Written Submission for the Victorian Regional Forest Agreement Review

From: [redacted]
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Email: [redacted]

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To the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning,

In response to your request for input into the Victorian Regional Forests Agreement we are providing a number of recommendations advocating for the continuation of low-impact sustainable use of Wet Forest (EVC 30) timbers for use in musical instruments and other high value products. A list of considerations are also given to hopefully shed some light on what we believe is important for the future of our forests. Primarily we are focusing this submission on our operations but we realize, are respectful of, and advocate for the many other important uses and values that the forest provides including; conservation for flora and fauna, ecosystem services, recreational activities, indigenous rights and connections, tourism and in providing other timber based resources such as firewood. A list of 20 companies/luthiers that have made instruments/furniture from Otway Blackwood and whom support low-intensity single-tree-selection harvesting for high value products is also provided.

[redacted] has been supplying many local, interstate and international instrument makers with Blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*) for over 30 years. Most notable is our strong relationship with Maton Guitars Australia who has been our main customer over this time. We have worked together to develop methods for delivering timber of specific dimensions and Maton have invested in equipment and technology to further process and value-add this product, with the end result being a quality handmade Australian guitar from Australian timbers. There is a strong focus on using Australian timbers in their instruments and as such Maton have helped to develop Blackwood's reputation as a tonewood worldwide. Otway Blackwood is used in many models including; the Blackwood Series, The Australian Series, the Vera May limited edition, the Mini Maton, SRS Series, the BB1200 electric guitar as well as being a high-end option in the Maton Custom Shop. The price of one Blackwood guitar ranges from $1,700 for an entry-level guitar to $6,500 from the custom shop. Maton sell to the Australian market and have a large percentage of sales occurring offshore, which is steadily increasing to almost 50%. Maton currently has over 70 employees and has been manufacturing guitars for over 70 years. They are looking to be producing about 10,000 per year in the next 3-5 years. Other products made out of Otway Blackwood include: ukuleles, weissenborns, mandolins, cellos, violins, solid and hollow-body electric guitars, double bases, banjos, drums, stomp boxes and furniture.

Currently I am looking to continue the family business in supplying Blackwood to Maton guitars and other luthiers. I have invested in equipment to process and value-add this timber and have developed methods with Vicforests to thoroughly document each tree that is harvested, allowing complete accountability and traceability for all our products – for each tree, from the forest to the workshop. Coupe plans are prepared that identify ecological, historical and indigenous values that have been or may be present on site. Any potential items that may occur are surveyed for prior to harvesting each tree, including hollows. Blackwood suitable for harvesting rarely contain hollows and if they do then they are likely rotten and not suitable for harvesting. Unlike Eucalypts they do not self-prune and hence hollows are not commonly formed from the limbs. Hollows only usually occur when the tree rots out to form an internal chamber, usually at the base but also from forked leaders. Each tree is carefully selected to ensure it has the right qualities for making instruments. It is fallen to avoid and minimize any impact on adjacent trees. Billets are carried out by hand and put into a trailer. No heavy machinery is used in this process, ensuring there is minimal soil disturbance and no soil compaction. Each tree produces enough timber to build 150-750 guitars and brings the highest revenue to the state (per cubic meter of timber) of any harvesting operation in Victoria by approximately 25%. The timber that we produce has high market competition from Tasmania, who receives heavy subsidies from Sustainable Timber Tasmania, including freight subsidies to the mainland.

For a sustainable renewable future in the timber industry it is important to:

- support operations that produce timber products that are used for high-value products
- create long-term security for business to invest in these operations
- avoid impacts to areas of high conservation and cultural value
- exclude areas of high social, cultural and ecological value from harvesting activities
- reflect on data that suggests:
    - the highest species diversity in an ecosystem is achieved with some level of disturbance and many species rely on disturbance for germination and regeneration (Mountain Ash is a good example of a species that requires fire to regenerate)
    - Mosaic disturbances can create a more bio-diverse and resilient ecosystem
- be aware that disturbance is a part of nature and we should consider this when thinking about forest ecosystems
- consider that many of the areas suitable for selectively harvesting Blackwood in the Otways have been previously cleared and have produced a dense canopy of Blackwood. As such they are predominantly areas of lower conservation value. In addition, EVC 30 Wet Forest, has a State Conservation Significance of Least Concern due to its large current distribution
- incorporate scientific knowledge and known conservation values in the decision-making process around land use and forest harvesting activities
- consider that increasing the area available for selective harvesting (or any timber harvesting) will increase the long-term sustainability and reduce localized intensity. It will also increase the security of this resource if fire events threaten the landscape. Approximately 50% of state forest was converted to The Great Otway National Park in 2008. This included large areas that were suitable for selectively harvesting Blackwood. The remaining area of state forest has large areas that are not suitable for Blackwood. Using current modeling, areas that were previously state forest that have low conservation values but support Blackwood could be used to expand this resource. There are large areas of land that are suitable for this
- use well-informed modeling to allocate public land for forestry activities
- establish areas for permanent timber harvesting operations in either native forest or plantations for long-term security and industry investment
- establish robust methods, with industry input, to properly manage native forest plantations for the long-term
- understand that trees take time to grow and therefore plans need to take this into account
- realize and communicate the potential and importance of forests as a renewable resource
- understand the variety of products and materials that are produced from timber
- understand the importance of timber in energizing the economy by: creating employment, investment of capital, processing of materials, production of goods, provision of materials for goods and infrastructure, retail sales etc.
- understand that some of the public native forest in which harvesting occurs are essentially poorly managed plantations and as such have high natural value in some areas and low natural values in others. Most has been logged before, just not regenerated effectively
- realize, incorporate and manage the conundrum between the habitat that native forestry plantations provide and the removal of the habitat when it is harvested
- realize that native forest plantations provide more habitat values to native flora and fauna compared with non-native plantations
- support public and private plantations to compensate for the diminishing extent of land available to harvest in native forests
- see that forests can be viewed as a carbon sink and by using the timber in construction, furniture and instruments it can be stored for long periods of time
- realize that by harvesting the timber and growing new trees we can store more carbon and help regulate global CO2
- consider the retention of the western RFA to support the various timber resources in that area. Large areas of forest will be suitable for harvesting in the future and if this is removed it may compromise the states ability to access this valuable renewable resource

Have a look around yourself right now and observe what products and materials you see. Think about what they are made of and go back to the source of that material. I'm going to guess that everything that you see that is soft or moveable will be something that has a short initial production phase, such as cotton, leather, wool, wood or the exception could be something synthetic or plastic. So, mostly highly renewable materials. However the stronger structural things will likely be non-renewable materials, like glass, brick, metal, cement, plaster (gypsum, clay, lime) or something plastic. The exception to this is timber. Yes it may take a while for trees to grow to a size that you can use but it's a hell of a lot quicker than waiting for some metal to form. If it's a sustainable future that we wish to see then timber has to be a strong part of it. And, it has to come from somewhere. This next point is a bit like global warming in the sense that we are all creating this issue but not many countries are addressing it. If we decrease our timber production but don't decrease the demand for timber then we will be putting more pressure on other areas to produce timber, and most of this comes from developing countries that have minimal environmental regulation. Large amounts of native forest are being cleared for timber, to supply a demand that exists within the world. Are we going to take responsibility for our share and grow timber to meet our demands? Or are we going to use the native forests of other countries at the expense of their threatened species, which have little to no protection? We need to be leaders in this area. We have the tools and the capacity to create well-managed timber production areas. We just need more community support in this area and long-term security.

Like the diversity that exists within our forests so too is the diversity of values, benefits and uses that it can provide. I hope that you are able to consolidate the balance that is needed to support the future of our forests,

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Otway Tonewoods.

Below is a list of 20 companies/luthiers who support low-impact single-tree selection harvesting techniques for musical instruments and/or furniture from public land:

Company	Name
Peter Daffy Guitars	[redacted]
Noyce Guitars	
Cargill Custom Guitars	
Jack Spira Guitars	
Maton Guitars	
Carson-Crickmore Guitars	
Aaron Rubley	
Wise Luthiers	
Jet Music International	
Thomas Lloyd Guitars	
Gilet Guitars	
Robert Fabris Furnature	
Australian Premier Verneers	
Melbourne School of Fine Woodworking	
Wheeler Custom Lutherie	
Guitar Woods	
Octigan Guitars	
Gary Gray	
MC Guitars, Founder of Australian / NZ Luthiers Forum	
Fidock Drums	