INSTITUTE OF FORESTERS OF AUSTRALIA

Forest Policies for Consideration[1]

WELL MANAGED FORESTS

Since the turn of the 20th Century the Victorian government has aimed to have well managed forests. This was the goal of the *Forest Act (1907)* which established the State Forest Department and has remained the aim despite numerous changes to administrative arrangements through the years.

The first Conservator of Forests in Victoria was Hugh Mackay and he was charged not only with regulating economic production from forests but also fire protection and the protection of ecosystems. These outcomes reflect the aspirations of foresters in 2018 but we are lucky to understand far more about ecosystems, biodiversity, silviculture, timber and fibre production, fire mitigation, carbon sequestration and climate change.

The foresters of 2018 are far better equipped to provide advice to the Victorian government than Hugh Mackay was in 1907. What has remained constant despite the passage of time is a commitment to scientific, evidence-based decision making to ensure the health of our forests through this Century and beyond.

Well managed forests provide Victorians with economic, social and environmental values. Forests are important for carbon storage, greenhouse gas emissions mitigation and climate change adaptation.

Well managed forests maintain important biodiversity and are crucial components of state and national biodiversity conservation strategies, complementing the role of the forest conservation estate (national parks and similar reserves).

Aim of this paper

This paper provides information for consideration by Victoria's political parties in the lead up to the November 2018 election. Forest policy issues covered in this paper include:

- Forest fire management
- Native forest timber production
- Great Forest (and other) national park proposals
- Plantations and agroforestry
- Renewable energy generation using biomass
- Firewood, and
- Forestry education

[1] By the Victorian Division of the Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) - 3 August 2018

Policy Recommendations

- Adequate resources must be provided to protect people, property and forest biodiversity from bushfires. This includes evaluation of different fuel reduction techniques.
- Investment in building up a seed bank is needed to help regenerate State Forests and National Parks after incidents such as large-scale bushfires.
- There should be no net reduction in the area of State forest in Victoria.
- Significant funding is required to reforest areas of quality forest that have suffered regeneration failures due to bushfires, droughts, browsing animals, and lack of seed.
- The Victorian Government should oppose the Great Forest National Park proposal as it would significantly reduce social, environmental, and economic benefits from the Central Highlands forests.
- No additional national parks should be created in forested areas in Western Victoria.
- Increased investment, with government incentives, in hardwood and pine plantations, is needed to meet increasing demand for building materials and other timber and fibre products.
- Use of biomass from native forests, plantations and sawmills should be encouraged to generate renewable bio-energy. Incentives should be provided to establish bio-energy facilities in regional areas.
- Active, sustainable forest management, including wood production, should be highlighted and encouraged as an effective way to mitigate carbon emissions and boost carbon storage.
- Access to firewood (from harvesting or thinning) from native forests should be maintained and better regulated.
- Urgent attention is needed to address the shortage of trained foresters. New forestry courses could be based at the currently under-utilised Creswick Forestry School.
- More resources are needed to address lack of knowledge of the values provided by forests and forestry in schools and the general public.

FOREST FIRE MANAGEMENT

- Adequate resources must be provided to protect people, property and forest biodiversity from bushfires. This includes evaluation of different fuel reduction techniques.

- Investment in building up eucalypt seed banks is needed to help regenerate State Forests and National Parks after incidents such as large-scale bushfires

Large, severe bushfires impact on lives, property, timber supply, water catchments, carbon storage and biodiversity. Uncontrolled severe bushfire is the greatest and most likely threat to forest biodiversity.

The fire management skills of the traditional owners of the land need to be incorporated into forest fire management planning across the State. The traditional owners have unique skills and expertise in the management of fire in the landscape. Traditional burning is an integral part of sustainable forest management including greenhouse gas emission reduction, forest health and ecological values.

Government budgets for forest fire management should address a range of prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response activities. Whilst a rapid and thorough emergency response capability is appropriate, so too is forest fire prevention and hazard management. Forest fuel hazard management activities differ markedly from rural, farm and urban fire management and accordingly needs different skills, approaches and equipment.

The Victorian Bushfire Royal Commissioners recommended extensive fuel reduction burning to manage forest fuels far away from urban settlements. Failure to do so will lead to forest fires burning into our cities like they did in Canberra in 2003 and as recent fires in Portugal (2017), Greece (2015 and 2018), Canada (2017) and California (2017, 2018).

Every fire management program should include the protection of human life, property, economic and cultural values, social function and environmental values. Post-fires, the Government must prioritise forest and community recovery operations.

To protect life and landscape biodiversity, fire must be managed by professionally trained, experienced and accredited forest fire managers.

The IFA notes the development of the National Burning Project and supports the implementation of its principles and philosophies in all jurisdictions of Australia.

Adequate resources must be provided for coordinated research into, and systematic monitoring of, the effects of bushfires and different fuel reduction techniques. Additionally, adequate funding is required to ensure that there is a significant eucalypt seed bank which can be used to help regenerate large tracts of ash forest in State Forests and National Parks after future large-scale bushfires.

NATIVE FOREST TIMBER PRODUCTION

- There should be no net reduction in the area of State forest in Victoria.
- Significant funding is required to reforest areas of quality forest that have suffered regeneration failures due to bushfires, droughts, browsing animals, and lack of seed.

The demand for timber in building construction continues to increase. Native forest timber and other forest products are renewable, sustainable, have great beauty and low embodied energy compared to other building materials which helps to mitigate climate change.

In Victoria, the native timber industry, including dependent downstream industries, employs around 21 000 people. This industry requires long-term security of timber resources from native forests.

Over the past 20 years the production of hardwood sawlogs in Victoria has halved – from 550 000 m3 in the mid-1990s to 260 000 m3 today. This has been because of constraints on resources available to the sustainable timber industry. While bushfires have played a part, the constraints have been based mostly on politics, not science.

At least 10 000 ha of Victoria's public forest estate is in urgent need of restoration as result of wildfires, inadequate conditions for regeneration burning, severe browsing by animals, and natural events such as frost and drought. To restore the health and productivity of these areas the government needs to invest significant funds in regeneration and reforestation projects.

PROPOSALS FOR MORE NATIONAL PARKS

- The Victorian Government should oppose the Great Forest National Park proposal as it would significantly reduce social, environmental, and, economic benefits from the Central Highlands forests.
- No additional national parks should be created in forested areas in Western Victoria.

With over 90 per cent of Victoria's public native forest either formally or informally reserved primarily for conservation, the rationale for any further park reservations is highly questionable.

Proposals for increasing the area of forest within parks for biodiversity conservation must be questioned, as forest habitats in Victoria are already well-represented. With limited funds available to government for conservation, there is a greater need for conservation efforts to focus on non-forest areas and other habitats not well represented in the conservation estate.

Australia already imports considerable volumes of hardwood from tropical rainforests in Asia-Pacific countries. With further forest put into parks, the State would need to import

even more wood products from such countries where sustainable forest management is often questionable.

Increasing the area of forest held within Victoria's conservation estate is unlikely to generate any significant improvement to biodiversity conservation, but is likely to reduce public land uses, such as deer hunting, 4-wheel-driving, mountain biking, firewood collection, horse-riding, mineral prospecting, and camping away from formal campgrounds. This restricts the amenity and social enjoyment of Victoria's wonderful forests.

Recent examples from the Great Otway and the Murray Valley River Red Gum forests suggest that forest-based tourism struggles to replace the jobs lost in forest management and timber production following the transfer of State Forest to National Parks.

MORE THAN 90 PER CENT OF VICTORIA'S PUBLIC NATIVE FOREST IS ALREADY FORMALLY OR INFORMALLY RESERVED PRIMARILY FOR CONSERVATION.

Proposed Great Forest National Park in the Central Highlands:

Approximately 170 000 hectares of the Central Highlands forests are contained in National Parks and other permanent reserves where timber harvesting is prohibited. Around 65 per cent of the region's Mountain Ash forest is permanently reserved from timber harvesting in a variety of public land tenures.

The proposal to establish a 350 000 ha Great Forest National Park has questionable benefits for biodiversity, yet clear negative effects on the regional native forest timber industry that produces high quality sawn timber and fibre for paper production. In 2015 the timber industry in Gippsland contributed $573 million annually to the Victorian economy while directly employing over 2000 people.

Expanding the area of National Parks in Western Victoria:

The government should resist demands by conservation groups to convert significant State forests in central western Victoria into national or state parks. These forests, including the Wombat, Mt Cole, Pyrenees and Wellsford State Forests. These forests are managed on an appropriate 'multiple-use' basis and are valued by the majority of the regional community for unrestricted access for recreational use and as a firewood supply.

PLANTATIONS AND AGROFORESTRY

- Increased investment, with government incentives, in hardwood and pine plantations, is needed to meet increasing demand for building materials and other timber and fibre products.

To help meet increasing demand for building materials and other timber and fibre products, Victoria needs much more investment in plantations, both hardwood (eucalypt) and softwood (pine). This would help to reduce our large trade imbalance in wood products.

An increased plantation resource would support more timber processing plants in regional Victoria. More native trees in the landscape would also have a range of environmental benefits.

Large-scale timber plantations should be established on already cleared land, and agroforestry, where forests are integrated with agricultural land uses, should be promoted. Studies have shown that an average of up to 20 per cent of a farm may be planted with trees without major impacts on agricultural outputs.

Victoria currently has insufficient timber plantation area to meet domestic demands for sawn hardwood. Native forests will need to meet this shortfall for decades while suitable land is procured, and new plantations are established and grow to maturity.

Significant investment in plantations will be required to overcome considerable impediments such as the availability of suitable land, the cost of acquiring it, and infrastructure such as roads.

RENEWABLE ENERGY GENERATION USING BIOMASS

- Use of biomass from native forests, plantations, and sawmills should be encouraged to generate renewable bio-energy.
- Incentives should be provided to establish bio-energy facilities in regional areas.

The use of (low quality) wood as fuel to generate renewable bio-energy should be encouraged, provided that any forests harvested for fuel are sustainably managed. Fuel wood can be sourced from public and private forests, as well as sawmill waste.

Opportunities for small to medium scale bio-energy facilities exist within rural and regional Victoria. Where appropriate, the government should consider financial incentives to help establish such facilities, which would benefit local employment and the environment.

Well planned and designed bio-energy facilities can reduce reliance on existing conventional energy generation facilities, while using biomass that might otherwise be dumped or burnt for no gain.

Many European countries, such as Sweden and Germany, have numerous bio-energy plants that supplement traditional energy generation. Within Victoria, several successful enterprises, such as the Meredith Dairy and the Beaufort Hospital, have already shifted from using carbon-intensive energy to sustainable bio-energy to provide their heating requirements.

CARBON STORAGE

- Active, sustainable forest management, including wood production, is an effective way to mitigate carbon emissions and boost carbon storage.

Wood is the only building material that is both renewable and stores carbon, and wood products embody far less carbon emissions compared to alternative products such as steel and concrete. Accordingly, more wood should be being used rather than less.

A sustainable cycle of forest harvesting, and regrowth combined with the innovative use of timber products will help store carbon in wood products and in the forest. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change regards this as a better forest carbon strategy than permanently reserving forests where wood production is prohibited.

FIREWOOD

- Access to firewood (from harvesting or thinning) from native forests should be maintained and better regulated.

Eucalypt firewood is still a sought-after product. Many rural households use firewood for heating and cooking and some are dependent on it.

State Forests are the major source of this product. Since 2011, removal of firewood for domestic purposes has been de-regulated. The Department of Environment Land Water and Planning has set some conditions on the volume that can be collected but no effective regulation and supervision is carried out and revenue is forgone. A permit system must be re-introduced to ensure sustainability of supply.

The IFA maintains that thinning of dense eucalypt regrowth should take place in some conservation reserves, such as in the Murray River and Bendigo State Parks, to ensure better forest health and biodiversity. As well as producing firewood, such thinning operations will also reduce fire hazards and promote growth of potential habitat trees.

FORESTRY EDUCATION

- Urgent attention is needed to address the shortage of trained foresters.
- New forestry courses could be based at the currently under-utilised Creswick Forestry School.
- More resources are needed to address lack of knowledge of the values provided by forests and forestry in schools and the general public.

There is an urgent need for more young men and women to become qualified foresters. Professional management of forests for a variety of landscape, commercial and conservation purposes demands professional skills. The large plantation expansion required in the next few decades will demand foresters with planning and operational skills in tree establishment fire and landscape management.

There are now no undergraduate forestry courses available in Victoria. The excellent facilities at the Creswick Forestry School (that started in 1910) and now operated by the University of Melbourne are greatly under-utilised, which is also having an economic effect on the town of Creswick. This issue needs to be urgently addressed by a committee of stakeholders, including the Creswick community and the IFA.

The IFA also believes that school students and the general public would benefit from 'forestry education' in the sense of understanding and appreciating the economic, social and cultural values of forests as well as the economic and climate change benefits that accrue from a well-managed forest. This education would not be complete without recognition of the benefits from timber harvesting and multiple use forest management. More resources should be provided to DELWP and VicForests to enable this to happen.

The IFA supports the development of a forestry education and professional development strategy. This strategy should bring together learning institutions, foresters, government land and fire management agencies, the forest industry (including plantation owners) and other key forestry stakeholder groups. A forestry education and professional development strategy would target prospective and current students and early career professionals.

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) is the professional body representing around 1000 members who are forest scientists and/or managers operating in all aspects of forest and natural resource management, including forest conservation. The IFA was established in 1935.

Foresters, informed by the science of natural resource management, play a crucial role in shaping the future of forests. We advocate balanced land use that meets society's needs for sustainable forest management, timber supply, and conservation outcomes.