



Future Directions for Australia's National Forest Policy

(IFA Forest Policy Statement No. 2.10)

Key statement

The IFA considers that it is time for a revision of the National Forest Policy Statement, which has served well for 2 decades, in order to address a range of emerging issues impacting on society's expectations about forest management.

The Issue

Australia's National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS) of 1992 provided the basis for development of the Regional Forest Agreements, the Plantations 2020 initiative, and the implementation and reporting of sustainable forest management. More recently, a host of issues- including management of old growth and conservation forests, plantation expansion, climate change, and forest management for environmental services such as carbon sequestration and water - have gained increasing prominence in community and policy debate. A revision of the NFPS would take account of these issues and provide the basis for future forest management in Australia.

Background

The National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS) was developed in 1992 after a long period of public and intergovernmental debate about how Australia's forests should be managed. The NFPS sets out broad national goals to be pursued to effect ecologically sustainable management of Australia's forests. It provides a comprehensive set of values for sustainable forest management. However, its focus reflects the issues of the 1990s and needs to be revised to address contemporary issues.

Regional Forests Agreements (RFAs) were a key element of the National Forest Policy Statement. RFAs are 20-year plans for the conservation and sustainable management of Australia's native forests. The RFA process and its outcomes significantly affected the way forests are managed – substantially increasing the area of forests and woodlands in the reserve system and the level of protection for forest values in multiple use forests where sustainable timber harvesting is permitted. However, they apply only to some forest regions, and were focused only on public forests. It would be desirable to apply their principles across the whole of Australia's forested landscape.

In many States, there have been frequent changes in regulatory arrangements for both public and private forests, impeding effective long-term sustainable management. Institutional changes in forestry, land management and research agencies have diminished capacity and expertise available to manage forests across all tenures, and this emphasizes the need for a renewed priority to be given to forest management programs across Australia.

In 1997, the Plantations for Australia: the 2020 Vision was launched with the goal to enhance regional wealth creation and international competitiveness through a sustainable increase in Australia's plantation resources, based on a notional target of trebling the area of commercial tree crops by 2020. This strategy, together with the taxation arrangements for plantation developments, has resulted in a doubling of Australia's plantation estate over the past decade. A National Indigenous Forestry Strategy (NIFS) was released in 2005, but few resources have been committed to implement it.

The following issues need to be considered in a review of the National Forest Policy Statement:

- Active management to sustain the values of all native forests - Management strategies for all forests, including those reserved for conservation, needs to recognise the importance of active management to sustain their values, at both stand and landscape scales. Inadequate resources and a focus on 'preservation' means that major threats to forest values - such as fire, disease, pest animals, weeds and forest age structure - and their impact on conservation values are not being adequately addressed. It will require an injection of funding into research and management capability to ensure fire management strategies sustain health and vitality, protect ecological diversity; minimise damage to environmental values; and minimise the risk of fire damage to park facilities, neighbours and community assets and infrastructure.
- Enhancing the role of forests in delivering ecosystem services –Forests of all tenures are, or could be, ecosystem services 'hot spots' delivering a range of essential services at little cost (biodiversity conservation, clean water and carbon storage). The policy framework necessary to enhance management of both native and planted forests on all tenures –public, private and indigenous - needs to be more fully developed to realise these benefits. Two specific components of this framework should be:
 - Develop the role of forests as part of climate mitigation responses - Australia's Emission Trading System needs to include all forests, woodlands, plantations, farms trees and forest products, and separately account and report on the forest sector, rather than reporting forests as part of the land use change sector. As a net positive contributor to climate change mitigation, forests have a significant role to play in climate change response strategies. Whole-of-life-cycle analysis is necessary to ensure that the carbon footprint of forest products is assessed fairly compared to alternative products.
 - Supporting the role of plantations in delivering multiple benefits – Policies for plantation expansion have emphasized the economic and social benefits of plantation investments, but not supported the potential of planted forests to deliver environmental services. A policy framework, which assessed and facilitated the delivery of environmental services from all rural land uses, would provide a better basis for managing planted forests to deliver these services.
 - Strengthen implementation of the National Indigenous Forestry Strategy – Aboriginal Australians now own and manage 13% of Australia's forests, for a range of objectives – including cultural values, conservation, and income generation. Implementation of NIFS and related forest-based initiatives can support Aboriginal Australians' interests, address indigenous disadvantage, and enhance the sustainable management of a substantial proportion of Australia's forests.
 - Develop enhanced regulatory and reporting systems to support sustainable forest management – In many states, the regulatory framework for forest management is fragmented and applied inconsistently across tenures, resulting in high transaction costs and poor sustainable management outcomes. In contrast, some states have developed and implemented outcome-based codes of forest practice, which apply across all tenures. Both forest certification and consistent, triple bottom line reporting on forest management outcomes have important roles in such systems. Streamlined regulation and comprehensive outcome-based codes of practice applying across all land tenures should address all major forest disturbance activities, not just timber harvesting.
 - Foster innovation in forest management and the use of forest products - There is limited and declining investment in forest research and innovation. Greater priority must be given to

improving Australia's capacity to manage for production and sustainability of forest values through research, education and training that takes into account the major long-term challenges to forest management. This should include a focus on the issues identified above, and on the innovative use of forest products, to fully realize the value of their low carbon footprint.

Policy

The Institute of Foresters Australia (IFA) advocates maintaining a contemporary, holistic National Forest Policy Statement to provide strategic directions for the management of Australia's forests and for Australian forest industries, and in this context considers that the 1992 National Forest Policy Statement be revised as a matter of urgency.

The IFA supports consideration of the following issues as part of the revision of the NFPS:

- the need for active management to sustain the values associated with native forests of all tenures
- the need to extend the principles of the Regional Forest Agreements to other forests, and through ongoing review and renewal at the end of their 20 year life;
- the need to enhance the role of all forests on all tenures in delivering ecosystem services. The role of forests and forest products in climate change mitigation strategies, and of plantation forests in delivering ecosystem services, deserve particular attention;
- the need to strengthen implementation of the National Indigenous Forestry Strategy;
- The need to develop enhanced regulatory and reporting systems to support sustainable forest management. Regulator systems should be outcomes-based and apply across all tenures, and be supported by forest certification systems.
- the need to build and sustain capacity for sustainable forest management, and innovation in the forests and forest products sector.

Further Information

Australian Government (2005) The National Indigenous Forestry Strategy.
<http://www.daff.gov.au/forestry/policies/nifs>

Australia's national parks: a submission to a Senate Inquiry from the Institute of Foresters of Australia, 2006. http://www.forestry.org.au/pdf/pdf-public/Submissions/national_parks_24032006.doc March 2006

National Forest Policy Statement: A new focus for Australia's forests, 1992. Commonwealth of Australia. <http://www.daff.gov.au/forestry/policies/statement>

Plantations 2020. <http://www.plantations2020.com.au/vision/index.html>

Regional Forest Agreements <http://www.daff.gov.au/rfa> Australian Government, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

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