge top to the creeks and gullies. With no protection, ash, dirt and rocks poured down the gullies into creeks and rivers.

Aside from the tragedy involving a departmental fire fighter, a photo printed in the Border Morning Mail illustrated the mass movement of tens of thousands of tonnes of ash, soil and rock that pollute water supplies and environmental water flows. With drier climatic conditions expected in future, this reinforces the need for action to be taken to manage forest fuel levels across all tenures.

Low intensity, patch burning will help break up contiguous fuels, while leaving unburnt patches to provide some level of protection from predators for birds, mammals and reptiles.





DSE Vehicle Trapped in Flash Flood Debris Upper Buckland Valley - Photo Border Morning Mail

After the 2003 fires, the CSIRO advised that regrowth from the fires was expected to use all the water expected to be saved over the following 20 years through the Victorian government water saving initiatives.

With a drier climatic conditions expected in future, action must be taken to manage forest stand density levels across all tenures. Thinning of regrowth will increase catchment water yield. With lower catchment yields due to less rainfall, thinning of regrowth has been show by Western Australian research to be a much cheaper option than getting the same yield from a desalination plant.

Ecological research has shown that thinning of regrowth can have positive ecological outcomes, including having larger, healthier trees sooner and branches broken off during the operation can promote earlier hollow formation.

7. Overarching Reforms

SETA is most concerned that the current regulatory and management framework fails to provide ecologically sustainable management in either the parks and reserves or the supposedly "protected" areas of State Forest. In addition, environmental charities and various activist groups continue to harness an ill-informed public to put an end to timber production in all Australian native forests, on the simple assumption that a change of land tenure will ensure the survival of a currently growing list of threatened species.

The existing regulatory frameworks need to be amended to codify active and adaptive management as a blue print for future ecologically sustainable forest management across all land tenures.

Scientific research needs to be interpreted in the context of over 50,000 years of management, at a landscape level, by Aboriginal people. The combination of Aboriginal



and natural fires had a fundamental effect on the development of ecology and ecosystems that existed at the time of European arrival in Australia.

The loss of Aboriginal management of the land has created a major ecological disturbance, that many ecologists fail to recognise, when interpreting research results. The problem is further exacerbated when scientists report research outcomes, with an eco-political agenda, rather than a specific scientific objective.

Parks and reserve managers must undertake co-ordinated surveys for a broader range of key species and report on a five yearly basis, in line with RFA reporting, to demonstrate the CARR system is delivering the conservation outcomes that were expected at the time this land was reserved.

If the CARR system provided the environmental services that should be produced, the pressure to transfer more land from production forests to the reserve system would be greatly reduced.

The Australian Wildlife Conservancy has set a benchmark for active and adaptive management principles needed to return and maintain threatened species in the Australian landscape. Government agencies appear to be just beginning to grasp these principles.

Less than adequate monitoring to date, shows that simply changing land tenure and applying passive management principles is not reversing the decline or many threatened flora and fauna species. Some level of active management is needed across all of Victoria, if the growing list of threatened species is to be reversed.

Recommendation 9: Undertake a radical reform of the current lockup and leave conservation model, to implement a regulatory framework that allows for active and adaptive management of native species, from those living within intact ecosystems through to those species remaining in fragmented landscapes.

Recommendation 10: As a first step, the Reference Areas Act 1978 be repealed.

This Act generally seeks to "protect" special areas of land that seeks to protect areas of land in *its natural state*. In most cases, these areas of land are an artefact of management neglect, rather than an outcome of ecologically sustainable management

8. Shifting the Impact of Forest Product Consumption

SETA believes that the ongoing campaign to close down all native forest harvesting will shift more and more of the impact of Australia's forests product consumption offshore, often to countries with lower environmental protection standards. This is unacceptable.

Continuing to shift more of the impact of our forest product consumption to less protected forests, offshore, is immoral, arrogant and unsustainable.



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Harvested & Regenerating Australian Forest
Unacceptable to "environmental" charities



Harvested & About to be Cleared Indonesian Rainforest
Out of sight, out of mind – tell someone who cares

Conclusion

The politicisation of forest reservation decisions will support an immoral shift of environmental impacts offshore and decimate small regional communities. The Victorian and NSW government red gum reserve decisions combined to "protect" a quarter of a million hectares of red gum forest, with The Victorian Environment Assessment Council, among others, claiming tourism would increase as a result of the parks dedication. The parks dedication on both sides of the border, resulted in a twenty three percent decrease in visitor numbers to the town of Mathoura within four years.

For over 25 years, small communities across Victoria have experienced negative social impacts following cutbacks to the native forest industries. The promised replacement jobs in eco-tourism have proved to be nothing more than activist and political hot air.

Native forest management across all tenures must be driven by active and adaptive management processes, that incorporate a historical ecological perspective. This perspective is totally missing from current legislation and management of native forests.

A reformed conservation management framework will allow for the ongoing use of designated areas of state forest for the sustainable production of forest products, as well as providing a fair share of environmental and recreational services.

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28 June 2019

