

Background

Regional Forest Agreements are a key part of national forest policy as agreed by the Commonwealth, States and Territories in 1992 in the National Forest Policy Statement. The Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) for the West region will be one of five RFAs between Victoria and the Commonwealth.

The RFA will last for up to 20 years and aims to provide certainty for industry, conservation and local communities. It has three main objectives:

- to protect environmental values in a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) Reserve System based on nationally agreed criteria;
- to encourage job creation and growth in forest-based industries, including wood products, tourism and minerals; and
- to manage all native forests in an ecologically sustainable way.

The JANIS criteria aim to reserve 15 per cent of each forest type as existed before European arrival, 60 per cent or more of old-growth forest and at least 90 per cent of high quality wilderness.

The criteria will be applied as far as is practicable on public land, and will also take account of social and economic considerations. ('JANIS' stands for the Joint ANZECC/MCFFA National Forest Policy Statement implementation Subcommittee, which developed the criteria.)

The RFA process has three stages - the Comprehensive Regional Assessment, the Directions Report, and development of the final Agreement.

Victorian RFA Regions

Victoria has five RFA regions:

- East Gippsland (signed 3 February 1997);
- Central Highlands (signed 27 March 1998);
- North East (scheduled for completion in August 1999);
- Gippsland (scheduled for completion in December 1999); and
- West (scheduled for completion in December 1999).

Stages in the RFA Process

Comprehensive Regional Assessment (CRA)

Volume One of the CRA report covers the assessments of the region's economic, social and resource values, water and catchments, tourism and recreation, minerals and the first stage of biodiversity information.

A second volume of the CRA report will be published in September containing further environmental assessments, including that of the region's national estate values. The CRA provides the information base for the RFA and both Governments will consult widely with the community and other interested stakeholder groups as they develop the Agreement.

RFA Directions Report

The Directions Report will outline:

- ❖ proposals for the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System;
- ❖ how the proposed CAR Reserve System addresses the national forest reserve criteria;
- ❖ the elements of ecologically sustainable forest management (ESFM) which are part of the RFA;
- ❖ industry development opportunities; and
- ❖ the links between the RFA process and other statutory processes, particularly environmental impact assessment, World Heritage, National Estate and endangered species.

RFA Finalisation

Following consideration of the community's response to the Directions Report, the Commonwealth and State Governments will negotiate the Regional Forest Agreement. The RFA is scheduled for completion in December 1999.

Consultation

Workshops will be held shortly after the release of the CRA report and will familiarise stakeholders with the information it contains. Community and stakeholder groups will also be consulted both during the development of the Directions Report and following its release through a series of workshops held in the West and Melbourne over the next few months. These consultations will focus on the issues that need to be addressed in the RFA. Any gaps or deficiencies identified at the CRA stage can be taken into account in the development of the Directions Report.

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All reports for the West RFA will be available on the internet as they are released. The address is: <http://www.rfa.gov.au>

