



Australian Government  
Department of Agriculture

# Regional Forest Agreements – an overview and history



© Commonwealth of Australia 2015.

### Ownership of intellectual property rights

Unless otherwise noted, copyright (and any other intellectual property rights, if any) in this publication is owned by the Commonwealth of Australia (referred to as the Commonwealth).

### Creative Commons licence

All material in this publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia Licence, save for content supplied by third parties, logos and the Commonwealth Coat of Arms.



Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia Licence is a standard form licence agreement that allows you to copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this publication provided you attribute the work. A summary of the licence terms is available from [creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/deed.en](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/deed.en). The full licence terms are available from [creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode).

### Cataloguing data

This publication (and any material sourced from it) should be attributed as: Department of Agriculture 2015, *Regional Forest Agreements – an overview and history*. CC BY 3.0.

ISBN 978-1-7-6003-093-3 (online)

ISBN 978-1-7-6003-092-6 (print)

### Internet

*Regional Forest Agreements – an overview and history* is available at [agriculture.gov.au](http://agriculture.gov.au)

### Contact

Department of Agriculture

Postal address GPO Box 858  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

Web [agriculture.gov.au](http://agriculture.gov.au)

Inquiries regarding the licence and any use of this document should be sent to [copyright@agriculture.gov.au](mailto:copyright@agriculture.gov.au)

The Australian Government acting through the Department of Agriculture has exercised due care and skill in the preparation and compilation of the information and data in this publication. Notwithstanding, the Department of Agriculture, its employees and advisers disclaim all liability, including liability for negligence, for any loss, damage, injury, expense or cost incurred by any person as a result of accessing, using or relying upon any of the information or data in this publication to the maximum extent permitted by law.

**The paper for this publication was sourced from 100% Australian fibre.**



Premium grade jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) timber from Western Australia.

Photo credit: Forest Products Commission, Western Australia

# Contents

Regional Forest Agreements – an overview and history	1
National Forest Policy Statement	3
Developing the Regional Forest Agreements	4
Regional Forest Agreement commitments	5
Threatened species management under the Regional Forest Agreement framework	6
Day-to-day forest management	6
Regional Forest Agreement reviews	7
Regional Forest Agreement extension	7
References	7
More information	7





Tall open eucalypt forest, Victoria.

Photo credit: Michael F Ryan



# Regional Forest Agreements – an overview and history

Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) are 20-year plans, each agreed between the Australian Government and a state government, for the productive use and conservation of Australia's native forests. They were developed to provide a long-term solution to decades of debate about access to and use of Australia's forests. RFAs seek to balance competing economic, social and environmental demands on forests by setting obligations and commitments for forest management that deliver:

- certainty of resource access and supply to industry—building investment confidence
- ecologically sustainable forest management—ensuring forests are appropriately managed and regenerated
- an expanded and permanent forest conservation estate—to provide for the protection of Australia's unique forest biodiversity.

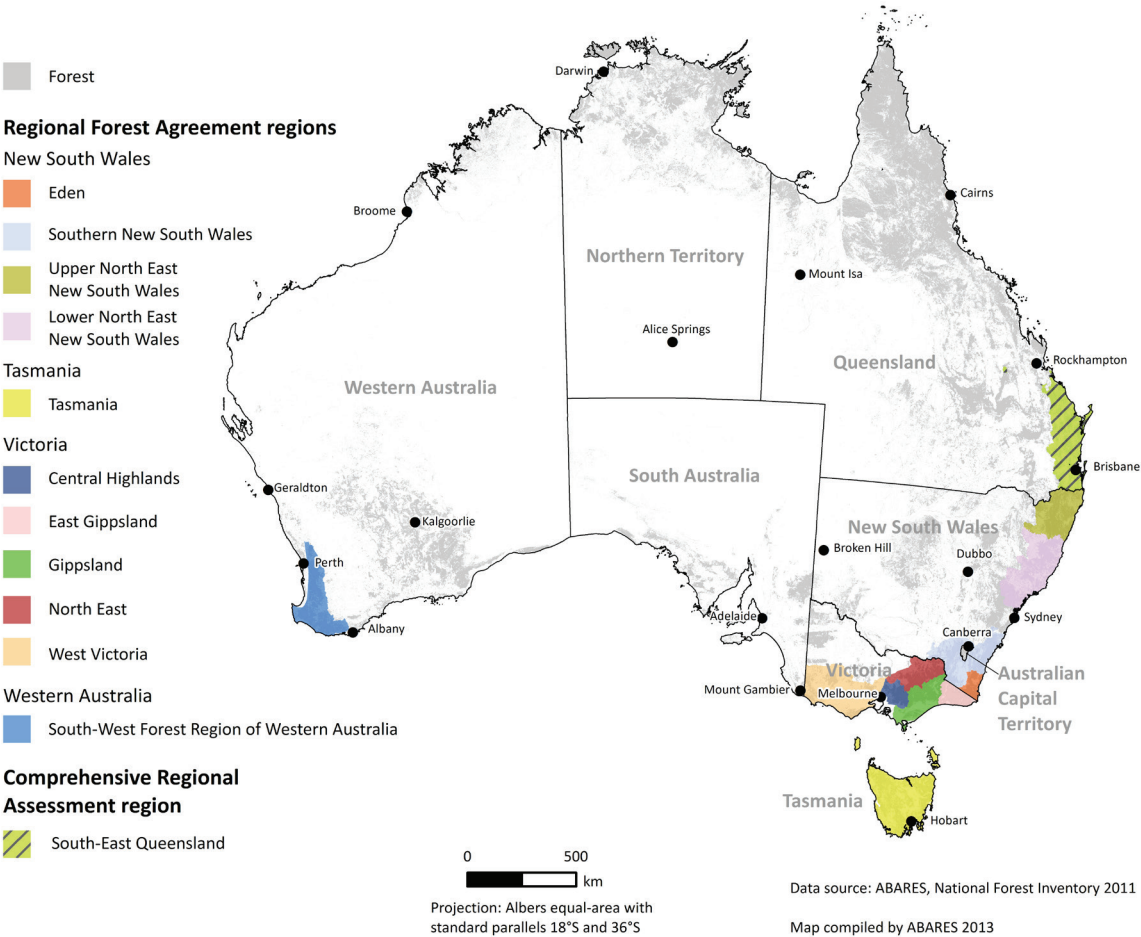
Ten RFAs were progressively signed between 1997 and 2001. They cover commercial native forestry regions—five in Victoria, three in New South Wales and one each in Western Australia and Tasmania (Map 1). The Australian and Queensland governments completed a Comprehensive Regional Assessment for South-East Queensland but did not sign an RFA.



**Unloading hardwood sawlogs from a truck at a sawmill, southern New South Wales.**

Photo credit: Wendy Whitby

MAP 1 Regional Forest Agreement regions



Note: The RFA for North East New South Wales comprises two sub regions: Upper North East and Lower North East.  
Source: Montreal Process Implementation Group for Australia and National Forest Inventory Steering Committee 2013

The 10 RFA regions cover 39.2 million hectares, including 22.3 million hectares (18 per cent) of Australia's forests. The forests in RFA regions comprise 21.0 million hectares of native forest and 1.3 million hectares of plantation forest.

RFAs implement the Australian and state governments' commitment to ecologically sustainable forest management, as identified in the National Forest Policy Statement. This statement aims to optimise the benefits to the community by ensuring that Australia's forests are managed for all their values and uses.



## National Forest Policy Statement

The National Forest Policy Statement was signed by the Australian Government and all mainland states in 1992 and by Tasmania in 1995. It gives effect to the Global Statement of Principles on Forests and related conventions signed by Australia at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It sets out a shared vision for managing Australia's forests and achieving ecologically sustainable forest management, and identifies 11 goals to achieve this:

1. **Conservation**—maintaining an extensive and permanent native forest estate to conserve the full suite of economic, social and environmental values for current and future generations.
2. **Wood production and industry development**—developing internationally competitive and sustainable forest industries, maximising value-adding and the efficient use of wood resources.
3. **Integrated and coordinated decision-making and management**—reducing duplication in government land use decision-making to achieve agreed and durable land use decisions.
4. **Private native forests**—ensuring that private native forests are maintained and managed in an ecologically sustainable manner, as part of the permanent native forest estate.
5. **Plantations**—expanding Australia's commercial plantations to provide an additional, economically viable wood resource and rehabilitating cleared agricultural land.
6. **Water supply and catchment management**—ensuring the availability of reliable, high-quality water supplies from forested land and protecting catchment values.
7. **Tourism and other economic and social opportunities**—sustainably managing Australia's forests for a range of uses, including tourism and recreation.
8. **Employment, workforce education and training**—expanding the employment opportunities and skills base of people working in forest management and forest industries.
9. **Public awareness, education and involvement**—fostering community support for ecologically sustainable forest management and inviting public participation in decision-making.
10. **Research and development**—increasing Australia's national forest research and development effort to support forest management, conservation and product development.
11. **International responsibilities**—promoting conservation and sustainable use of forests in other countries and meeting Australia's obligations under relevant international agreements.



## Developing the Regional Forest Agreements

Each RFA was developed following a Comprehensive Regional Assessment of forest values for each RFA region. This included extensive consultation with the community about how they valued and used forests.

### Comprehensive Regional Assessments

Assessments were undertaken between 1995 and 2000 to determine the values and uses of the forests in each RFA region. They examined: timber harvesting, regional employment, biodiversity conservation, wilderness, water catchment protection, tourism, recreation, and cultural and heritage values.

These assessments drew on commissioned studies, technical reports and extensive stakeholder consultation. They involved around 50 projects in disciplines such as biology, ecology, economics and sociology.

Stakeholders put forward their views about future forest management during meetings with local government, industry, unions, regional economic development organisations, conservation groups, Aboriginal Land Councils and members of the community.

The RFAs firmly established a holistic approach to forest management with the inclusion of environment and heritage values. The knowledge base developed through the Comprehensive Regional Assessments continues to inform management of forests in RFA regions.

Comprehensive Regional Assessments collated information that helped delineate:

- multiple-use public forests available for timber harvesting
- a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system, which was established to provide for the protection of biodiversity, old-growth forests and wilderness.

These assessments also provided information on plantation and privately owned forests.

### Multiple-use public forests

These are state forests and timber production reserves and other areas of public forest where timber harvesting is permitted. Of the 22.3 million hectares of forests in RFA regions, 30 per cent are multiple-use public forests. A small area of multiple-use public forest is harvested each year and must then be regenerated. This allows multiple-use public forests in RFA regions to supply timber, sustain a functioning forest ecosystem and host other commercial and non-commercial forest uses.

### Comprehensive Adequate and Representative reserve system

In 1997 the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council and the Ministerial Council of Forestry, Fisheries and Aquaculture established the National Forest Policy Statement Implementation Sub-committee to develop the National Forest Reserve Criteria. These criteria provided guidance and targets for selecting forest to protect biodiversity, old growth and wilderness values. Using the criteria, a CAR reserve system was identified and established in each RFA region that:

- included the full range of forest communities (comprehensive)
- maintained the ecological viability of forest species (adequate)
- reasonably reflected the biodiversity of forest communities (representative).



The CAR reserve system comprises:

- formal reserves, such as national parks
- informal reserves set aside for conservation purposes within multiple-use public forests
- forests protected by specific operating instructions—for example, protecting habitat trees and nearby vegetation during a harvesting event.

When the RFAs were signed between 1997 and 2001, around 3.3 million hectares of native forest previously available for timber production was transferred into conservation reserves, increasing the reserve system by 44 per cent.

Under each RFA, the CAR reserve system is the primary mechanism to provide for the protection of biodiversity, old-growth forests and wilderness values. It is complemented by the ecologically sustainable management of multiple-use public forests in each RFA region.

## Regional Forest Agreement commitments

The RFAs describe the commitments made by each government to achieve sustainable forest management. The key elements are:

- developing internationally competitive and sustainable forest products industries
- establishing the CAR reserve system
- establishing fully integrated and strategic forest management systems capable of responding to new information.

The Australian Government's RFA commitments included providing over \$200 million through industry adjustment programmes to promote investment in value-adding projects from a smaller resource base and increased regional employment.

Forestry operations in an RFA region are not subject to part 3 of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* or the requirement to licence wood exports under the *Export Control Act 1982*, thus removing the Australian Government from day-to-day forest management in recognition that:

- comprehensive regional assessments, conducted before each RFA was signed, addressed the economic, social and environmental impacts of forestry operations
- the CAR reserve system and ecologically sustainable forest management protect the environment.

The states' RFA commitments include:

- providing ongoing responsibility for day-to-day forest management
- providing certainty of resource access and specifying harvest volumes for industry
- establishing and maintaining reserves
- protecting threatened species
- ensuring ongoing monitoring and evaluation
- developing, revising and implementing forest management plans and codes of practice under relevant state government regulations.

## Threatened species management under the Regional Forest Agreement framework

The RFAs provide for the protection of threatened or rare species and ecological communities. Each RFA lists the priority species and ecological communities within that region and specifies ways to provide for their protection. These include:

- protecting forests in the CAR reserve system
- developing recovery plans and threat abatement plans consistent with the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and state-based legislation
- prescribing management requirements—for example preserving key features and habitats such as important nesting and foraging sites.

The RFAs also provide for continuous improvement and adaptive forest management when new information that impacts on forest management becomes available. Changes to the management of threatened species under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* or state-based legislation can be incorporated into public forest management frameworks without requiring a change to the RFAs.

## Day-to-day forest management

The RFAs guide management and use of forest resources in the RFA regions but they are not detailed forest management plans. State governments have day-to-day forest management responsibility, which is implemented through legislation, forest management plans that cover public production forests and reserves, and codes of practice. Under each RFA, the Australian Government has accredited the states' forest management systems to deliver ecologically sustainable forest management.

State agencies impose limits on the areas of multiple-use public native forest available for wood production and the volume of timber that can be harvested for sustainable yield. Sustainable yield is calculated to maintain wood supply in perpetuity and protect major ecological functions across the multiple-use public native forest estate. Codes of practice define, within allocated harvest areas, how and where the forest may be harvested, what must be protected during harvesting and what other precautions are needed to protect the environment. Codes of practice also apply to forest management on private land. Together, these controls ensure Australia's reputation for supplying ecologically sustainable wood products.



**A sustainably managed Spotted Gum forest, northern NSW.**

Photo credit: Ian Ruscoe



## Regional Forest Agreement reviews

The Australian and state governments measure, monitor and report on forests in RFA regions. They use internationally accepted criteria and indicators to assess the sustainability of forest management.

The Australian and state governments agreed that the implementation of the RFAs' milestones, commitments and obligations would be reviewed every five years. Five-yearly RFA reviews have been completed in each RFA state. Tasmania is currently undertaking its third five-yearly review and the remaining RFA states are assembling information in preparation for their third five-yearly reviews.

The first-step in undertaking an RFA review is for the Australian and relevant state government to sign a Scoping Agreement. The Scoping Agreement sets out the arrangements agreed between the governments for undertaking the review.

The Australian Government and the relevant state government then release an implementation report and invite stakeholders to respond through public submissions.

A reviewer examines the implementation report and the public submissions, and then presents a report which is tabled in the Commonwealth Parliament. The Australian Government and the relevant state government then consider the reviewer's recommendations and publish a joint government response.

In addition to the RFA reviews, state forest management systems, plans and codes of practice are also subject to regular reviews. These reviews underpin adaptive forest management. They ensure that the latest information can be incorporated into forest management systems without needing to amend the RFAs.

## Regional Forest Agreement extension

As part of each RFA's third five-yearly review, the Australian and state governments can agree a process to extend the RFA.

In October 2013, the Australian Government committed to maintaining its support for long-term RFAs by seeking to extend and establish 20-year rolling lives for each RFA.

This will be achieved by extending RFAs for five years following the successful completion of each RFA's five-yearly review.

## References

Commonwealth of Australia 1992, *National Forest Policy Statement – A New Focus for Australia's Forests*, Canberra, Australia, available at [agriculture.gov.au/forestry/policies/statement](http://agriculture.gov.au/forestry/policies/statement).

Montreal Process Implementation Group 2008, *Australia's Sustainable Forest Management Framework of Criteria and Indicators 2008*, Policy Guidelines, Canberra, Australia, available at [agriculture.gov.au/abares/forestsaustralia/framework](http://agriculture.gov.au/abares/forestsaustralia/framework).

Montreal Process Implementation Group for Australia and National Forest Inventory Steering Committee, 2013, *Australia's State of the Forests Report 2013*, ABARES, Canberra.

## More information

[agriculture.gov.au/forestry](http://agriculture.gov.au/forestry)

---

### The 'Biosphere' Graphic Element

The biosphere is a key part of the department's visual identity. Individual biospheres are used to visually describe the diverse nature of the work we do as a department, in Australia and internationally.



---

### Department of Agriculture

Postal address     GPO Box 858 Canberra ACT 2601  
Switchboard       +61 2 6272 3933



---

[agriculture.gov.au](http://agriculture.gov.au)