

WESTERN FORESTS & WOODLANDS AT RISK

Summary report: Western Victoria's last remnants threatened by logging



AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ECOLOGICAL
IMPLICATIONS OF A NEW TIMBER UTILISATION
PLAN FOR WESTERN VICTORIA, JUNE 2017



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Summary

Key points:

- Proposed commercial logging by VicForests of 61 state forests and woodlands in some of Victoria's most cleared landscapes in the west of the state will be ecologically damaging.
- Across western Victorian forests 70% of the area targeted for logging contains native vegetation types that are either endangered (19%) vulnerable (11%) or depleted (40%). In the Horsham Forest Management Area 54% of the vegetation is endangered.
- Threatened species have been found either within or near 33% of planned logging coupes. In some forest management areas, including the Portland Forest Management Area, that figure leaps to 67%. These forests and woodlands should be protected from logging.
- The VicForests draft Timber Utilisation Plan (TUP), published on February 2017, is inconsistent with state government policy and the Code of Practice for Timber Harvesting.
- The Andrews Government should ensure no logging of merchantable timber commences in western Victoria while the currently seriously flawed VicForests Timber Utilisation Plan 2017 is withdrawn and reviewed with a comprehensive ecological assessment, management detail and satisfactory community consultation, before any logging proceeds, if it proceeds at all.
- The plan currently proposes potentially 'unlawful' logging in some Forest Parks, a type of conservation reserve.
- Some areas in the Central West such a Wombat, Wellsford, Mt Cole state forests and Pyrenees ranges are listed for logging are also subject to a recently announced Investigation by Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), and should be removed from logging schedules while this investigation is completed.

The Timber Utilisation Plan, published on February 2017 by the Victorian Government's logging agency VicForests, lacks important details, contains a raft of inconsistencies with statewide biodiversity policy and is in all likelihood in breach of the Code of Practice for Timber Harvesting and other state government policy.

The Andrews Government should ensure no logging of merchantable timber commences in western Victoria. At the very least the Timber Utilisation Plan should be withdrawn, significantly reviewed, reassessed and re-advertised with relevant details to address threatened species concerns,

how the conservation significance of vegetation types will be managed and relevant forest code prescriptions and tenure inconsistencies.

Logging operations planned across almost 50,000ha of some the most fragmented and depleted landscapes in Australia will be ecologically damaging and of limited commercial or economic value. They should not proceed.

The proposed 2017 Timber Utilisation Plan also highlights a significant strategic issue and raises questions about the ongoing role of the commercially-focused, state-

Horsham FMA

Area: 13,250 ha

No. Coupes: 115

- Coupes with rare, threatened or depleted vegetation types (EVC): 81%-100%
- Coupes with threatened species within or adjacent: 49%
- Places: Twenty six state forest areas and two other reserve types including Cherrypool State Forest, Connewirricoo State Forest, Glenisla State Forest, Woolhpooper State Forest, Kalingur State Forest.

Mid Murray FMA

Area: 1885 ha

No. Coupes: 22

- Coupes with rare, threatened or depleted vegetation types (EVC): 100%
- Coupes with threatened species within or adjacent: 59%
- Places: Four state forests including Benwell State Forest, Gunbower State Forest.

Bendigo FMA

Area: 8616 ha

No. Coupes: 120

- Coupes with rare, threatened or depleted vegetation types (EVC): 93%-100%
- Coupes with threatened species within or adjacent: 27%
- Places: Fourteen state forests including Wellsford State Forest, Bealiba - Barp State forest, Redcastle-Greytown State Forest, St Arnaud & Pyrenees State Forest.

Midlands FMA

Area: 5533 ha

No. Coupes: 134

- Coupes with rare, threatened or depleted vegetation types (EVC): 86%-76%
- Coupes with threatened species within or adjacent: 22%
- Places: Nine state forests and three other reserve types including the Wombat State Forest, Mt Cole State Forest, Mt Lonarch/Berungomer State Forest, Beerimpmo State Forest.

Portland FMA

Area: 2616 ha

No. Coupes: 27

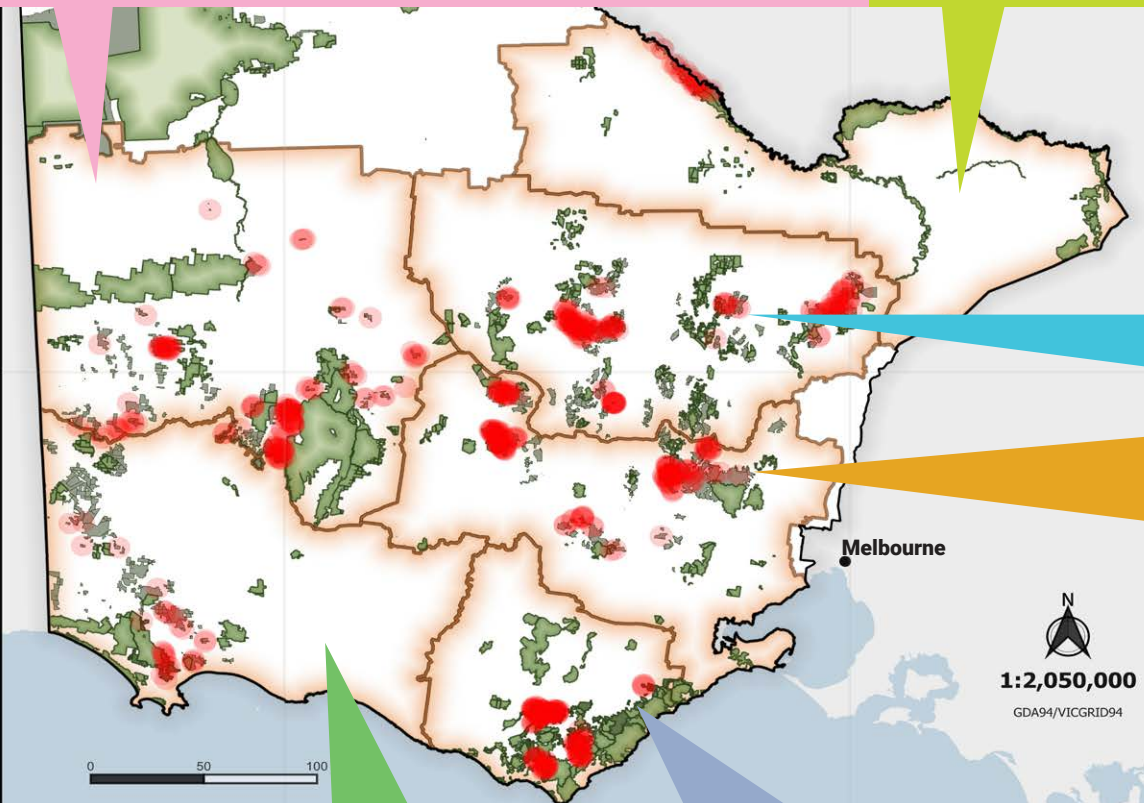
- Coupes with rare, threatened or depleted vegetation types (EVC): 52%-48%
- Coupes with threatened species within or adjacent: 67%
- Places: Eight state forests and two other reserve types including Cobboboonee Forest Park, Annya State Forest, Homerton State Forest.

Otway FMA

Area: 9179 ha

No. Coupes: 115

- Coupes with rare, threatened or depleted vegetation types (EVC): 84% - 33%
- Coupes with threatened species within or adjacent: 23%
- Places: Otway Forest Park.



Indicative location of Timber Utilisation Plan coupes in Western Victoria. Note not to scale.

owned enterprise VicForests. This highlights the fundamental flaws in the current legal and administrative arrangements, particularly the role of the obsolete regional forest agreement.

While much of western Victoria's commercial forestry was phased out following the decision to create the Great Otway National Park in the 2002, the box-ironbark parks in the same year and then nationally significant red gum national parks in 2012 and the Coobobbonee national and forest parks. Up until

2014, there have remained a number of small commercial forestry and firewood licences managed by the state environment or agriculture department. The vast proportion of commercial native forest logging occurs in eastern Victoria.

In 2014, on the eve of the Victorian state election, VicForests was controversially given control of logging operations in the west of the state. Little has happened in the past two years, until a new Timber Utilisation Plan was announced. Logging operations under these plans



SUMMARY



Looking east towards Mount Langi Ghiran and Mount Cole.

Photo: Ed Dunens | Flickr

would target 41,248ha of western Victorian forests and woodlands. Another 7,729ha of hazardous tree and salvage logging would increase the forest damaged to 48,977ha. These forest losses would take place in some of the most cleared and fragmented bioregions and landscapes in Victoria, if not Australia.

The vast bulk of planned western Victorian logging coupes are in fragmented landscapes. Fragmented landscapes support the majority of the state's biodiversity. About 40 per cent of Victoria's native land vertebrate species (mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles) are restricted to these fragmented landscapes. A further 45 per cent rely on fragmented landscapes across a major part of their distribution in Victoria.

It is profoundly disturbing that while these forests have seen millions of dollars spent on threatened species recovery and revegetation, and that volunteers have given up thousands of hours to regenerate some of the most cleared landscapes in western Victoria,

the same forests are being opened up to logging.

Studies carried out by the Victorian National Parks Association have identified a number of state forests in the Midlands Forest Management Area that are high in conservation significance and worthy of better protection under the National Parks Act, yet are targeted for logging under the proposed Timber Utilisation Plan.

The Timber Utilisation Plan also includes areas subject to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Central West Investigation, which is identifying and evaluating the condition, natural and biodiversity values and cultural, social and economic values of public land in the vicinity of the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Range forests. VicForests' own documentation also states these areas will not be logged. Very clearly all areas subject to this Central West Investigation should be removed from the proposed Timber Utilisation Plan.



The Victorian National Parks Association has carried out a spatial analysis of the proposed Timber Utilisation Plan across all western forest management areas. The analysis included:

- Conservation significance of ecological vegetation classes (using the state government NV 2005 _ EVCBCS data set).
- Records of Threatened, near Threatened or poorly know species from the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas (VBA_FUNA25).
- Case studies of potential implications for two specific threatened species – red-tailed black cockatoos and the brush-tailed phascogale.
- Analysis of tenure inconsistencies.

Detailed mapping of the tenure, conservation significance of ecological vegetation classes and records of threatened species have been undertaken for each of the 61 state forest areas and 11 other reserve types in each of the six Forest Management

Areas. Logging categories (silviculture) are also identified. These are outlined in detail in Appendix II of this report, and have been released as a community resource.

Conservation significance of vegetation in the Timber Utilisation Plan

The spatial analysis reviewed the occurrence of rare, threatened or depleted Ecological Vegetation Classes within coupes. It also analysed the total percentage of areas within coupes that contain rare, threatened or depleted Ecological Vegetation Classes. The analysis covers the entire western Victorian region covered by the Timber Utilisation Plan but excluded hazardous tree removal and salvage logging:

- **19% (7953 ha)** of Ecological Vegetation Classes are considered Endangered.

- **11% (4662 ha)** of Ecological Vegetation Classes are considered Vulnerable.
- **40% (16427 ha)** of Ecological Vegetation Classes are considered Depleted.

The Timber Utilisation Plan fails to address a number of Forestry Code of Practice prescriptions. Based on our analysis of these prescriptions for endangered, vulnerable or depleted vegetation:

- In the Bendigo Forest Management Area almost 490ha of proposed coupes are made up of endangered vegetation types and should be removed.
- In the Horsham Forest Management Area almost 7179ha (54%) are considered endangered vegetation types and should be removed from the Timber Utilisation Plan
- A further 2479ha (19%) of Ecological Vegetation Classes found in coupes earmarked in the Timber Utilisation Plan's Horsham Forest Management Area are considered vulnerable. The JANIS criteria, which sets targets for the conservation of ecosystems, specifies that 60 per cent of the existing distribution of each forest type if vulnerable "... should be protected" has not been addressed and it is unclear if this prescription has been met.
- It is clear that the formal reserve system in the Horsham region does not meet the JANIS criteria.

• [See page 22 of the full report for more detail](#)

- On a preliminary analysis it appears that there is simply not enough forested public land in either the Dundas Tablelands bioregion or the Wimmera bioregion, which make up most of the Horsham Forest Management Area, to meet the JANIS target – 15 per cent of the pre-1750

distribution of each forest type.

This requirement is a Forest Code of Practice planning and management prescription. Even under these existing flawed prescriptions it appears that logging in the entire Horsham Forest Management Area region and significant parts of the Portland Forest Management Area needs to be reconsidered.

- VicForests has provided no information in the Timber Utilisation Plan on the levels of protection in the informal reserve system e.g. Special Protections Zones, etc.

Threatened species in the Timber Utilisation Plan

An analysis of records of Threatened, near Threatened or poorly known species from the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas (VBA_FUNA25) was overlaid on the proposed Timber Utilisation Plan across all coupes. At a regional level across western Victorian forests a third of planned coupes (33%, 175 coupes) had records of threatened species within or nearby (within 100 metres). Twenty-two per cent (118 coupes) had records of threatened species within the coupes.

The high proportion of logging coupes that have recorded threatened species is indicative of the scarcity of woodlands and forests in these highly-cleared landscapes.

In three Forest Management Areas – Horsham, Mid Murray and Portland – either more than or about 50% of coupes have rare, threatened, near threatened or poorly known species within or adjacent to them. These are listed below and in the table Summary of Conservation Values by Forest

Management Area.

- **Bendigo FMA:** 27% of coupes have threatened species within or adjacent.
- **Horsham FMA:** 49% of coupes have threatened species within or adjacent.
- **Mid Murray FMA:** 59% of coupes have threatened species within or adjacent.
- **Midlands FMA:** 22% of coupes have threatened species within or adjacent.
- **Otway FMA:** 23% of coupes have threatened species within or adjacent.
- **Portland FMA:** 67% of coupes have threatened species within or adjacent.

While understanding that the broader conservation advisory lists in Victoria have limited legal force on forestry, the high number of threatened species recorded within or adjacent to logging coupes illustrates the high conservation significance of the areas being targeted.

There are 64 threatened fauna and 121 threatened flora species listed in the forest management and planning forest codes that apply to the western Timber Utilisation Plan. The planning standards also require specific action in the Midlands Forest Management Area, Mid Murray Forest Management Area and the Otway Forest Management Area. None of these rules or prescriptions have been addressed in the proposed Timber Utilisation Plan and appear to have been largely ignored. In addition, there are 34 threatened species (20 faunal and 14 floral) listed in the Forestry codes that have been recorded occurring in or adjacent to coupes in the Timber Utilisation Plan, yet no detail has been

provided on how the utilisation plan addresses these species and relevant code prescriptions.

A number of coupes in the Portland and Horsham forest management areas also include records of brolgas, which are listed in Victoria under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. There are no forestry prescriptions for this species. Their occurrences are likely indicative of wetlands.

Red-tailed black cockatoos have been recorded in 11 coupes in the Horsham and Portland forest management areas, in some cases multiple records. There are thought to be just 1400 of these birds left in the wild and they are subject to an extensive recovery effort. This bird species is listed in a regionally specific part of the Forestry codes and yet the Timber Utilisation Plan provides no information about how proposed logging impacts will be avoided or mitigated for the red-tailed black cockatoo. A small number of additional records are provided for the brush-tailed phascogale in the Wombat Forest, but questions remain if prescriptions for this species have been satisfied.

Tenure inconsistencies

Just over 200ha of various coupes cover a number of national parks, conservation and other types of reserve tenures. This is likely due to sloppy mapping, and should be rectified and removed from the Timber Utilisation Plan's spatial layers. Most of two major forest parks – the Otway and Coobobonee forest parks – are also proposed to be logged using various silvicultural techniques which, in our view, are inconsistent with the purposes of the reserves and possibly unlawful.

