



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 is one of five RFAs between Victoria and the Commonwealth.

RFAs apply for up to 20 years and provide certainty for industry, conservation and local communities. They have 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 National Reserve 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 have been applied as far as is practicable on public land, and also take account of social and economic considerations.

Victorian RFA Regions

Victoria has five RFAs:

- East Gippsland (completed February 1997);
- Central Highlands (completed March 1998);
- North East (completed August 1999);
- Gippsland (completed March 2000); and
- West (completed March 2000).

The RFA Process

The RFA process for West Victoria had three stages - the Comprehensive Regional Assessment, the preparation of a Consultation Paper, and development of the final Agreement all of which involved close consultation with stakeholders and communities.

Comprehensive Regional Assessment (CRA)

The CRA provided the information base for the RFA, with scientific assessments of

- biodiversity
- old-growth forest
- wilderness
- economic
- world heritage
- social
- resource management
- national estate

It drew on the expertise of scientists, academics and stakeholder groups as well as tapping into the local knowledge of the community. Workshops were held shortly after the release of each of two volumes of the CRA report to familiarise stakeholders with the information they contained and identify any gaps or deficiencies in the data.

RFA Consultation Paper

Drawing on the CRA and discussions with stakeholder groups, governments published a Consultation Paper and called for public submissions over seven-weeks. A West RFA Independent Panel was established to accept submissions and to hold a series of public hearings in Melbourne and the region. The Panel then reported on issues raised in public submissions for their consideration as the RFA was finalised.

RFA Finalisation

Following consideration of the panel's report, the Commonwealth and State Governments finalised the Regional Forest Agreement.