

February 2019 Issue 1



Welcome to the 1st edition of the Future of our Forests newsletter!

The Victorian Government has embarked on a major program to modernise the state's Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) and the forest management system they accredit, through comprehensive engagement with Victorian communities and investment in contemporary science. The government is committed to delivering this program and future forest management in partnership with Traditional Owners.

Through the 2018-19 budget, the Victorian Government committed \$17.6 million to support the RFA Modernisation Program and ensure future forest management delivers the highest and best uses for Victorian communities. An additional \$18.3 million was committed to a Forest Protection Survey Program to undertake pre-harvest surveys in timber harvesting coupes. This represents a \$36.9 million investment in delivering greater community value from Victoria's forests.

The time has come to update the Victorian RFAs to ensure they reflect changes that have occurred in the 20 years since they commenced and can deliver on their underlying aims of environmental protection, ecologically sustainable forest management and use, and providing stability for forest-based industries. The RFAs also need to be updated to recognise the rights of Victoria's Traditional Owners to partner in land management and seek economic and cultural

opportunities, and the urgent need for action to combat climate change.

Over the next four years, through comprehensive engagement with Victorian communities and stakeholders, and updated assessments of a wide range of forest values, the program will deliver:

- a **vision** for the future management of our forests
- a **strategy** for the management of State forests
- renewal and extension of the Victorian **RFAs**, through negotiation with the Commonwealth of Australia
- reform of environmental **regulation** of timber harvesting operations, and
- development of new **forest management plans** across the State, including greater integration across tenures and between forest and fire management.

These components are collectively the RFA Modernisation Program.

Future of our Forests – Online Survey

All Victorians are invited to answer an **online survey** and provide their views on how forest management can be improved, and what you would like from forests into the future.

The survey is open until **31 March 2019** on the Engage Victoria website:

<https://engage.vic.gov.au/future-of-our-forests>

Regional Forest Agreements

RFAs are agreements between the Australian government 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.

The agreements are entered into having regard to an assessment of forest values in a given RFA region, which include:

- environmental values, including old growth, wilderness, endangered species, national estate values and world heritage values
- aboriginal cultural values
- economic values of forested areas and forest industries
- social values (including community needs), and
- principles of ecologically sustainable development.

The Victorian RFAs are agreed between the Victorian Government and the Commonwealth of Australia. Under relevant Commonwealth legislation (including the *Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002* and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*), the RFAs authorise certain forestry operations for the purpose of the EPBC Act.

In effect, the RFAs accredit the Victorian forest management system and exclude duplication of consideration of RFA forestry operations undertaken in accordance with that system from the application of the EPBC Act and the *Export Control Act 1992* (Cth).

A Memorandum of Understanding between the Victorian and Commonwealth 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. The MoU and more

information about RFAs are available on the Future of our Forests webpage.

Upcoming opportunities to get involved

Date	Activity
Dec – Mar	Future of our Forests online survey (closes 31 March 2019) https://engage.vic.gov.au/future-of-our-forests
Jan – Mar	Workshop series with communities across metro, rural and regional Victoria
Mar	Science public lecture #2
Mar	Youth Forest Symposium
Mar	Targeted stakeholder meetings and drop-in centres (joint engagement with the Commonwealth government focussed on the RFAs)
Apr	RFA public submission period

We want anyone interested in the future of our forests to have an opportunity to share their views.

To find out about events and activities happening in your area, you can register your interest on the Future of our Forests webpage at:
<https://www2.delwp.vic.gov.au/futureforests>.

Partnering with Traditional Owners



DELWP acknowledges and respects 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.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

To explore together what a partnership for delivery of the RFA Modernisation Program and future forest management means and looks like in practice, two statewide roundtables have already been held (in January and August 2018) with Traditional Owners and conversations on Country are ongoing.



Figure 1: DELWP meeting with Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation in Warrnambool.

Key points arising from discussions to date are:

1. Traditional Owners aren't another stakeholder, they are a **partner**. This means identifying appropriate opportunities and mechanisms for **joint decision making**.
2. Traditional Owners need to be **appropriately resourced** to partner with DELWP on this program and into the future.
3. An approach to partnering should be pursued which:
 - a. Embeds relationships, systems and processes for **future forest management**
 - b. Supports each Traditional Owner group's **unique aspirations for management of Country**
 - c. Is consistent with the principles of **self-determination**.
4. Building partnership **connections at the local level** – between Traditional Owners and regional DELWP and Parks Victoria staff – is critical for enabling Traditional Owners and government to work together to plan and deliver forest management activities on Country.
5. Traditional Owner values must be considered in strategic decision making, and DELWP should support and facilitate Traditional Owners to capture information about their values (including **tangible and intangible values**) to input into decision making processes. Data and information sovereignty are important.

DELWP and Traditional Owners are continuing to work together to finalise resourcing arrangements for the program that will enable Traditional Owners to participate as a genuine partner, and meaningfully engage with their communities, in shaping the future direction of forest management in Victoria.

Targeted engagement activities are being planned across the State to discuss the future management of our forests with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities.

Governance and advisory committees

In March 2018, the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP (on behalf of the State of Victoria) and the Hon Senator Ruston (on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia) signed an MoU which sets out key commitments and areas of focus for the renewal and extension of the five Victorian RFAs.

A Project Work Plan signed by the lead departments in October 2018 establishes the governance arrangements and key milestones for the negotiations.

Ultimately, amendments to the Victorian RFAs are agreed by the Prime Minister of Australia and the Premier of Victoria. Victorian and joint Victorian-Commonwealth governance committees have been established to support the negotiation of amendments to the Victorian RFAs for their consideration.

Victoria and Commonwealth governance committees

Committees comprising representatives of the Victorian and Australian governments will lead the negotiation of amendments to the five Victorian RFAs. The lead departments for the negotiations are DELWP (Vic) and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (Cth), supported by the Department of Jobs Precincts and Regions (DJPR; Vic) and the Department of Environment and Energy (DoEE; Cth).

Whole of Victorian Government governance committees

Committees comprising representatives from key Victorian Government departments and agencies will propose Victoria's negotiating position around key themes, consistent with Victorian Government objectives and informed by scientific assessments of forest values and the outcomes of community and stakeholder engagement.

These committees include representatives of DELWP, DJPR, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Department of Treasury and Finance, and VicForests.

Independent Scientific Advisory Panel

To inform modernisation of the Victorian RFAs and forest management system, over \$7.5 million is being directly invested in updated scientific assessments of a wide range of environmental, ecosystem services, economic, Traditional Owner, social and community values.

To assure communities, stakeholders and Government, that the scientific methods and data used to assess forest values and inform forest management decisions are credible and rigorous, an independent Scientific Advisory Panel is being established.

The Panel will: (1) review and report on the relative merits and limitations of methods and data used to

assess forest values; and (2) provide science-based advice and recommendations to inform the renewal of the Victorian RFAs and design of a contemporary forest management system that is resilient and adaptive to a changing climate and associated management challenges.

To ensure the independence of the Panel, DELWP engaged the Royal Society of Victoria (RSV) to run a public expression of interest process and convene a panel of RSV members to assess candidate applications and recommend to DELWP a short-list of candidates to be appointed to the panel. The selection panel comprised the following RSV members: Dr Tom Beer, Dr Bill Birch AM, Prof Roslyn Gleadow, Dr Bram Mason and Prof David Walker.

The Eol process closed on 21 January 2019 and the RSV provided its recommendations to DELWP on 6 February 2019. Following the appointment of members, the first meeting of the Scientific Advisory Panel will take place in early March.

Status of the RFA negotiations

An **MoU** and **Project Work Plan** to guide the negotiation process have been signed by the parties.

An **approach to the negotiations** (including negotiation process, timelines and key themes) have been endorsed by the Joint Steering Committee.

Seven themes have been agreed to focus the negotiations:

1. Review and accountability
2. Forest management system
3. Timber industry development
4. Other forest values and uses (including ecosystem services, carbon and water)
5. Environmental protections (including the CAR reserve system)
6. Traditional Owner rights and partnership
7. Research priorities.

Negotiation of **uncontroversial matters** has commenced.

Negotiation of **'Review and Accountability'** mechanisms will commence shortly.

Engaging with Victorian communities and stakeholders

The RFA Modernisation Program will deliver a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive engagement process through which the diverse values and uses of Victoria's forests are identified, understood and used to shape the modernisation of Victoria's RFAs and forest management system. This is critical for ensuring future forest management delivers the "highest and best uses" of our forests for Victorian communities.

Engagement is including a broad range of activities across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria and online. Outcomes of the engagement will inform the strategic direction for future forest management in Victoria, negotiation of the RFAs with the Commonwealth, and reform of Victoria's regulatory framework and forest management planning.

Stakeholder roundtables

Statewide roundtables were held with key stakeholder groups in December 2017 and October 2018. The earlier roundtables informed the design of the RFA Modernisation Program, and the roundtables late last year provided an opportunity to provide an update on progress and gain early input from key groups interested and impacted by the RFA renewal.

Roundtables were held with: the science community; local government; environmental non-government

Future of our Forests

RFA Modernisation Program - Newsletter

organisations; the timber industry (including native forests and plantations); and other commercial and recreational forest users.

Participants prepared their own reports with key points of advice to inform the RFA modernisation process, and the reports are publicly available on the Future of our Forests website.

Future of our Forests online survey

An online survey, including an interactive mapping tool, is currently live on the Engage Victoria platform. The survey will close on 31 March 2019.

The survey allows every Victorian to provide their views on how forest management can be improved, and what they would like from forests into the future.

The survey also includes an interactive mapping tool that enables participants to 'drop pins' and write stories about why particular areas of forest are important to them.

You can access the survey here:

<https://engage.vic.gov.au/future-of-our-forests>

What people are saying

As at 1 February 2019, DELWP had received 245 survey responses.

Here are some examples of what people are saying:

"My vision is for Victoria is to have a range of intact ecosystems across the state that contain a thriving range of biodiversity. These areas would have high levels of protection and the highest priority would be the protection of this biodiversity. Any other uses would have to first ensure that this priority is not compromised in any way."

"My vision is to incorporate Aboriginal traditional fire management practice and cultural practice into the way we manage public land."

"All Victorians being able to head out in a four-wheel drive and explore the wilderness every weekend. Hunting, fishing, dirt biking, camping and 4wding. Getting outdoors and enjoying the forest. Love it!"

"Income generated by sustainable harvest of timber and reseedling should provide sufficient resources for bush fire recovery and funds to properly manage areas not harvested."



Figure 2: Interactive mapping tool on the Engage Victoria platform.

Engagement with local communities

'At place' engagement with local communities to support delivery of the RFA Modernisation Program recently commenced across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria, and will continue for the next 3 years.

Engagement over the next two months will focus on understanding how people value and use our forests, seek people's views on a vision for future forest management, and include joint engagement with the Commonwealth specifically focussed on the RFAs. This will be supported by a range of activities including workshops, meetings, drop in centres, and listening posts at community events.



Figure 3: DELWP staff members Kris Hendrickx and Patricia Young engaging with locals at Trentham Farmers Market.

Public lecture series

The first in a series of public lectures to provide the community and stakeholders with technical briefings on contemporary forest science, including research projects being funded through the RFA Modernisation Program, was held at The Royal Society of Victoria on 20 December 2018 and livestreamed via Facebook to viewers across the State.

The first public lecture focused on work underway to survey and model the habitat of threatened species (Dr Lindy Lumsden and Dr Graeme Newell, Arthur Rylah Institute), to update mapping of old growth forests and rainforests (Associate Professor Craig Nitschke, University of Melbourne), and to leverage and address gaps in an existing body of research on the values communities hold for Victoria's forests (Dr Rebecca Ford, University of Melbourne).

Information about the first public lecture, including speaker biographies, videos of the presentations, and Q&As are available on the Future of our Forests website.

A public lecture is planned to be held every two months throughout 2019 and will include presentations from scientists delivering research for the RFA Modernisation Program (both departmental and external researchers) and other researchers with significant relevant expertise to contribute to a robust public discourse on contemporary forest management science. The 2019 public lecture schedule will be available soon.

Joint engagement with the Commonwealth

In March 2019, the Victorian Government (DELWP and DJPR) and Commonwealth of Australia (DAWR and DoEE) will undertake a three-week period of joint face-to-face engagement with key stakeholders and Victorian communities specifically regarding the Victorian RFAs.

Targeted stakeholder meetings and drop in centres will be scheduled across each of the five Victorian RFA regions, and provide an opportunity for anyone interested in the RFAs to share their views.

Details about the timing and location of joint engagement activities will be provided in the next newsletter, and will also be advertised on the DELWP website, and through social media and local newspapers.

Website

The Future of our Forests (RFA Modernisation Program) website was launched in September 2018. A major update of the website is currently underway to provide more information about the program, including the research we're investing in to update our understanding of a wide range of forest values. The webpage will be regularly updated to provide details of upcoming engagement activities and share presentations and reports.

The website can be accessed at <https://www2.delwp.vic.gov.au/futureforests>.

Assessment of forest values

To deliver greater community value from Victoria's forests, and ensure our forests are resilient and our management practices adaptive to a changing climate, it is imperative that the modernisation of the Victorian RFAs and forest management system are underpinned by a strong scientific evidence base.

Of the \$17.6 million committed by the Victorian Government towards the RFA modernisation process, \$7.5 million has been directly invested in updated assessments of a range of forest values.

Key deliverables for the research program include:

- \$3.0 million to fund a landscape scale survey program for threatened species, update habitat distribution models and conduct population viability analysis;



Figure 4: Louise Durkin from DELWP's Arthur Rylah Institute undertaking habitat assessments as part of the Greater Glider surveys in the Central Highlands.

Future of our Forests

RFA Modernisation Program - Newsletter

- \$3.2 million to update mapping of old growth forests and rainforests, supported by a major new acquisition of Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) data in East Gippsland and areas of the Central Highlands not captured in 2015;
- \$1.0 million to update assessments of a range of other ecosystem service, economic, Traditional Owner, social and community forest values; and
- \$0.3 million investment in enhancing our modelling capability and decision support systems to assess the impacts of possible future forest management scenarios on a range of forest values.

We are also updating our information on timber resources.

Delivery of the research program is underway and will continue through to 30 June 2020. Findings from the research will inform both the modernisation of Victoria's RFAs and future forest management planning and decisions.

Detailed information on the full extent of the research program and data being collected, including timelines, is being finalised and will be available on the Future of our Forests webpage by 28 February 2019.

Key engagement contacts

If you would like further information on the RFA Modernisation Program, or to find out about engagement activities happening in your area, please contact your local RFA Engagement Coordinator:

Region	Name	Telephone	Email
Melbourne CBD	Mr Paul Kooperman	0436 613 243	paul.kooperman@delwp.vic.gov.au
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Port Phillip	Ms Hayley Coviello	0409 453 429	hayley.coviello@delwp.vic.gov.au
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Barwon South West / Grampians	Mr Kris Hendrickx	0409 943 814	kris.hendrickx@delwp.vic.gov.au
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