

Forestry Australia position on the Victorian Native Forest Decision

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Forestry Australia is an independent professional association of forest scientists, managers and forest growers who work in native forests, plantations, farm trees and forests and the provision of forest environmental services. This statement presents the position of the Victorian Branch on the recent decision of the Victorian Government to bring forward the closure of native forest harvesting in State forests from 2030 to January 2024. It raises questions that the government needs to address in considering the future of these forests, the role of First Nations people in relation to these forests, and other members of communities who live near, and depend on, forests for their livelihoods. Recommended actions are presented to address problems created by this decision and to promote sustainable forest and farm tree management and a sustainable forest products sector in Victoria.

Position

Forestry Australia considers that this decision was not based on sound evidence. Affected parties were not consulted and the implications for future management of Victoria's forests, or the wider implications of the decision on the forest products sector, timber supply and use, were not assessed in making the decision.

Ceasing native forest harvesting will have potentially serious consequences for the future health and resilience of Victoria's native forests by reducing forest and fire management capacity, reducing access and reducing funds for forest management. It negatively affects many people who work in native forests (including many members of Forestry Australia), as well as those who depend on access to forests for their livelihoods and lifestyles and those who depend on the broader economic activity generated by native forest products.

The decision comes at a substantial cost, including compensation for affected businesses and workers, ongoing costs of managing State Forests and public lands and maintaining the extensive road network and other infrastructure that has been funded by timber revenues. Maintaining this infrastructure will be important for bushfire protection, recreation, weed and feral animal control and catchment management. Ongoing major threats to forest-dependent species and communities need to be managed and funded. These costs need to be clearly spelt out to Victorians.

The decision also impacts on future professional forest management knowledge and expertise and the specialist skills and equipment of forestry contractors. Professional foresters, forest workers and contractors play an important role in protecting forests from threats and keeping communities safe from bushfires. Many associated professionals work in the native forest timber sector, including seed collectors, ecologists, botanists and hydrologists. The government needs to commit to maintaining this specialist forest management expertise and provide assurance to VicForests staff and other professionals and forestry contractors about their future.

The forest products sector in Victoria is based on privately-owned plantations, state native forests, farm trees, and, increasingly, forests controlled and cared for by First Nations people. The current 'Forestry Transition Plan' and the 2019 Victorian Forestry Plan largely focus on shutting down one industry sector. This has created a negative environment for potential investors in the forest sector in Victoria. This is leading to missed opportunities for Victoria, driving investors to other places with more supportive policies that recognise the value of integrated, multiple use forests for climate and sustainable development objectives.

Forestry Australia calls for a comprehensive, positive vision and policy for all Victorian forests. With an enabling policy and regulatory framework, this vision can support ongoing forest management and attract capital investment in innovative and sustainable forest-based industries. This investment can support active management of native forests, add value to plantations and create markets for products from new forests and farm trees. New industry opportunities include high-value, innovative, structural and appearance timber products from native and plantation forests, biochar, biochemicals and biofuels. The capacity in professional foresters and skilled contractors and workers must be maintained to support these new industries and to protect and enhance the value of forests to the Victorian community.

Key Questions for the Victorian Government:

1. **What are the implications for Traditional Owners?** Traditional Owners were not consulted in making this decision. First Nations people need to lead in managing and caring for Country and realise economic benefits for their communities by using forest products under Whole-of-Country plans.
2. **What are the conservation benefits from this decision?** Well-managed timber harvesting is not a significant threat to forest biodiversity in Victoria compared with urban expansion, feral animals (cats, deer, dogs, pigs, foxes), climate change and altered fire regimes. At its current scale, the effects of timber harvesting on forest biodiversity are small and effectively managed through exclusions and prescriptions. Practices are continually improving. Monitoring and sound long-term data are required to assess the effects of this decision on forest biodiversity.
3. **What are the costs of this decision (direct and indirect, including social and mental health impacts)?** Do the benefits outweigh these costs? A comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of this decision is needed.
4. **What are the implications for Victoria's Regional Forest Agreements?** The government needs to spell how the decision affects arrangements to protect Matters of National Environmental Significance and for exports of forest products, including plantation timber products.
5. **What are the implications for active management?** Active and adaptive management of Victoria's forests, across public land tenures, was an important component of revised Regional Forest Agreements. It can enhance forest resilience and reduce the impacts of climate change, drought, invasive species and bushfires. Legislative and regulatory arrangements and funding are needed to support testing and implementation of active forest management.
6. **What are the implications for climate change objectives?** Increasing carbon stocks in well-managed, actively growing forests and harvested wood products is a well-established climate mitigation strategy. The government needs to consider the overall impacts of this decision on greenhouse gas emissions, including increased use of non-renewable, emissions-intensive building products and increased imports of timber products.
7. **What are the implications for the sources of hardwood timber products used by Victorians?** The government needs to understand how this decision impacts on trade flows and forests elsewhere, including those with lower environmental protection standards to those in Victoria.
8. **What are the implications for bush users?** State Forests are used by apiarists, fossickers, foragers, campers, horse riders, mountain bike riders, hunters, fishers, four-wheel drivers, trail-bike riders,

bushwalkers and firewood cutters. National parks and other conservation reserves often do not allow access for such users. Access to State Forests needs to be maintained for all forest users.

9. **What are the implications for water yield and quality and for aquatic environments?** Victorian forests provide water to rivers of the Murray Darling Basin, Melbourne Water catchments, and many smaller rivers and communities. Actively managed catchments in which fire and feral animals are actively controlled, with diverse forest age structures and streamside protection produce high quality water. The government needs to assess the impacts of reduced wildfire management capacity in and around these catchments will impact on long term water yields and water quality.

Recommendations

That the Victorian Government:

1. Provide stronger support for Victoria's First Nations people to care for their Country and realise economic development opportunities for their communities.
2. Invest in active management of native forests that improves wildlife habitat, forest health and the resilience of forests to fires and climate change.
3. Investigate alternative timber sources to maintain Victorian wood processing and manufacturing capacity until new plantation and farm tree resources become available.
4. Support more private sector investment in forest plantations. Well-designed timber plantations can provide nature-positive solutions to Victoria's climate change and biodiversity commitment. However, our plantation area is declining. Action is urgently needed to address this decline and increase investment in plantations.
5. Increase support for farm trees and agroforestry on Victorian farms by developing regional farm tree policies, plans and incentives to increase awareness of rural landowners and their advisors about commercial tree opportunities, increase collaboration across rural sectors, support networks and peer-to-peer learning, creating links to new sources of capital, work with and supporting collaborative business models between industry, investors and farmers.
6. Develop clear policies to enable Victorian industry involvement in the bio-economy and the use of timber in Victoria's housing and infrastructure programs to support climate mitigation targets.