

SUSTAINABLE FOREST HARVESTING



CONTEXT

In Australia, native forests and plantations are harvested and regenerated to provide forest products with multiple flow-on benefits and to meet a range of society's needs. Australia has a growing balance of trade deficit in forest products. Sustainable forest harvesting is not deforestation, because of the key requirement to regenerate harvested areas. Deforestation occurs when forests are converted to other land uses. Compliance with legislation, regulations and Codes of Practice, the implementation of strategic and operational management plans, and independent third-party forest certification schemes all provide assurance that harvesting practices in Australia are managed sustainably. Sustainable harvesting practices are those that enable reforestation, take account of social and economic outcomes and are adaptively managed to mitigate risks to the environment. Plantations and native forests provide different types of forest and wood products and therefore both have a role to play and must be managed as part of a holistic forest products supply strategy. Unintended consequences associated with reducing sustainable forest harvesting in Australia include increased reliance on imports and forgoing a range of flow-on benefits to communities and the environment. Different silvicultural techniques can be utilised to support forest health and biodiversity, mitigate risks from fire, pests and diseases and to grow bigger trees quicker, storing more carbon and creating forests that are more resilient.

FORESTRY AUSTRALIA ADVOCATES THE FOLLOWING:

- We have a moral imperative in Australia to support well managed sustainable forest harvesting from both Australian plantations and native forests as part of ecologically sustainable forest management. This is to provide local forest and wood products and flow-on benefits to meet society's needs and reduce Australia's increasing reliance on imports of forest products.
- The flow-on benefits of sustainable forest harvesting in Australia are significant and must be accounted for in government policy decision-making. They include supporting livelihoods in rural and regional communities, increasing carbon capture and storage, contributing specialised skills and equipment for bushfire suppression, managing risks from fire, pests, diseases and climate change, and enhancing forest access.
- Plantations are and should continue to provide the primary resource for sustainable forest harvesting. Investment in growing the plantation estate is needed to meet increasing demand.
- Native forest harvesting provides an important source of wood products that are not able to be sourced from plantations and can deliver flow-on benefits through active forest management and silviculture to support forest health and resilience. When implementing native forest harvesting, the protection of conservation values should be prioritised through reserves and prescriptions.
- Thinning is often a desirable management practice in dense regrowth forests to support and recover forest health, grow bigger trees quicker and reduce the risk of wildfire and insect attack, while providing a source of forest and wood products.
- Developing and diversifying accessible markets, including for thinnings and portions of trees that don't meet sawlog standards, will help make full use of harvested trees, help prevent 'high grading' of forests and improve the financial viability of harvesting for high-value forest products.

- Sustainable forest harvesting is best planned and managed by trained forestry professionals, such as those represented and certified by Forestry Australia through the Registered Forestry Professional (RFP) scheme.

SUPPORTING NOTES

Sustainable forest harvesting, which is an important part of ecologically sustainable forest management (see Position Statement 01), involves the extraction of wood products utilising appropriate silviculture and regeneration practices to ensure forests and harvestable products are maintained in perpetuity. Sustainable forest harvesting occurs in softwood and hardwood plantations and some native forests across public and private land.

Maintaining forests in perpetuity is foundational to sustainable forest harvesting. In public discourse, sustainable forest harvesting is often confused with deforestation, land clearing, or negatively associated with the term "logging" – but these are very different activities. Deforestation and land clearing are forest loss and conversion to other land uses. The term "logging" is often used to imply wood production that is unsustainable or does not take due care of the environment.

Silviculture is the toolkit of forestry – the science and craft of creating, managing, conserving, using and caring for forests. When choosing sustainable forest harvesting approaches, forest managers should carefully choose which silvicultural practices to use in each forest to meet ecological, social and economic needs and to restore and enhance forest values, health and resilience. There are many forms of timber harvesting and silvicultural practice, which vary by forest type depending on the ecological characteristics, species tolerance and natural processes of the particular forest, site history and operational objectives.

Wood products harvested from different forest types have different physical characteristics and are used for different purposes and are therefore not directly interchangeable. Softwood plantations have rotation cycles of about 30 years and are harvested for building timbers, paper, and cardboard products. Most hardwood plantations are grown on short-rotation cycles to produce woodchips and fibre. Native forests are managed on much longer rotation cycles primarily

POSITION STATEMENT

SUSTAINABLE FOREST HARVESTING



for high quality sawn timber and wood panel products, with residues primarily being exported as woodchips.

In native forests, biodiversity values are strategically identified and protected within formally protected and conserved areas of forest. In public native forests covered by Regional Forest Agreements, the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative reserve system is the mechanism jointly agreed to by the Commonwealth and State governments for protecting biodiversity, old growth, and wilderness values. In public native forests available for timber harvesting, conservation and heritage values are protected through complementary measures such as management zoning systems, regulatory prescriptions, and other voluntary and site-specific measures. This multi-layered approach provides for conservation and representation of key forest types and biologically important areas across the landscape.

Australia's demand for forest products is continually increasing. Reductions in the hardwood plantation estate and native forest harvesting, coupled with very little development of new plantations, means that Australia is struggling to meet the increasing demand for forest and wood products. This is resulting in increased reliance on imports, often sourced from developing countries whose forests are not managed to the same high environmental standard as in Australia. Importing more wood is morally questionable given that Australia is the 6th-most forested country in the world and amongst the world's top five in per capita consumption of wood products (see Position Statement 05).

Beyond the provision of wood products, sustainable forest harvesting in Australia provides a broad suite of important flow-on benefits. These include supporting vibrant rural and regional communities and providing socio-economic benefits, including road access for recreation, ecotourism and production of non-timber products like honey. The people who conduct forest harvesting are also a critical resource, providing unique skills and machinery, that are essential during bushfire control operations. Sustainable forest harvesting using appropriate silviculture can also promote forest health and environmental outcomes. For example, thinning in regrowth forests enables trees to grow bigger quicker, making them more resistant to fire and supporting carbon capture and storage, can be utilised to increase water yields, and can act to mitigate fire risk in some forest types.

All sustainable forest harvesting in Australia is carefully planned, strongly regulated and conducted by well-trained forestry industry personnel. It must be done in ways that comply with relevant laws, regulations, and codes of practice to ensure risks

to environmental, social, cultural, and other economic values are effectively managed. Best practice includes monitoring and adaptive management that is tailored to local circumstances.

All public native forests and most plantations are also covered by forest certification schemes subject to independent auditing of compliance. Australia has two forest certification schemes: The Australian Forestry Standard, managed by Responsible Wood under the global Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC); and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) National Forest Stewardship Standard of Australia, managed under the FSC global arrangement. Forest certification provides an additional layer of surety to wood products consumers that harvesting is undertaken sustainably and in line with agreed best-practice standards. When undertaken at a scale and intensity appropriate for each forest type, harvesting can emulate natural ecological processes and support biodiversity.

Around Australia, there are large areas of native forest that consist of dense stands of regrowth trees, either as a result of having been burnt by intense bushfire or from reforestation practices that exceeded the desired stocking level. Retaining a high proportion of a forest estate in this condition results in slower growth of individual trees and can present increased risks related to future bushfires and diseases. Forest managers use silvicultural practices, such as thinning, to reduce the density of trees and achieve a more open forest stand condition. For forest managers to economically thin forests and reduce bushfire risks there needs to be markets for the trees that are cut.

Ensuring effective access to a range of commercial markets for harvested timber, is important for ensuring the economic viability, long-term sustainability and resilience of forest industries. In the past, some forests were degraded by the unsustainable practice of harvesting only the best trees for high-end timber, known as high-grading. Such perverse outcomes can be avoided by ensuring there are a range of markets for low quality wood and offcuts, which in turn minimises waste and improves financial returns. Diverse markets, beyond those for traditional sawn timber and woodchips, include posts and poles, engineered wood products, bioenergy, and bio-composite materials (e.g., bioplastics).

Sustainable forest harvesting needs to be planned and managed by trained forestry professionals. Forestry Australia's Registered Forestry Professional (RFP) scheme provides confidence that these forestry professionals have the skills and experience to develop management and harvest strategies to meet the forest owner's objectives and community expectations for timber production and the conservation of other forest values.

Further reading

ABARES Australian forest and wood product statistics. <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/forests/forest-economics/forest-wood-products-statistics>

Brown, G.W, Murphy, A, Fanson, B & Tolsma, A, 2019, 'The influence of different restoration thinning treatments on tree growth in a depleted forest system,' *Forest Ecology and Management*, 437, pp. 10-16.

Forestry Australia. Forest Certification. Viewed June 2023 <https://www.forestry.org.au/forest-certification/>

Forestry Australia. About Registered Forestry Professional. Viewed June 2023 <https://www.forestry.org.au/about-rfp/>

Keenan, RJ, Weston, CJ & Volkova, L, 2021, 'Potential for forest thinning to reduce risk and increase resilience to wildfire in Australian temperate Eucalyptus forests,' *Current Opinion in Environmental Science & Health* 23; pp. 1-6.

Munks, SA, Chuter, AE & Koch, AJ, 2020 'Off-reserve' management in practice: Contributing to conservation of biodiversity over 30 years of Tasmania's forest practices system,' *Forest Ecology and Management*, 465, p. 117941.

Whittle, L 2019, 'Australia's Forest Industry,' *Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, Canberra*. CC BY 4.0. Viewed June 2023 <https://doi.org/10.25814/5dc8f4a1976b9>

Ximenes, FA, George, B, Cowie, A, Kelly, G, Williams, J, Levitt, G, & Boer, K, 2012, 'Harvested forests provide the greatest ongoing greenhouse gas benefits. Does current Australian policy support optimal greenhouse gas mitigation outcomes?' *NSW Department of Primary Industries* Viewed June 2023. <https://rune.une.edu.au/web/handle/1959.11/12555>

Venn, T J, 2023, 'Reconciling timber harvesting, biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration in Queensland, Australia,' *Forest Policy and Economics*, 152, p. 102979.