
From: POV eSubmission Form <ecosystems@parliament.vic.gov.au>
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Categories: Submissions

Inquiry Name: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Mr Paul Leitzke
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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. We are farmers in the Western Districts. We both work full time off farm and are rehabilitating the farmland we purchased three years ago. We are very concerned about the continued degradation of our natural habitat and native forests and the infestation of invasive species.

We would particularly like to see addressed the following key issues:

1. Protecting our native forests and stopping land clearing
2. Eliminating feral animals
3. Halting ecosystem decline and preserving threatened species, and
4. Minimising the impacts of climate change on flora and fauna

Protecting our native forests and stopping land clearing

Land clearing must be stopped. We cant afford to lose any more trees and native habitat. Trees are the only scalable carbon capture and storage method in the world.

Logging of old growth and high-value forests in not economical or sustainable and should be stopped. It is unthinkable that Victoria continues to log very high conservation value forests for paper. VicForests does not invest in comprehensive surveys in areas of significant value, even though it is required by law prior to logging commencing. VicForests have been successfully challenged in court numerous times for failure to abide by a range of laws. It is clear VicForests is not able to sustainably manage the forests.

Examples of contraventions include:

- In May 2020, the federal court ruled that VicForests had breached national environmental protection laws when it logged the habitat of Leadbeater's Possums and Greater Gliders. VicForests did not comply with the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 and as a result has not been acting in accordance with their Regional Forest Agreement (RFA)
- An ABC report from November 2018 revealed that 17 sites that have been logged, or there are plans to log, were completely outside the allocation order while another 25 sites were at least 90 per cent outside the legal area. VicForests appear to do no due diligence/internal checks on their coops.
- the Lawless logging report documents 27 cases of logging operations carried out by VicForests in East Gippsland

and Central Highlands regions since November 2014, that breached environmental protections contained in the Code of Practice for Timber Production in Victoria's state forests (2014). The Lawless logging report provides evidence of VicForests systemic failure to identify High Conservation Values and comply with the regulatory framework and Code of Practice and the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning's (DELWP) systemic failure to enforce compliance with the Code of Practice.

It is incredibly disappointing to know that DELWP have failed the people of Victoria by not appropriately regulating this industry or holding it to account. In our view, the long-term stability of native forests in Victoria cannot co-exist with logging of high conservation forests.

The last independent review in 2010 recommended that the Western RFA be cancelled. There are very few high conservation areas left in Western Victoria and what remains deserves strong protection. Despite this, comments have been made about logging in the Grampians, the Wombat forest and Mt Cole. These areas are strong regional tourist attractions that we love hiking in and they would provide greater economic benefit if preserved and used for recreation.

A comprehensive economic report in 2016 from Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) concluded that "continued native forest logging is uneconomic and that support for other industries, including plantation forestry and tourism would generate greater returns." Despite clear evidence to the contrary, the government still pushes ahead with logging, further endangering vulnerable species.

There is sufficient plantation timber in Victoria for logging. Plantation timber on private land has less conservation value and would be a more sensible option compared with destroying high-value forest areas. If more plantation timber was required, consideration could be given to establishing a Managed Investment Scheme (MIS) whereby tax concessions can be given for planting sustainable plantations for wood production. Forestry jobs could then be converted to these roles. This would be similar to MIS programs in the 1990's however, with greater regulation and oversight by a state or commonwealth entity to reduce the likelihood of mismanagement.

An independent PWC report has shown that the industry is uneconomical. DEWLP's own report clearly identifies that more effort is needed to stop the overall decline of forest-dependent threatened species and improve the extent and condition of forest habitats. VicForests have failed to follow the existing rules and DEWLP has failed to effectively regulate them.

Eliminating feral animals

All feral cats and foxes need to be eliminated as a priority. Feral cats and foxes have decimated small mammal populations, such as Eastern Barred Bandicoots. While the bounty on foxes was a good start, a viral disease solution (similar to myxomatosis in rabbits) may be more sustainable and should be considered.

Similarly, a viral disease solution should be instigated for cats – with all registered cats being entitled to a free vaccination. It is ludicrous that cats were only listed as an established pest in 2018 and that land owners have not been able to euthanise feral cats on their land. Research has shown that cats kill over 1.5 million native animals a night across Australia and over 1 million birds a day. This is unsustainable. Cats also travel up to 100 km to areas with fire scars as small mammals are increasingly vulnerable following fires due to a reduction in safe hiding spots and less food.

If a viral solution is not implemented, a bounty also needs to be considered on cats or purchase and monitoring of the Felixer in designated areas to see if this can help reduce numbers. All abandoned cats should be euthanised and council funding should be withdrawn from re-homing cats – this merely exacerbates the problem by guilting people who don't really want a cat to have one -as its 'going to die otherwise'.

Ongoing and sustained programs to reduce rabbits, deer and horses, as well as feral pigs are also urgently needed. Deer and wild horses need to be declared as established pests and regular culling instigated. Deer must be removed from protection under the Wildlife Act 1975. They graze farming land and destroy critical habitat in state forests and national parks. The Grampians NP has a significant problem that is not being adequately addressed. The draft deer strategy was poorly written and no decisive action has been taken to date. The strategy needs to be reviewed and implemented and definite steps taken to reduce the numbers of this feral pest.

Halting ecosystem decline and preserving threatened species

Much of the remaining high conservation areas in Victoria have been both logged and poorly managed. No regular and ongoing assessment of native flora and fauna is conducted and many of the remaining areas are fragmented and are inadequate to maintain viable populations of vulnerable and threatened species. With inadequate sized areas left and a lack of representative types of ecosystems to sustain native populations, the remaining forest and habitat areas need to be fully protected and more effectively managed for conservation value as a matter of urgency.

More emphasis needs to be placed on conserving high value areas. The Eastern barred bandicoots do not have a government managed reserve to re-establish a viable population, despite the population getting down to only 25 specimens in Victoria. This is an iconic Australian mammal that needs to be preserved.

Areas of high conservation forest such as the areas around Erinunderra National Park in East Gippsland should be managed in conjunction with an evidence based and highly effective not-for-profit organisation such as the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC). AWC have established collaborations with the NSW government and Australian Department of Defence to provide significant ecological return on investment in three national parks in NSW and on Defence land in far north West Australia. The NSW parks have established feral free areas and commenced re-introductions of bilby's and bettongs, some of which have been locally extinct for over 100 years. The Victorian government should fund one or two projects with AWC as it has proven it can use science and effective management to recover critically endangered populations. Victoria could leverage their expertise and provides better outcomes for wildlife through scientifically managed restoration of habitats and native animals. An independent state-based regulator, to monitor progress, enforce contraventions and ensure habitats and species are protected, is desperately required.

Minimising the impacts of climate change on flora and fauna

The increase in land clearing contributes to massive habitat destruction and increased risk of erosion, bushfires, soil run off and reduced water quality in catchment areas. A moratorium on all land clearing needs to be instigated and more stringent assessment of proposed clearing of land implemented. While offsets have previously been proposed, they have failed and should be stopped. Critically endangered grasslands in Melbourne's urban growth boundary were supposed to be offset. Ten years later DELWP has still not met its commitments to establish the reserves and has purchased only 10 % of one reserve. A massive loss of native grasslands has occurred with no accountability from DELWP, while developers continue to destroy what remnants of native grassland we have left.

Deforestation is a significant contributor to the increased release of carbon into the atmosphere. A recent Rainforest Alliance report indicates that to attempt to mitigate the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change rise of 2oC, 37% of the sequestering will need to come from 'natural climate solutions'. That is, existing or newly planted forests. Therefore, Victoria will need to maintain carbon 'sinks' in national parks and forest regions to support the reduction of atmospheric carbon – and preserving and expanding our already fragmented forest and national parks areas will be critical in achieving this.

Conclusion:

In order to have stability of native forests in Victoria, there can be no logging of our native forest habitats. Therefore, the Victorian government must take decisive steps to reduce the loss of biodiversity across the state and act now to cancel all the Regional Forest Agreements. The government must listen to the majority of Victorians and stop logging our native forests and instead create new national parks and strengthen the conservation of existing state forests to ensure our native flora and fauna are able to be enjoyed by all Victorians for years to come.

We strongly urge the enquiry to ensure:

- A rapid and just transition out of native forest logging into appropriately planned plantations, by 2022;
- The government abandons the Regional Forest Agreements (RFA's) as these agreements have been challenged in court and VicForests has been found to have breached federal environmental laws – they are illegal, unsustainable and unviable;
- Strengthening state legislation and regulation, to ensure state forests are valued for water yield and quality, recreation and climate change mitigation, not just native forest logging;
- Carbon capture and storage is valued and forests are protected to enable Australia to meet carbon emission reduction targets;
- A range of new national parks and conservation reserves are created in East Gippsland, the Central Highlands (including the creation of the Great Forest NP) and the Central West;
- Approve the 60,000 hectares of new national parks in Victoria's central west, in the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Forests as recommended by the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (following a four-year consultation process);
- Put a bounty on foxes and cats and encourage stronger feral cat removal programs on private and public land;
- Prevent re-homing of invasive pest species and ensure all abandoned cats are euthanised;
- Declare deer as a pest species, strengthen the deer strategy and initiate implementation of the strategy to start to reduce pest deer numbers;
- Develop recovery action statements and management plans for all threatened species and communities and ensure these are adequately funded and implemented as a priority;

- Collaborate with the Australian Wildlife Conservancy to implement two projects in Victoria to utilise evidence-based conservation science to effectively manage the recovery of critically endangered populations of plants and mammals (Erinunderra NP, Great Forest NP and Lower Glenelg NP would be three excellent sites to consider);
- An independent state-based regulator, to monitor progress on biodiversity markers, enforce contraventions and ensure habitats and species are protected; and
- Incorporate the impacts of climate change on ecosystems, protect forests as carbon sinks and instigate mitigation strategies to help keep warming to 1.5oC.

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