

The Institute of Foresters of Australia

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Office of the Commissioner for
Sustainability and the Environment
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***Investigation into the Government's tree management practices and the renewal
of Canberra's urban forest***

Dear Sir/Madam

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the ***Investigation into the Government's tree management practices and the renewal of Canberra's urban forest***. Our submission follows, and includes a number of general comments and responses to each of the specified issues for investigation.

The Institute of Foresters of Australia is a professional body with over 1350 members engaged in all branches of forest management and conservation in Australia.

The IFA has developed a host of Policies relating to the management of native forests and plantations forests, a number of which are broadly relevant to the management of Canberra's urban forests. These are available at <http://www.forestry.org.au/ifa/g/g0-ifa.asp> and relevant extracts are attached.

The Institute would be pleased to make a member available to discuss the submission and any other issues of interest to your Office.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Volker', written in a cursive style.

Dr Peter Volker RPF FIFIA
President
Institute of Foresters of Australia

The Institute of Foresters response to the *Investigation into the Government's tree management practices and the renewal of Canberra's urban forest.*

The Institute of Foresters welcomes the Government's tree renewal program as a significant and much needed investment to ensure the maintenance of Canberra's urban landscape. We provide the following submission to the investigation.

General comments:

We believe the principles underpinning the program are sound. They recognise the imperative to replace aging trees and the opportunities to work with communities in this process. The program has a strategic focus and seeks to manage the forest estate as a whole and avoids a piecemeal, localised or reactive approach. This is central to effective outcomes for the community's investment.

Notwithstanding our general support we believe that a greater focus on planning is required. We recommend the development of a strategic plan for the urban forests to guide sustainable management and provide for the diverse range of uses and values. This would provide a focussed approach to community consultation. We believe that this should include the use of appropriate criteria and indicators as a framework for monitoring implementation of the program and the values being delivered to the community. We note that the intent of this approach is reflected in material on the Urban Tree Program website, including reference to a master plan, but we are yet to see this process come to fruition – an essential part of strategic program delivery.

Community support will be contingent on acceptance of the need to remove trees as part of a rejuvenation plan. This is often contentious. We therefore support a greater focus on education – providing current, accurate and accessible information for the community to understand and respond to the program. The issues associated with the urban forests are not dissimilar to those faced in our native forests where community awareness and interest in forest management has intensified. What is apparent is that perceptions about forest management are often influenced by the negative portrayal of the short-term impacts of disturbances, such as tree felling.

Initiatives to raise community awareness need to highlight that, while trees in urban areas can often live for a long time, maintaining amenity values nevertheless requires a purposeful strategy that includes removal and replanting. Looking to the future, program managers must build trust and foster effective relationships with the community to ensure that the tree assessment and replacement practices are better understood. There are a range of initiatives from Landcare that may be useful models for engaging community participation and engagement.

We also look to greater recognition and commitment to protecting remnant vegetation and paddock trees in the development of new suburbs. Remnant trees or forested environments are a valuable resource and need to be managed and in most cases protected in appropriate settings. While this has not been part of the urban renewal program we believe that it should be included as resources will be required to meet best practice management requirements. Highly significant paddock trees or patches of remnant trees should go on a register of significant trees in the Territory. There should also be plans for renewal of these trees or remnant forests to maintain their genetic integrity and long term contribution to the urban setting.

We would encourage you to consider the opportunities for major events that promote education, learning and information exchange with national and international experts and broader appreciation and discussion of urban forest issues. This could include a major conference, workshops, expert information exchange and community education. This would be particularly relevant if timed to coincide with the UN International Year of Forests (2011) and the Centenary of the Capital (2013). IFA would welcome the opportunity to assist in such an endeavour.

We have also provided more specific comments against the issues identified for investigation. These are attached.

Specific comments

1. **The scope and efficiency of any enhancement that may be required to the Government's existing tree management programs;**

Discussed under general comments above.

2. **The benefits and drawbacks of considering funding for urban tree programs separately to climate change initiatives;**

As a general rule we emphasise the long term importance of the urban forests program and the need for sustained funding if the program is to be successful. This suggests that short term funding programs, whether focused on climate change or other issues, should not be the primary source of funds for the program.

Forests perform an important role in the removal and storage of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Urban forests can therefore help meet climate change mitigation objectives. We do not see any conflict in objectives and believe that the tree renewal program is consistent with effective carbon mitigation. There are significant costs in considering climate change targets without considering rural and urban forest management contributions.

3. **Improved notification and consultation processes to support greater community involvement in urban tree planning and management, including risk mitigation, tree removal and planting;**

Comments are provided above (under general comments) regarding consultation and community engagement. We emphasise the importance of maintaining a strategic focus and avoiding a tree by tree approach. We believe that an effective and strategic plan is essential and would caution against localised and reactive decision making. We advocate the need for a notification process, provided this is matched by a predetermined complaints handling mechanism.

4. **The priority given in tree management decisions to environmental values, solar access and the retention of communities of trees in parks;**

While urban forests deliver substantial environmental values, their primary role is not flora or fauna conservation and that role is not practical in the urban setting. Flora or fauna conservation is the role of the surrounding urban forests and national parks. The exception is the native vegetation and paddock trees in newer suburbs.

There is no doubt that trees improve the amenity of urban settings by providing shade and shelter for humans as well as foraging and nesting habitats for birds and native animals. It should also be recognised that urban areas are modified environments and as such, the decision to utilise exotic and native species should be based on considerations of amenity and practicality. It is not a priority for planted trees in street settings to perform environmental functions normally associated with native forests or large stands of trees.

5. **The sustainable reuse of timber from felled trees;**

There are multiple potential uses of timber. These will largely be determined by assessment of feasibility and cost, given the size of the potential harvest. It is likely that processing, transport and supply limitations will restrict the types of uses that are viable for the bulk of the timber generated to those which are low value. What is most apparent is that reuse in a valuable way to the community will be important, and there is significant value in engaging the community in novel applications – such as park furniture and the like, as well as the relatively low use

applications such as mulch which are likely to be one of the few options that provides value. There should be no limitations on use of that material as mulch and firewood for the local market or as biomass for energy generation.

Some trees are capable of generating high value timber, which can be sawn or made available for craftwood. While the supply of timber is not envisaged to be at an industrial scale, the IFA recommends that appropriate mechanisms be developed for production and sale of such timber.

6. When replanting should occur following the removal of trees, the scope for pre-planting, and principles for the number and species of trees that should be replanted;

The institute does not seek to prescribe planting. We suggest that urban forest settings are best served by a suitable mix of species, native and non-native. The experience is that the amenity values should be a significant determinant of species. This is discussed above.

The ACT, and Canberra in particular, has benefited from a planned approach to tree planting. The essential character of older suburbs in Canberra is characterised by a strategic approach to tree planting using a mix of exotic and Australian species (not necessarily native to the Canberra region).

IFA recommends that such long-term strategic planning approaches removes the potential for conflict by giving interested parties sufficient time and knowledge to become acquainted with such plans. Town planners and architects also then have the opportunity to design buildings and infrastructure that is sympathetic to the planned urban forest.

7. The need for enhanced management to maintain the survival and good health of trees;

The ongoing maintenance program is essential to ensure the longevity of new plantings. Annual budgets should reflect the increased maintenance requirements, especially for new plantings in the critical establishment phase that usually coincides with the first two to five years after planting.

Health surveillance is an important activity, not only to identify emerging health problems, but also as a means of monitoring and reporting on the condition of the urban forest. The Health surveillance activity should focus on pest and disease incursions, general tree health (especially during droughts or soon after storm damage) and tree safety.

IFA recommends that health surveillance and maintenance programs are overseen by suitably qualified professionals. It is important that staff undertaking such work have some knowledge of arboriculture and silviculture, tree physiology, entomology and pathology and access to experts when required.

8. Appropriate safeguards to ensure contractors follow best practice and adhere to government tree policies;

Appropriate commercial practice in engaging and supervising contractors for tree removal and replanting must be in place to ensure that conflicts of interest are not possible. This is part of normal business and ethical practice. This means that individuals and businesses involved in assessing whether trees should be removed must have no prospect of financial interest in the consequent tree removal work. It is also clear that assessment should be undertaken by suitably qualified and supervised staff and based on clear assessment criteria, of which tree health and age should be paramount.

Tree maintenance contractors must be suitably qualified to undertake tasks such as pesticide application and be able to identify and implement appropriate water, nutrition and weed management regimes.

9. Principles for the decision-making process where it is proposed that a tree is removed or is retained;

We highlight the importance of maintaining remnant native vegetation and paddock trees (particularly natives). The principles should be related to safety and community value. Also see comments at 8 above.

Removal or retention trees should be compatible with the longer-term strategic plan for the area.

10. Improvements to the Tree Protection Act or other relevant Acts in light of the above matters; and

We favour clear legislative backing to the urban tree initiative to establish the standards to be applied to tree replacement, particularly in public places.

11. Resource implications associated with an enhanced program

We would welcome increased resourcing to meet community expectations.

IFA considers that the urban forest is an essential part of the character of Canberra's urban landscape and is sufficient to warrant dedicated resources within the administrative structure. IFA recommends that a professional forester would be an appropriately qualified professional to manage the strategic planning, tree renewal and maintenance programs. There is requirement for access to health surveillance and maintenance resources. Whether these are done "in-house" or contracted depends on the administrative structures and the scale of work involved.

IFA also recommends that there is continued access to experts in the fields of arboriculture, entomology, pathology and tree physiology. It would be beneficial if such experts had a good working knowledge of Canberra's urban forest and strategic plan.

Management of a large urban forest requires a comprehensive tree management system which should be treated as part of normal asset management system in an urban management program.

Extracts from IFA policies with relevance to urban forest management

Forest Management Planning (Statement 2.6)

... The IFA advocates the development and implementation of strategic and operational management plans on all forest land tenures to guide sustainable forest management and provide for the diverse range of uses and values. Management plans for public owned forests should incorporate community values in the planning process.

Forests and climate change mitigation (Statement 6.2)

Forests perform an important role in the removal and storage of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Sustainable forest management activities can therefore help meet global climate change mitigation objectives.

Community Awareness and Knowledge on Forestry (Statement 5.4)

...the IFA calls for greater government and industry initiatives that provide to the community information on forest management that is current, accurate and accessible and can be used to promote a greater understanding of the social, economic and environmental benefits that arise from professional, sustainable forest management...

The complete version of IFA policies can be viewed at <http://www.forestry.org.au/ifa/g/g0-ifa.asp>.