

NATIONAL FOREST POLICY STATEMENT



CONTEXT:

A national forest policy should contain long-term goals and associated strategies that provide guidance for legislation, the management of nationally important forest values including climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation, land use and forest management decisions, and investment in the forest sector. The 1992 National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS) has provided the overarching policy framework for cross jurisdictional management of Australia's public and private forests and the associated forest industries for the past 30 years. However, state government native forest management policies, community expectations, and the proportion of wood products sourced from native forests and plantations have changed over this time, while climate change has presented new issues and opportunities for the forest sector. The 2023 Labor Party national conference agreed to a review of Australia's NFPS by early 2025. This Position Statement focuses on high-level aspects within the current NFPS, including the Vision and National Goals.

FORESTRY AUSTRALIA ADVOCATES THE FOLLOWING:

- A comprehensive review of the NFPS is appropriate and timely to take account of changed circumstances, new and emerging issues, and the opportunity to improve policies for native, planted and urban forests.
- A review of the NFPS would benefit from an independent assessment of the achievements, strengths and limitations of the current NFPS and a transparent process for stakeholder and community consultation.
- The States, Territories and local governments must be actively involved in the review to facilitate political support for a revised NFPS. There must also be broad consultation with the community, including Traditional Owners and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- The revised NFPS would benefit from a clearer set of policies relevant to all existing tenures across native and planted forests, including public, private, indigenous and leasehold tenures, in ways that provide direction for addressing forest management issues through a more holistic, integrated approach.
- The NFPS could be enhanced by specific consideration and address of the following key themes: the cross-tenure conservation of Matters of National Environmental Significance; forest management for climate resilience; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' forest management rights and aspirations; fire management; water management; recreation, tourism, health and well-being values of forests; the role of forests and wood products in climate mitigation and adaptation; and how Australia intends to meet future wood and fibre demand.
- The current NFPS Vision and Goals need to be revised, and will likely need to be expanded, to reflect this broader range of nationally important forest values.
- The current NFPS Vision and Goals should also ensure to recognise, endorse and support Australia's policy commitments and obligations under international conventions and processes relating to ecologically sustainable

forest management, noting significant advances in international conventions and processes over the past 30 years.

- Where possible, the NFPS Goals should be expressed as SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant & Time-Bound).

SUPPORTING NOTES

Under the Australian Constitution, the responsibility for management of forests and forest land use decisions primarily rests with the States and Territories, while the Australian government has responsibilities related to relevant international treaties. For over 90 years Australia did not have a National Forest Policy, then during the 1970s and 1980s forest policy makers began to consider this need, prompted by the Commonwealth Government legislation on a range of environmental issues and the development of a national strategy on ecologically sustainable development. After decades of tensions over forest policies, the National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS) was signed by most Australian governments in 1992, with Tasmania signing it in 1995. It contains a vision of ecologically sustainable management of Australia's forests, eleven national goals, and policies for developing both a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative reserve system and Regional Forest Agreements.

History has shown the benefits of having a national approach to addressing forest policy issues through a unified and agreed vision and goals for ecologically sustainable forest management, to ensure that all uses and values of forests are managed holistically and sustainably, while meeting the needs of current and future generations.

However, since 1992 much has changed in relation to the social, political and environmental aspects of Australia's forests and to the wood supplies to forest industries from native and planted forests. Notably, the 1992 NFPS did not make specific provision for facilitating the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in forest management. Other important issues such as climate change, increasing wildfire incidence, and the multiple compounding threats to listed threatened species and communities all require updated forest policy guidance.

POSITION STATEMENT

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There are also other important national strategies that have implications for forest policy that are not covered in the current NFPS. For example, the National Bushfire Management Policy Statement for Forests and Rangelands, which was signed by all Australian governments in 2014, outlines the agreed national goals and policies for the future management of landscape fire in Australia's forests and rangelands, but is not referenced in the NFPS. Furthermore, Australia's Strategy for Nature 2019-2030 and the 2023 agreement by Australia's Ministers for Environment to protect and conserve at least 30% of Australia's land and to minimise the impact of climate change on nature have implications for national forest policy that are not currently addressed in the NFPS.

At the international level, the current NFPS refers to international conventions including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Global Statement of Principles on Forests; however, it does not refer to the Montréal Process Criteria and Indicators for the Conservation and Management of Temperate and Boreal Forests, which Australia has supported since its inception in 1994; and further consideration should be given to other international obligations relating to ecologically sustainable forest management that Australia has entered into since the early 1990s.

Because Australia's NFPS is outdated, forest management, planning and policy decisions have become increasingly disjointed and politicised across federal, State and local levels. In recent years, some forest-related decisions by governments have either been inconsistent with the NFPS policies or related to aspects that were not properly addressed in the NFPS. Concurrently, there has been a rise in the use of the legal system by community groups who have lost faith in the framework. A revised NFPS that is agreed across federal, state and local governments would provide a powerful framework and impetus for positive policy and regulatory reforms, while helping to build and instill community trust. As Australia's forests consist of many forest types and ownership categories, the NFPS must be holistic while also accommodating regional differences and differences in forest management approaches, tenure and objectives.

The current NFPS Vision articulates eight characteristics of ecologically sustainable forest management, most of which continue to be relevant, despite requiring some updating and broadening. However, the Vision is silent on important issues such as the contribution of forests and wood products to addressing climate change, management of Country by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the increasing threats from bushfires and invasive species, the restoration of degraded landscapes, the role of urban and community forests and trees in maintaining community health and well-being, and the need to improve consistency and coverage of data and monitoring across all forest tenures.

The current NFPS identifies eleven broad national Goals to be pursued within a regionally based planning framework that integrates environmental and commercial objectives. While each of these Goals remain relevant, they are expressed in a passive manner. This has led to varying degrees of commitment and implementation by the NFPS signatories and has made it difficult to evaluate the achievements and effectiveness of the current Goals. Ideally, each Goal should be SMART – i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound.

Some examples of specific changes to the Goals that could be considered in the review include: addressing threatened species and active management of reserves in the conservation goal; separating goals for plantation and native forest wood production; and creating new goals to address climate change and forest management by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many of the current Goals, including those for integrated and coordinated decision making and management, private native forests, and tourism and other economic and social opportunities, need modernising to cover a broader range of forest tenures, uses and values.

Effective and appropriately resourced stakeholder consultation across all forest-interest groups is essential to a review of the NFPS, including the forest and fire management sector, forestry academics and specialists, environmental non-government organisations, forest industries, Traditional Owner groups, community groups and bush user groups.

Further reading

Commonwealth of Australia. 1992. National Forest Policy Statement: a new focus for Australia's forests. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service. http://www.agriculture.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/forestry/australiasforest-policies/nat_nfps.pdf

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