

POSITION PAPER

The Institute of Foresters of Australia/Australian Forest Growers

TIMBER HARVESTING IN NATIVE FORESTS

Date: 7 April 2020



Introduction

The universal management of native forests for their full range of values, including timber, has been brought into question in Australia. Entities that oppose native forest harvesting have mounted concerted, yet often misinformed, public campaigning. These entities have advocated for preservation as the sole objective of native forest management, ignoring evidence that forests can be sustainably managed to deliver multiple environmental social and economic benefits.

There is now a pressing need to consider how the management of Australia's native forests can provide a full range of values, including high-quality timber and associated products. The IFA/AFG advocates for active forest management that addresses the following key considerations.

Socio-economic values

Australia has large areas of native forests that can produce, from a very small portion of the total estate in each state and territory, high quality hardwood timbers to meet domestic demand. Many of these products cannot yet be produced in plantations.

Failure to produce these timbers in Australia will lead to increased imports, often from developing countries whose forests are not managed to the same high environmental standard as in Australia. Importing more wood rather than harvesting in native forest is morally questionable given that Australia is amongst the world's top five in per capita consumption of wood products.

Currently Australia has a \$2 billion trade deficit in forest products. This is in large part due to imports of paper and packaging products sourced from other countries; as well as imports of wooden doors, mouldings and sawn timber, all sourced from overseas rather than our own native forests.

The sustainable management of native forests for timber production provides a broad suite of socio-economic benefits, including road access for recreation, fire control, ecotourism and production of non-timber products like honey.

Biodiversity

In Australia, management of public and most private native forests is conducted in accordance with principles from the Convention on Biological Diversity

and objectives under the National Forest Policy Statement and National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biodiversity. Sustainable management is underpinned by a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) conservation reserve network, complemented by active management of biodiversity outside of formal parks and reserves.

Excluding timber production from native forests does not guarantee protection of biodiversity, particularly from the broader threats of wildfires, invasive species and climate change. The CAR reserve system also requires a level of active forest management to maintain structural diversity and resilience to this range of threats.

While timber harvesting can have a localised impact in time and space on plant and animal species, modern forest management systems and practices are supported by a scientific approach. They take a whole-of-landscape view to protect biodiversity values, including threatened species and habitats.

Climate change

Forests clearly play an important role in mitigating the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, by removing (sequestering) carbon dioxide through photosynthesis, particularly in actively growing regrowth forests, and storing carbon in 'forest carbon stocks'. Sustainable forest management incorporates the maintenance or enhancement of carbon stocks over the long term. Sustainable timber harvesting then enables society to obtain timber and other wood products from a renewable, carbon neutral source, rather than relying entirely on fossil fuel intensive alternatives such as aluminium, concrete and steel, and coal or petroleum based fuels.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has recognised that a sustainable forest management strategy aimed at maintaining or increasing forest carbon stocks, while producing an annual sustained yield of timber, fibre or energy from the forest, will generate the largest sustained climate change mitigation benefit.

Water

High quality drinking water is often associated with undisturbed native forest catchments. However, high quality drinking water can be obtained from

Approved by the IFA/AFG Board

catchments that have been disturbed by fire events, and manageable levels of agriculture and timber harvesting.

Many years of scientific studies have resulted in harvesting prescriptions that maintain appropriate streamside reserves that consider the size of the stream, topography, soil type and adjacent land use, limit the area harvested in any one year and disperse harvested areas in space and time. In addition, management practices such as forest thinning, selective timber harvesting and prescribed burning can be used to maintain or enhance water yield in domestic water-supply catchments.

Rather than posing a threat, sustainable native forest management including some timber harvesting can maintain or enhance water quality and quantity.

Fire

The 2019/20 summer has highlighted the ever increasing threat of forest wildfires in Australia. Over the last 25 years, there has been a significant increase in the area of conservation parks and reserves that emphasise preservation, and a corresponding decrease in the area of State forest. This has led to reduced levels of active forest management across the public native forest estate. There are now fewer experienced forest managers and timber harvesting crews working in native forest with the skills and capacity to use the plant and equipment required to confidently mount rapid and aggressive first attack on any fire outbreaks.

This decline in land management skills and capacity has coincided with an observed shift from a land management approach to an emergency response approach to fire management with a conservative attitude to risk, which tends to avoid direct attack on fires and relies more on aircraft to suppress fires.

Maintaining a strong native forest timber industry is integral to maintaining effective fire management across forested landscapes and reducing the risks of catastrophic impacts on forest values and society.

Active management and silviculture

Active forest management comprises 'silviculture' - the art and science of sustainably managing the establishment, growth, quality, health, protection and use of forests, to meet the diverse needs and values of forest owners and society.

There is a broad range of silvicultural treatments available to forestry professionals, for use through forest management cycles. These treatments include clear-felling, variable retention, selection harvesting, and thinning for ecological and commercial benefits. Each of these treatments has merits applicable to specific situations, and they will vary due to species, structure and regeneration requirements of different forest types. Most importantly, appropriate silvicultural decisions

require clear management objectives, as well as knowledge of the ecology and circumstances of each forest.

If these aspects are considered, silvicultural practices including timber harvesting can enhance forest health and productivity, water yield and biodiversity, as well as reduce the impact of wildfires and other risks to forests.

Plantations as the alternative

Plantations play a significant role in this country in supplying softwood timbers that are not available from our native forests. Australia also has fast-growing hardwood plantations that supply wood fibre for pulp and paper production, predominantly overseas. However, plantations cannot produce hardwood sawlogs in the quantity and quality that can be obtained from sustainably managed native forests, due to the time and costs involved in growing suitable plantation species to achieve comparable timber attributes.

Unlike plantations, native forests require no site establishment using herbicides, no fertilisers and no expensive appropriation of agricultural land that may be required for food production. Australia already has multi-aged native forests available to address much of our timber needs. Proposals to transition from native forests to plantations often fail to recognise the challenges and costs of obtaining a cleared farmland base of substantial scale, and the investment risks of waiting decades before plantations can provide a capital return.

Plantations have a vital role to play in meeting Australia's timber needs, complementing a sustainable supply from actively managed native forests.

IFA/AFG position

The IFA/AFG considers that active management, including timber production, is vital to the sustainability of native forests and provides many benefits to Australian society. The IFA/AFG advocates for ongoing research on timber harvesting in native forests to support this capability in Australia. The IFA/AFG represents forestry professionals that have the skills to develop management strategies to meet forest owner's objectives and community expectations regarding the production of wood products and conservation of other forest values.
