

Victoria's Forests in Crisis

(Reasons for the Current Conflict in our Forests)

Victoria's forests are in a state of crisis! In 1998 a Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) was signed by the Federal and State Governments, the purpose being to decide and agree on land usage of state forests for the next 20 years. The RFA was supposed to guarantee 'resource security' for the logging industry and 'end conflict' on forest use issues. The RFA can also be seen as an instrument to soften the voice of people with environmental concerns, as only four official reviews will be made to the RFA during the 20 year period that it is in force. A problem here is that the reserve system created under the RFA is not legislated. Designated reserved areas could have their classification changed, *and then be logged at any time* to meet timber volume commitments of the NRE. And a major fault with the RFA is that it specified only guaranteed volumes of *graded sawlogs* to be made available to sawmills. Hence, 'residual logs' (which end up as woodchips) are not taken into account in the volumes of timber that may be logged under the RFA!

Examination of the 'harvesting schedules' published by NRE for forestry blocks in the Central Highlands shows quite clearly that expected volumes of residual logs (for wood-chipping) far exceed expected volumes of graded sawlogs. For example, in the Dandenong Forest Management Area (where the 350 Upper Bunyip block lies), the 24 coupes listed for logging in the 2002/03 schedule (next summer) are expected to yield a total of 53,120 cubic metres of graded sawlogs. *The corresponding figure for residual logs is a massive 167,055 cubic metres – more than three times the volume of sawlogs!* Is it any wonder that harvesting of 'residual logs' for wood-chipping is the real driving force behind the logging industry in the Central Highlands?

It has been argued by NRE that a sustainable quota of 500,000 tonnes of timber per annum can be extracted from the forests by clear-felling, for the next 20 years. These 'sustainability' figures are highly misleading, because

- they do not take into account the 70-80 per cent of the total logs removed that end up as woodchips;
- they rely on an assumption that there will be 100% regeneration of the volumes that are logged. That is, they project the myth that nothing will be lost by clear-fell logging, in terms of regenerated timber volumes. *This is a myth*, because studies by NRE have shown that re-growth generates between 30% and 60% of the original volumes in the next re-growth cycle.

And – *of greater importance* – the forest that 'regenerates' bears little ecological resemblance to the original forest that has been destroyed! Thus, there is a vast difference between ecological sustainability and 'resource' sustainability, as a result of clear-felling. Environmentalists do not accept the 'sustainability' arguments of NRE, and this is one reason for the current conflict between NRE and environmental activists.

Another major reason for the current conflict is that, for reasons unexplained, logging has been allowed to proceed in previous years at unacceptably high levels! Obviously, this has created enormous pressure to try to fill this year's logging quotas from an already depleted resource. This over-logging was acknowledged recently by the Victorian Government (21 February, 2002) in an announcement that severe cutbacks would be imposed on the future logging of our eucalypt native forests.

NRE is responsible for managing the timber resource, and the NRE has failed in its duty to ensure that loggers have not inadvertently encroached upon areas not to be logged.

So... why is there conflict in our forests? Environmentalists know why! Others seeking answers should direct this question to the relevant land resource manager - the Department of Natural Resources and Environment!!!

No Forests Safe from Logging!

The current awful truth is that there are now no forests outside of legislated parks and reserves that are safe from logging in Victoria.

Most of the remaining accessible forested areas have a mixture of forest species, and mixed-species areas return the lowest grade of timber and are the most vulnerable. Owing to high transport costs, the more accessible lower-grade forests – like those close to Marysville, *and the forests that protect Melbourne's water catchments* - are now being targeted for their high 'residual log' values. In the main, the wood from these forests ends up as low value-added products, such as garden stakes, pallets and toilet paper. *Plantation timbers can supply most of these needs* – there is no need to log our native forests!

Owing to previously unsustainable harvesting levels, *our* native forests (**yes! they belong to all Victorians**) are now being logged on a forever decreasing time cycle. At present, the NRE is taking the Mountain Ash re-growth from the 1939 wildfires that swept through Victoria only 60 years ago. Many of these 60-year-old trees are still immature and they yield low volumes of sawlogs. The usual process is that

- new high-impact logging roads are bull-dozed into the areas to be logged, resulting in major siltation in lower-level creeks and rivers;
- coupes are clear-felled and *all* permissible logs regarded as economic (including a high ratio of 'residual logs' for wood-chipping) are removed - the impact on native wildlife is horrendous. These days, high volumes are transported quickly to sawmill or chipper by using enormous 'B Double' logging trucks...
- the coupe is subjected to a 'regeneration burn' that literally turns it into a wasteland;
- at a later date, re-seeding is performed via a 'blanket bombing' approach (that is sometimes done from a helicopter);
- *if 'successful'*, the thicket-like re-growth forest of almost uniform seedlings is left to fend for itself, resulting in a predominantly 'monoculture' tree farm that bears no resemblance to the original forest that was destroyed. This means that bio-diversity is lost from the area – possibly forever!

For more information about this process, see the UBAG document "The Awful Effects of Clear-Felling"

We must stop this unnecessary wastage of our forests, and the natural heritage values that could be lost for centuries unless vigorous action is taken now!

JOIN THE UPPER BUNYIP ACTION GROUP, and begin writing letters NOW to protect the 350 Upper Bunyip Forestry Block from unnecessary devastation.

[This document was prepared by the UBAG Steering Committee – February, 2002.]