



30 August 2021

## **IFA/AFG Submission on the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements Major Event Review following the 2019-20 bushfires.**

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) and Australian Forest Growers (AFG) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements Major Event Review following the 2019-20 bushfires.

The Institute of Foresters of Australia and Australian Forest Growers (IFA/AFG) is an independent professional association of forest scientists, managers and growers who work in native forests, plantations and in the provision of environmental services. IFA/AFG members have extensive experience in forest and fire management through roles as land managers, employees of emergency service agencies, and as volunteer fire fighters. The IFA/AFG is committed to the principles of sustainable forest management and applying these principles to generate environmental, economic and social outcomes in all types of forests. This submission is based on contributions from members who are highly experienced foresters and forest scientists from the public and private sectors who have worked for many years in forest and fire management and research.

The IFA/AFG supports the concept of RFAs as durable, long-term, strategic agreements between the Australian and state governments to support sustainable forest management and provide for protection of Matters of National Environmental Significance (MNES) under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

However, the RFAs and the National Forest Policy Statement only remain useful if they truly reflect a *shared* vision for forests, the evolving environmental, social and economic situation and emerging scientific knowledge. Currently, we lack a cohesive shared vision for forest management, with ongoing politicisation and polarisation over forest management that is resulting in bureaucratic paralysis and sub-optimal outcomes for forests and for society. To achieve this shared vision, we make the following recommendations:

- The Federal and Victorian Government develop a new joint funding program to provide resources and capacity for ongoing, **active forest management** across all land tenures (public, private and conservation)
- That Forest and Fire Management Victoria move from a seasonal 'fire-fighting' mode to **employ more people year-round** to use fire and other tools to manage forests for resilience.
- Jointly fund **Traditional Owner groups to develop and apply locally appropriate approaches** to land and fire management, to heal cultural knowledge and expand the Working for Country program to support Indigenous-led Ranger Programs in Victoria.
- The Victorian Government **review and remove legal and administrative barriers** restricting access to land and implementation of cultural fire and land management practices.
- The Victorian Government **develop clear policies and strategies to manage fire-sensitive communities**, in particular immature ash forest at risk of conversion to other forest types. This requires processes to accurately determine the extent of impacted by high intensity wildfire and ongoing technical knowledge, management capacity and seed stocks needed to enable their rapid recovery.



- Invest in more locally driven research to **apply and evaluate alternative silvicultural approaches**, including forest thinning, mechanical fuel treatments, mosaic burning, accelerated habitat and other forest restoration techniques at a landscape scale.
- Carefully consider the **consequences of further expanding conservation reserves** without accompanying financial resources and capacity for active forest, fire and fuel management.
- That the review panel recommend support for **genuine, open dialogue** involving Traditional Owners, community members, government, NGO's and researchers on the best way forward to restore forest health and improve resilience to future fires.
- An outcome must be **far stronger structured formal involvement** of local communities in management of their nearby forest with measurable accountable improvements in management.

The IFA/AFG would be happy to work with both the Australian and State Governments to advance these recommendations.

The IFA/AFG believes there needs to be a significant improvement in forest management underpinned by a shared vision for forests that is inclusive of all tenures. This must include investment, long term planning, accountabilities, fire prevention on a landscape scale, stronger local and regional management and in genuine partnership with Traditional Owners.

The impacts of the 2019/20 bushfires present both a challenge and opportunity for how we manage forests covered by the RFAs. While the immediate challenges of managing fuel loads, timber shortages and forest recovery over such a vast area is pressing, the opportunity is to increase active forest management to promote healthy, resilient forests and communities into the future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rodney Keenan". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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