

# Central Highlands Regional Forest Agreement

Review submitted by

Pat. Liffman,

30.000 ha. of the Wombat State Forest are in Woodlands Ward, Shire of Moorabool, 36.000 ha. are in Hepburn Shire, whilst 5.6 ha are in the Shire of Macedon Ranges. On a bi-monthly basis, I meet with representatives of DSE, Parks Vic, local councils, the Great Dividing Trail Association and Landcare, when we convene to discuss tourism/forest maintenance. This creates an opportunity for attendees to obtain a joint perspective of forest health and forest obligations.

1974, my son Karl, a final year Burnley College student discovered that the Victorian Forestry Commission was about to convert the Wombat State Forest from Blackwood to Mount Macedon into one massive pine plantation. In response to our submissions, the Victorian Land Conservation Council vetoed the Forest Commission's plan by declaring the entire 72.000 ha. of the Wombat State Forest to remain hardwood, whilst the Victorian State Government officially acknowledged the future tourism potential of the Blackwood area.

Prime Minister, Paul Keating established the Regional Forest Agreement which was upheld by the consecutive Howard government. During January 2000, Mrs. Catherine Masters and her colleagues from the Prime Minister's team and Cabinet were hosted by Tim Anderson and Loris Duclos of the Wombat Forest Society to a series of public meetings throughout the Wombat State Forest. Compensation of \$42,600,000 from the Feds plus \$20,000,000 from the Victorian State Government were expended upon assistance for displaced mill owners and timber workers.

The 'Response to the RFA document' by Loris Duclos is a superb analysis by an intelligent lady with years of experience concerning the Wombat State Forest's history.

Page 10. para 6..Despite millions of dollars flowing into Consolidated Revenue from the sale of woodchips to Japan, not one additional cent was diverted towards weed eradication. June 2004 at my request, the Member for Melton, Don Nardella visited Barry's Reef and was shown hectares of combustible gorse. In 2006, *funded by money from Community Forest Management*, the *Blackwood/Barry's Reef 10 Year Weed Eradication Program* began with DSE conducting systematic weed reduction via a groomer and seasonal spraying programs. Although gorse was growing to tree height at the Great Sultan mine site, *DPI Ballarat was reluctant in taking action against Blackwood Goldmines NL* who had failed to clean up a former mine site, resulting in gorse infesting my adjacent land. DPI Ballarat's weeds are infiltrating the adjacent forest.

Page 11, para 3. After 2005, no thinning has ever occurred in this area. The Wombat State Forest urgently requires thinning of even aged regrowth which retards water absorption to the aquifers after rain.(see photographs).

Page 14, para 4 –This Central Highlands RFA prescription has obviously been written and endorsed by bureaucrats within the Central Highlands RFA.

Page 19. There is considerable public concern about the massive quantities of good timber being logged for export in Gippsland and Vic. Forest's autonomy.

Retired foresters say that too much viable timber which has been locked up in EVC's is falling over or has already fallen over.

Page 23, para 3 – "*public participation and public consultation since implementation*": Where?

Page 24 para 2 – Which milestone? DSE assessing DSE? Yes, if the assessors are kosher. There are some wonderful people in DSE – but others are using the system for themselves.

Page 25, para 9 – Dissolution of the LCC was a political blunder by the Kennett Government.

Page 27, para 3. It is widely acknowledged that Vic Forests is shutting its eyes to the fact that excessive logging of very old trees is taking place. Page 30, para 3. How good is the assessment? A lifetime observer tells me that only once in fifty years, has he seen one particular orchid flower then die the same day. This man has become so cynical about DSE (25 years of Shelterwood logging in the Wombat etc), he has given up and unwilling to participate in this report, except to say that it is ages since he saw a kingfisher, a sugar glider or a potoroo.

Page 31, para 3. Feral species: the place is out of control with black rabbits, no help from DPI, so when the feed dries up in winter, I shall have to take action. Foxes – they bark at night, feral cats are huge. Deer are proliferating, *Phytophthora cinnamoni* – plenty of it. With no natural predators, kangaroos are 300% in excess. Having spent most of 2009 in hospital with brain injury,( just as I had relaxed his leash, my dog chased a kangaroo near the house and dragged me with him). I have written to Minister Joe Helper that culling is not the answer, we need some form of biological control.

Page 35 – Milestones: Page 10, I referred to the *Blackwood/Barry's Reef 10 Year Weed Eradication Program*, organised by our Member for Melton, Don Nardella MP and financed, without consultation, from Community Forest Management funds. Since then, spraying around Barry's Reef has been with Good Neighbour. More recently, Melbourne Water has become involved, following the Werribee River and its tributaries. Forthcoming prescribed burns around Barry's Reef will help to mitigate gorse and pines. 2009, Minister Joe Helper (Agriculture) allocated \$50,000 to all rural councils, this year \$40,000 for control of recognised weeds such as serrated tussock, gorse and blackberry, but why is there no reference to *Vinca major*, *Galenia*, Hawthorn, Prairie Ground Cherry, *Agapanthus*, *Pinus radiata* etc. etc?

Page 36, para 2. **Water**. Following 25 years of Shelterwood1 logging in the Wombat, and cessation of work crews in the forest during June 2005, the forest needs thinning. Excessive even age regrowth is sucking up rainfall before it reaches the aquifers. Water bores, stock and domestic bores and illegal bores need more public scrutiny. 101 years ago, Government geologist E. J. Dunn wrote the following report:

**The Dunn Report: 20/5/1909:**

*"It is generally accepted that these springs do not flow as freely as formerly and the country around Daylesford has become much drier than in the first years of settlement.*

*When settlement began at Daylesford, the country was covered by a dense forest growth, many of the timber trees attaining to a great height. This has been*

*been removed to allow of the cultivation of the ground for grazing purposes, for mine timber, for building purposes and for fuel and the forest has been drawn upon until the original growth has been entirely removed, and where there is any forest remaining, it consists of an after growth of saplings. The cutting of races and driving of tunnels has also helped to diminish the water supply. The value of trees as a means of condensing moisture from the air is in proportion to the space they occupy in the atmosphere, and the present growth occupies but a fraction of what was occupied by the original forest."*

Page 51 – Correction para 3: The Feds. contributed \$42.6 dollars (not the states).

Obligation 3 and page 52, Obligation 2. "to improve the productive capacity of State Forests". A timber mill owner wanting to open his historic steam mill as a tourist attraction said "what's the use" when he was told he had to obtain a Planning Permit, a Flora and Fauna Study which normally costs around \$12,000, a Water flow report and he had to employ a qualified operator to mark the trees. What a joke! This miller comes from a family with generations of logging experience.

Page 54: Worker Assistance: some of those workers 'have done very well from the compensation deal'.

Pages 57 & 58: Blackwood Goldmines NL, Barry's Reef blatantly ignored orders from Minister Theo Theophanous to clean up their leaseholds.

Obligation 1, page 58 – DPI, in their Ballarat hide-away are not interested in world's best practice, or forcing Blackwood Goldmines to clean up their gorse which is invading the forest and adjacent properties.

2002, Minister John Thwaites was responsible for the establishment of Our Forests, Our Future and in 2003, Community Forest Management. Meetings with the interim and then the actual Stewardship Council, held on a monthly basis at DSE's Daylesford office were always marred by the demeanour of a small group of activists who would prolong the meetings until 1 am and one

lady had to endure the problem of her tyres being slashed. The Chair made no attempt to halt the activists, so around March 2010, the Working Groups resigned, leaving the Stewardship Council without a quorum, to continue our own themes – mine being Weeds, especially pine plantations. When the Member for Melton, Don Nardella phoned to tell me that Senior Forester, Andrew Maclean was resigning and I contacted Andrew to say “Farewell”, he replied “I’m just preparing a report for Minister Thwaites”. March 2007, after facilitator, Tim Anderson’s contract had been terminated, CFM collapsed. Under FOI, I discovered that Andrew Maclean

Had given a false report to Minister John Thwaites Midlands Coordinator, Peter Keppel promised our Landcare group that in the winter of 2007, DSE’s Groomer would be available to remove the pines. Peter resigned without honouring his promise. I am now negotiating with DSE about prescribed burns which will knock out a lot of pines.

Tourism/Wombat State Forest in the Blackwood area, is going well. The GDTA, DSE, Parks and Landcare convene on a bi-monthly basis at Blackwood to discuss Forest welfare. DSE is allocating \$200,000 towards upgrading the John Davies Loop Walking Track (see map), into which Moorabool Shire has been very financially supportive.

Around 2000, the popular Wombat Forest Drive was constructed and designed by former Forest Manager, Sharon Slater. Maps were printed and distributed by proprietors of the Blackwood Store. With change of ownership, this custom ceased. At a GDTA meeting after CFM had ceased, I asked DSE Forest Manager, Elizabeth Ashman, if DSE could print copies, she snapped “We don’t have the money!”

Forest status: Comments from an experienced Forest worker: “Nothing on tracks since logging stopped – bush needs cleaning-light burns at night, no experienced bush men in forest, there’s enough timber in uncut areas to maintain one local mill, no work crews, trees are dying in the bush, we need thinning crews with small machines”. I find most of the blokes to be great but some administrators have proven to be counter productive and arrogant.

Politics: My accident has delayed my plans to establish the South Wombat Forest Landcare Group, linking communities within the 30,000 ha. of the Wombat in Moorabool Shire. I avoid Hepburn Shire because it is littered with dangerous activists, some of whom were responsible for Working Groups to resign from CFM’s Council of Stewards. They are opposed to prescribed burns. They blockade DSE crews ready to do a prescribed burn and dart amongst the flames during burn-offs. One woman publicly objected to a burn near her home saying the smoke would affect her seven month old twins. When DSE offered to accommodate her in an hotel, she refused. Prior to the 2006 election, they ran a scare campaign which influenced the Government to shut down Dwyer’s timber mill in Daylesford. With one or two exceptions, they believe that theirs is a lifetime commitment which entitles them to accept Government financial support. Why should they work? And – they are smart.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the 'powers that be' for this opportunity to present a commentary about my beloved Wombat State Forest.

Pat. Liffman