

Background

A joint policy statement was negotiated between the Commonwealth and the States in 1992 and after further negotiation finally signed by the last State in 1995 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992, 1995). The Statement rests on three main principles as the basis for sustainable forest management:

- maintaining ecological processes,
- maintaining biological diversity, and
- managing for the full range of environmental, economic and social benefits.

The Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process commenced in 1997 and sought to achieve

two main objectives that extended or amplified those set out in the National Forest Policy Statement, each being an attempt to assuage one of the two sides in what had become a highly polarised debate:

1. Establish a comprehensive, adequate and representative national reserve system.
2. Provide greater certainty regarding the native forest resource available for wood production by integrating industry and conservation policy and by encouraging downstream processing of the native forest resource, and the export of unique Australian wood products.

The RFA and the 2009 Victorian Timber Industry Strategy provide the policy framework for the management of State forests for timber production, from which long-term supply agreements with processors have been established.

This is the first review of the RFA for the Central Highlands despite the RFA stipulates review every five years. Since the induction of the RFA there have no indication of how this RFA is performing. There was no public consultation in regards to delaying the RFA review and many community groups and community members have no confidence in the state governments will to change and improve the RFA should the review show a lack of performance. This is an appalling approach to governing Victoria's forests and poor performance by the state government.

Currents Risks of the RFAs

The review of RFA for the Central Highlands needs to be reviewed in the context of economic, social and environment risk to the public posed by the logging industry.

Economic risk:

VicForests have been underperforming economically for many years now and are regularly registering yearly losses amounting to millions of dollars. It has become a public financial liability and a reflection of the unviable nature of the logging industry itself hence the need to reform the logging industry and VicForest to ensure more sustainable and responsible approaches both economically and ecologically.

Social risk:

The February fires of 2009 caused immense devastation at a social level. The loss of lives and livelihoods will stay in the minds of Australians for many decades. Evidence has been presented to the Royal Bushfire Commission highlighting that logging is changing the microclimate in forests and dries the understory making the forests more fire prone. The forests of the Central Highlands are in the high-risk category of moist eucalypt forests which when disturbed influence the natural resilience to fires. Maintaining the status quo and allowing business as usual will deliver a dire risk to rural communities in the Central Highlands.

Environmental Risks

The Central Highlands is Melbourne's water catchment areas and provides an important water supply for millions of Victorians. Large areas of forests in the water catchments were destroyed by the February fires but this did not urge the state government to act with caution and logging continued without any clear indication of the ecological damage from the fires. According to a recently appointed government consultant salvage logging put water quality in the Yarra river and its tributary at great risk but this too failed to halt logging. Sinclair Knight, was part of the Yarra river health assessment, highlighted "Erosion, and therefore sediment input, from bushfire-affected areas will be exacerbated by salvage logging," and "Removal of standing and fallen logs from burnt areas represents a particularly large threat because if left [in place] these logs would trap sediment and limit the amount of material entering tributary streams and ultimately the Yarra." Low flows and high sediment levels have already been blamed for the possible loss of some fish species from sections of the Yarra, and the report said a ban on salvage logging would give the fish a better chance of survival.

Recommendations:

Against the above background and highlighted risks the RFA for the Central Highlands has failed all its objectives. The state government is not managing Victoria's forests and water catchments in accordance to the principles of sustainability when adhering to a forest agreement that:

- is not responsive to the biggest natural disaster in the history of Australia nor does it have any mechanism to put in place risk reduction measures;
- have no meaningful public consultation regarding expansion of logging activities (including salvage logging activities);
- lacks economic responsibility and viability;
- has no mechanism to make changes if its performance is in doubt,
- is neglecting its own performance review requirements.

Against the points made above *Anonymous* sees the RFA for the Central Highland as a protective measure for the logging industry only, not a protective measure for forests nor for the community.

Against the abovementioned risks *Anonymous* calls of the state government to discontinue the RFA and phase logging out of the water catchments over a 9 month period and locate logging to low risk areas where logging activities are not posing another natural fire disaster, economic liability and ecological compromise.