

NEWS

Fallen trees 'a real danger'

BY MALVIKA HEMANTH

TIMBER recovery efforts, in the form of large-scale tree clearing at the proposed Wombat-Lerderderg National Park, encompasses a range of benefits, according to Forestry Australia's vice-president.

The Wombat State Forest, which will form part of the state government's three new national parks in Victoria along with the Lerderderg State Park, was decimated by the June storms last year which saw widespread damage and a "severity that has rarely been seen before," Dr Michelle Freeman said.

The resulting destruction caused many trees to fall down and in April this year VicForests, in consultation with traditional owners, began clean-up efforts under the Forest Recovery Timber Utilisation Plan to "restore forest health" and "mitigate fire risk to communities through management of timber and debris generated".

Dr Freeman said the fallen trees posed a real danger due to the large amounts of fine fuels and 200 to 400 tonnes



CLEAN-UP EFFORTS NEEDED: Forestry Australia vice-president Dr Michelle Freeman says timber recovery operations are "necessary" at the Wombat State Forest to ensure the safety of both "human communities" and wildlife. **Picture: Supplied.**

per hectare of coarse woody debris the storms produced.

"The scale and extent of damage brought about by the 2021 storms is beyond ecologically normal levels and beyond what is required

for species habitat," she said. "The fallen trees represent a real danger, not only to adjacent human communities, but to wildlife, due to the extreme fuel loads."

Dr Freeman said the

timber recovery operations were necessary as it was the "only practical measure to ensure these areas of high fire risk are effectively managed ahead of the bush-fire season."

She said the major benefits the timber recovery efforts presented after catastrophic weather events included most prominently its ability to reduce fire risk as well as the financial gain it would provide the local community.

"After a severe weather event windblown trees that are not removed become part of the fuel load as they dry out over the next few years, adding to the convective component of fires," Dr Freeman said.

"If left alone in high volumes, they increase the likelihood of firestorms. Additionally, high volumes of large logs could smoulder after any future fire, which negatively impact any surviving trees or soil biota.

"If (the trees are) not removed, high loads of heavy debris also create a barrier to firefighter access and inhibit the establishment of control lines in the event of a fire.

"The recovery of this timber will also provide financial benefit to the Dja Dja Wurrung community through providing them timber and firewood, which is currently in short supply."

Dr Freeman also added timber recovery would also reduce Australia's reliance on imported timber.

Wombat Forestry care convenor Gayle Osborne said while she agreed fallen trees increased the likelihood of fire risk, she believed the framework outlined by VicForests to remove them was not being appropriately managed.

"We were caught completely by surprise to find that, in early April this year, and without any notice, VicForests had commenced an industrial scale salvage harvesting operation," Ms Osborne said.

"It is obvious that ecologically sensitive management of fallen timber in some areas is necessary and the government position is that this salvage operation will reduce fire risk, however, the logs that are being removed do not present a major fire

risk as it is fine fuels, generally less than 6mm in diameter, that are recognised by many fire scientists as a driver of forest fires.

"The large logs lying on the ground would have become important habitat for mosses, lichens and fungi as well as insects and small mammals and lizards and are an important contributor to the food chain that supports life in the forest."

Ms Osborne said an improved timber recovery policy was sorely needed for the Wombat State Forest especially in light of the great glider species being listed from vulnerable to endangered by the federal government on Tuesday.

"The loss of trees in the June 2021 storm highlighted the need to look at the effects of the storm on greater glider habitat trees. If we want these beautiful creatures to persist and to thrive, we need to increase their housing stock and have better timber recovery policy in place."

The Victorian National Parks Association have recorded 40 great gliders living in the Wombat State Forest.

Planning authority proposes smaller lots

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To give a comparison of the block size, the goal square at Mars Stadium is 60sqm, as is one-quarter of a tennis court. Four to five average Ballarat carparks make up 60sqm; the Gatekeeper's Cottage and garden at the Botanic Gardens is 120sqm; a few of the Lake Wendouree boatsheds are about 35sqm.

That is not to say encouraging small allotment development is completely unwelcome, says urban geographer and specialist in urban planning Dr Kate Shaw.

"If the effect is to reduce

block sizes and increase housing densities on the urban periphery (after 20 years of this as completely unrealised policy objective), it's not all a bad thing," Dr Shaw says.

"Obviously the application has to be nuanced and it depends on context. But if it's well-designed then it's not necessarily a bad thing."

RMIT Emeritus Professor Michael Buxton agrees the philosophy of the changes to the code, but the devil - and it's a sizeable devil - will be in the detail.

He says councils such

as Ballarat have had their influence and control over developments such as these limited by exclusion from planning processes.

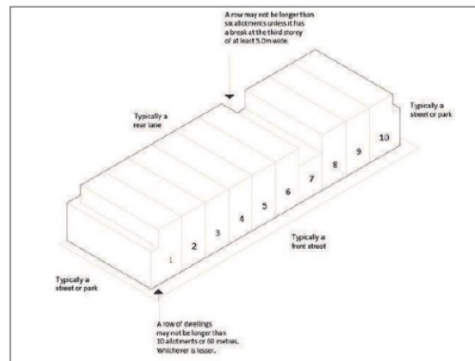
"It might seem the code encourages housing diversity, but only a small proportion of dwellings are being constructed on lots under 250sqm as lazy developers continue with their standard business model of providing detached housing on various-sized lots," he says.

"Growth areas around regional centres are particularly affected by this lack of council control as higher

density housing, sometimes located 5 to 8 km from regional CBDs, is poorly serviced and unconnected to any other activities and jobs except by road vehicles.

"The code is also seriously deficient, with many vague standards able to be interpreted differently, omitting essential requirements such as housing orientation and sunlight access.

"This makes it impossible to hold developers properly to account, a major deficiency of code assessment which places effective power with developers."



HIGH DENSITY: A VPA image of a proposed 60sqm block. The VPA is taking submissions on the plan, and have offered a detailed response to The Courier tomorrow.

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