

August 26, 2020

Forest & Wood Communities Australia submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem decline in Victoria and measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species.

About Forest & Wood Communities Australia

Forest & Wood Communities Australia is an association which represents grassroots workers and their communities, the small businesses that support the industry, and those who want to continue to enjoy Australian-sourced native and plantation timber.

Unlike other organisations that largely represent the business or sector interests of the industry, FWCA represents the voice of the workers, their families, lovers of timber, forest users and the communities they reside in.

Summary

- Forestry provides forest management expertise via people who have made it their livelihoods,
- Forest workers fight fires assisted by the road network created for harvesting timber,
- Forestry manages fuel loads,
- Forests regrowing after harvest attract native species,
- First Peoples managed the forests for the betterment of their communities, as does modern forestry,
- Carbon taken from the forest is stored in timber products and regrowing forests sequester more carbon,
- Forestry provides economic sustainability for regional Victoria, and
- Australian forestry provides world-standard certified timber as an alternative to plastic, concrete and timber imported from less environmentally sensitive sources.

Responses to inquiry

Forest & Wood Communities Australia supports the submissions made by the Australian Forest Products Association and Victorian Association of Forest Industries and adds to those submissions the following:

- (a) *The extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts;*

FWCA respects the findings of forest and fire academics which have shown that the decline of Victoria's biodiversity has been due to the lack of a low-intensity fire regime which was forest management practice of the First Peoples.

Instead the forests have been allowed to become prone to high-intensity fire due to the accumulation of heavy, unmanaged fuel loads across most of the forested landscape.

As well as the disastrous impacts on species within these forests, the wildfire resulting from poor land management releases carbon stored in the forests and contributes to climate change.

The First Peoples managed the forests for the betterment of their communities and we believe the timber industry does the same thing today. Victorian native timber workers and communities respect and care for the forests to ensure that the small remaining areas of native forest available to them for timber and domestic firewood production continue to provide environmental, social and economic outcomes.

Continuing to close off more areas of forest to active management, including sustainable timber harvesting, the likely impacts include a greater threat to ecosystems from wildfire and regional unemployment.

- (b) *The adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;*

From a forest worker's perspective, the legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment is less than adequate and requires review as it is exploited by anti-forestry groups to hinder lawful timber production.

Environmental protections cannot be more clearly demonstrated than in how they govern native timber harvesting. Of the 6 per cent of the forest estate available to the native timber industry, approximately half is further protected under a regime of exclusion zones designed to ensure the impacts of forestry are minimised.

Timber workers are acutely aware of the protections in place as they are clearly mapped out in Coupe Plans issued by the state authority. However, no matter how well timber workers adhere to these protections, they are still subject to malicious anti-forestry campaigns, litigation and workplace invasions.

Timber workers are also puzzled by the government's public support of the belief that native species such as the Leadbeater's Possum are critically endangered when these animals are allegedly routinely identified in logging coupes by 'citizen scientists'. DELWP research has also shown significantly greater numbers of this species than has been publicised by anti-forestry researchers, yet it is still used as a lever to disrupt our workplaces and create uncertainty for harvest operators who lose productivity.

We call on the Victorian Government to have the 'critically endangered' status of Leadbeater's Possum reviewed immediately.

(c) *The adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems;*

The government has not been successful in forest management as evidenced by the increasing threat of fire and the intensity of fire when it occurs due to its failure to control fuel loads in unmanaged forests.

We note University of Melbourne academic Patrick Baker's June 2020 report which clearly stated fire is the greatest threat to Victoria's ecosystems, not logging. Therefore we believe the government should consider expanding the native timber industry to promote better forest management.

The native timber industry provides expertise in effective forest management as an alternative to the current lock-it-up-and-let-it-burn policies, which have resulted in catastrophic impacts on ecosystems and timber supply.

Timber workers provide assets such as:

- Local knowledge,
- A road network into remote areas of forest,
- Heavy machinery for reducing the risk of and fighting fires, and
- Manpower in times of fire emergencies.

(d) *Legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts;*

As the government policy is to remove effective forest management by way of ending native forestry by 2030, it is setting up greater reliance on high carbon-intensive materials such as plastic and concrete to replace the timber which would have been sourced from native forests.

The government is also shifting the impact of hardwood timber consumption offshore, by increasing reliance on timber sourced from other countries, which have poor records in ecosystem management. Locking up Victoria's native forests will multiply the potential climate change impacts.

(e) *Opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria;*

There is a great opportunity to reconnect the First Peoples to country by following their example of pre-European forest management. The First Peoples used low intensity fires to reduce fuel loads and subsequently the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and managed the forest to yield material benefits such as food and tools for their communities.

The First Peoples understand that humans are part of nature and can work in symbiosis. Modern day foresters also understand this connection with the ecosystem and strive to manage it effectively to achieve environmental outcomes as well as fulfil the needs of the communities which are supported by the timber industry and Australian demand for a broad range of timber and domestic firewood.

(f) *any other related matters.*

Forest & Wood Communities Australia is concerned that this inquiry will be exploited as a process to further distort the public perception of sustainable native timber harvesting in Victoria. We believe the vast majority of Victorians see the economic and environmental value in using wood products sourced from native timber industry and are comfortable with the controls currently in place.

However, it is evident that organisations which have created a business out of criticising the industry and employ media professionals have managed to seize control of the narrative. Well-publicised rhetoric from activist environmental charities, among others, has been used to denigrate the industry and influence public opinion, which is manifesting in government policy. We also note the campaign by these groups to flood this inquiry with anti-forestry propaganda in an attempt to influence its findings.

Overstatement of the extent of forestry, such as Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, Lily D'Ambrosio's November 7, 2019 statements about the old growth forests and carbon emissions, show how the Labor Party has drifted from the interests of timber workers and regional communities and become another tentacle of the anti-forestry activist movement.

The decision to shut down native forestry in Victoria will have far-reaching impacts on not only timber workers, their communities and those who regard the value of ethically sourced native timber, but on the environment it manages.

Forest & Wood Communities Australia asks this inquiry to recognise that the First Peoples managed the forests for the betterment of their communities as does modern forestry which has many benefits and minimal environmental impact.

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