

## Benefits of producing Australia's State of the Forests Reports

Prepared by the *Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences* on behalf of the *National Forest Inventory Steering Committee* and the *Montréal Process Implementation Group for Australia*, and endorsed for publication by the *Forestry and Forest Products Committee* in November 2015

### *Overview*

The Australia's State of the Forests Report (SOFR) series is the mechanism by which the state of Australia's forests, and changes over time in a range of social, economic and environmental forest-related indicators, are reported to government and industry stakeholders and the broader community. The SOFR series meets Australia's formal national reporting requirements for forest information, and the data assembled for SOFR are also used to meet Australia's international forest-related reporting requirements.

### *Characteristics of the SOFR series*

#### 1) Comprehensive

The SOFR series is based on a major national assembly of data on a wide range of indicators of sustainable forest management. SOFR is the only comprehensive compilation of national data and information on Australia's forests, and as such is the best available snapshot of the state of Australia's forests and the best presentation of trends over time.

#### 2) Credible

The SOFR series is an authoritative and trusted source of information on Australia's forests. It has gained this status by presenting the best available data and information from national and state and territory sources. SOFR is authored by two committees (the Montréal Process Implementation Group for Australia, and the National Forest Inventory Steering Committee) each containing national and state and territory representatives, and published by ABARES, the research bureau of the Australian Government Department of Agriculture. The framework of criteria and indicators used in the SOFR series was developed under the international Montréal Process.

#### 3) Consistent

SOFR is structured according to a consistent and systematic format under seven separate criteria of sustainable forest management, covering the biophysical, social, economic and policy aspects of forests. Within each of the seven criteria, various indicators (44 in total) address specific forest parameters and values. This framework remained unchanged between SOFR 2008 and SOFR 2013, and gives a familiar and easily navigated layout for the complex range of information and data presented. Repeated reporting against this consistent structure enables patterns and trends over time to be revealed.

#### 4) Accessible

Each SOFR indicator contains sufficient explanatory narrative to allow the reader to understand the data being presented. The data and narratives are also summarised and synthesised into Key Points (for each indicator), Key Findings (for each criterion), and an Executive Summary. References, a glossary and an index are included at the end of the report.

#### 5) Available

SOFR 1998, SOFR 2003, SOFR 2008 and SOFR 2013 are available at the Forests Australia website ([www.daff.gov.au/forestsaustralia](http://www.daff.gov.au/forestsaustralia)) and the ABARES publications website ([www.daff.gov.au/abares/publications](http://www.daff.gov.au/abares/publications)). SOFR 2013 and a separate Executive Summary are available in both pdf and accessible MsWord formats, as individual chapters as well as single

documents, and are also available in hard copy. Key spatial datasets, including forest cover, forest type, forest tenure and Indigenous managed forests, have also been published.

### *Usage of the SOFR series*

The SOFR series is a widely used resource for understanding the multiple values of Australia's forests, as well as the state of these values, and demonstrating progress in sustainable forest management. SOFR is of importance to, and serves the diverse purposes of, many different people and organisations throughout Australia and overseas, such as:

- Australian, state and territory government ministers
- Australian, state and territory government agencies, including regional development organisations
- parliamentary and other enquiries (SOFR 2008 was widely cited in a number of state and Australian Government parliamentary inquiries into forests and forest industries)
- policy-makers
- forest planners and natural resource management planners
- forest growers and managers
- forest industry and business managers, including in the processing, manufacturing and importing sectors, often during the preparation of proposals and business cases
- academia, researchers, consultants and forest industry analysts
- non-governmental organisations
- professional societies.

### *Benefits of producing the SOFR series*

The comprehensive and consistent nature of the SOFR series described above, and the above wide range of users, leads to the following benefits of producing the SOFR series:

1) Informed policy and informed decision-making

SOFR directly assists policy-makers to develop sound future policies and programs in relation to sustainable forest management, access to forest resources, meeting market demand for forest products, effective forest conservation strategies, and community concerns with forest management.

2) Informed industry development and decision-making, regionally, nationally and internationally

The data and analyses presented in SOFR support the development of viable forest industries, and significantly improves the capacity to inform decision-makers about forest management in Australia.

3) Improved trade and market access

The publication of SOFR provides reassurance and confidence to local, national and international communities about the management of Australia's forests, and so builds support for continued access to forest resources and continued active forest management.

4) Informed research and analysis by consultants and academics

SOFR provides a consistent, authoritative and comprehensive source of national forest-related data suitable for use in a wide variety of analyses for a wide range of purposes.

5) An informed community

Informing the broader community about the state of Australia's forests is the main legislative driver for preparing SOFR. The publication of SOFR ensures that community debate about the role and management of Australia's forests can be based on appropriate data, and raises community confidence in forest management. The general acceptance of the content of the SOFR series suggests that this has been achieved.

The broad range of forest values on which information is collected and reported in SOFR in an integrated fashion ensures that stakeholders, forest managers and decision-makers are aware of the connected nature of the ecological, biophysical, social and economic aspects of Australia's forests. Building this awareness of the diversity of values of Australia's forests improves the communication of the state of Australia's forests to the broader community, and informs the wider community debate.

*Other outcomes from preparation and production of the SOFR series*

1) Fulfils national legislative and policy obligations

The five-yearly SOFR series fulfils commitments under the Commonwealth *Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002* (RFA Act) and the *National Forest Policy Statement* (NFPS).

The RFA Act commits the Commonwealth Minister for forestry "to establish a comprehensive and publicly available source of information for national and regional monitoring and reporting in relation to all of Australia's forests; and to support decision-making in relation to all of Australia's forests".

The NFPS commits the nine signatory governments to provide through their forest management agencies "appropriate information from which to produce and publish a 'state of the forests' review every five years". The 'reviews' are to provide accountability to the community on the stewardship of forests and demonstrate ecologically sustainable forest management.

2) Efficient compilation of data

The formal structure of the Montréal Process framework of criteria and indicators facilitates collection and supply of data by the Australian, state and territory government agencies. The resultant national compilation of data leads to a greater understanding within jurisdictions of the purpose and importance of forest monitoring and reporting.

3) Efficient input into national reporting

The data and information in each of SOFR 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013 have underpinned a number of national reporting processes and products. These include Australia's State of the Environment Reports, national environmental accounts, and other domestic reports. SOFR 2008 was widely cited in *Australia State of the Environment 2011*. SOFR is also the main source for non-economic forest-related data in the *Australia's Forests at a Glance* booklet series.

4) Efficient state and regional reporting

In addition to SOFR, Australia's Montréal Process criteria and indicator framework is adopted in several state reporting processes (Victoria's State of the Forests Report, Tasmania's State of the forests report, the New South Wales Seeing Reports, and the Western Australia Forest Management Plan) and for reporting against each Regional Forest Agreement. This alignment and common platform provides consistency in assembled information, and a shared approach for measuring and reporting forest attributes. The connection between the state, national and international levels of reporting aligns data requirements, and increases the efficiency of producing each report.

5) Compatible with certification frameworks

The criteria and requirements in the Australian Forestry Standard (AFS) for forest management are constructed around the Montréal Process criteria that are used for reporting in the SOFR series. This provides AFS certification with a high-level linkage to the sustainability criteria adopted by Australia's states and territories, and allows consistent assessment and management of forest values.

6) Efficient international reporting

SOFR is Australia's key source for international forest reporting processes. This includes Australia's responses to the five-yearly Global Forest Resources Assessments led by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization for 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015, which were based primarily on data and information from SOFR 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013 respectively. Compilation of SOFR allows efficient responses to these international reporting requirements, as evidenced by no additional requests for data from state and territory governments being necessary to prepare these responses.

The preparation of SOFR using Australia's Montréal Process criteria and indicator structure also enables SOFR to serve as Australia's country report to the international *Montréal Process Working Group on Criteria and Indicators for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Temperate and Boreal Forests*, of which Australia is a founding member.

The SOFR series has also been the source for responses to requests for national forest information from the United Nations Forum on Forests, the Convention of Biological Diversity, and other requesters.

*Recognition of benefits*

At its release the Hon. Richard Colbeck, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture described SOFR 2013 as:

“a huge resource for people in the forestry industry”

“a message for the broader community”

and, in regard to sustainable forest management,

“a benchmark for what's published around the world”.

A wide set of accolades have subsequently been documented from the SOFR user community. Examples include:

“Just wanted to say how great it's been having the 2013 SOFR. I've referred to the report and the online version for various bits of research in the last month. A great reference all round” (from a Senior Planning Officer in a state Environmental Protection Agency),

“as comprehensive and informative a document as ever” (from a senior academic), and

“excellent report produced by your country” (from the National Sustainability Program Leader in an overseas Forest Service).

The national forest cover and forest type spatial datasets in the National Forest Inventory have been identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as an Essential Statistical Asset, and are foundation spatial datasets in the land cover component of ANZLIC – the Spatial Information Council.