

Submission on the modernisation of Victorian Regional Forestry Agreements

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Healthy planet, **healthy people.**

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About Doctors for the Environment Australia

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA), is a voluntary organisation of medical doctors in all states and territories. Our vision is 'healthy planet, healthy people'.

DEA understands that human health and wellbeing are absolutely dependent upon a rich, biodiverse planet where all ecosystems sustain life in balance. Humans need a future with clean air and water, healthy soils producing nutritious food and a complex, diverse and interconnected humanity whose needs are met in a sustainable way.

We work towards sustainable development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising future generations. DEA has a distinguished board of advisors whose knowledge of medical and public health issues is fully contemporary, and our members include doctors and medical students from all facets of medicine.

Introduction

As medical doctors we welcome this opportunity to contribute to the community discussion on the Victorian Regional Forestry Agreements (RFAs). We rely on natural ecosystems like forests for clean air and water, maintain a stable climate in which to thrive and a rich tapestry of living organisms- biodiversity- from which we have taken food and over half of the medicines in use today.

We are facing urgent threats to our wellbeing from climate change and biodiversity loss and preservation of our forests is essential as they support our health in many ways, namely the protection of our drinking water supplies, stabilisation of our climate, purification of our air and as a refuge for biodiversity. They also hold enormous value as places for connection to nature, recreation, education, health provision and cultural activities.

Forests support human health in the following ways

1. Water quality and supply

The Yarra River system provides around 70% of Melbourne's drinking water which is of an excellent standard. The high yield of water per hectare of catchment is reflective of the pristine forests from which the water comes. Other forests also protect water catchments and all forests help generate rain through the transpiration process.

2. Mitigation of climate change

The most carbon dense forests in the world are those in our Central Highlands. These mountain ash forests were designated as a critically endangered ecosystem by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List in 2015 and are home to the threatened Leadbeater's possum, our faunal emblem. Despite this, they are a place which is regularly logged under a current RFA. Forests draw down carbon dioxide (CO₂) and store it in their soils, trees and other vegetation. Forests also cool the nearby landscape and slow down bushfires.

3. Air quality

Forests release oxygen into the atmosphere and draw down CO₂ and air borne pollutants. We need forests and other natural areas to keep the air we breathe optimally clean for our health.

4. Biodiversity refuge in face of current biodiversity crisis

Over half medicines in use today come from nature. Forests provide a place of rich biodiversity from which future medicines and foods may come. Forests have provided a place from which aboriginal people procured bush medicines and food for millennia. Given we are facing a catastrophic, global extinction crisis protecting biodiversity refugia, like Victoria's forests, is essential.

5. Forests provide places of rest and restoration

This resource for the physical and psychosocial wellbeing of Victorians also provides opportunities for both preventative and therapeutic health interventions for a myriad of health problems.

6. Forests are places of cultural and spiritual significance to indigenous Australians

Culture and health are inextricably entwined, we need a healthy country for healthy people.

7. Forests provide places of healthy, long term jobs

These jobs are in the spheres of eco-tourism, recreational activities, scientific exploration and discovery, education and health interventions.

Regional Forestry Agreements

RFAs are twenty-year-long agreements between the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments and provide special treatment to the native forest industry. RFAs allow for the logging of public native forests. Logging that occurs under these agreements does not require approval under federal environmental laws, unlike most other industries or activities.

There are five RFAs in Victoria, which start expiring from March 2018:

- East Gippsland (signed 3 February 1997)
- Central Highlands (signed 27 March 1998)
- North East (signed 9 August 1999)
- West Victoria – west of the Hume Highway to the South Australian border (signed 31 March 2000)
- Gippsland (signed 31 March 2000)

Potential improvements to RFA's

DEA would like to comment on the proposed changes to the RFAs as below.

Theme 1 - Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management

- 1) We agree that there is a need to recognise all forest values. Forests need to be recognised as providing ecosystem services that support human health both locally and globally as well as having intrinsic spiritual and cultural values for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The climate change mitigation benefits of forests, especially the fragile and threatened ecosystem of the mountain ash forests, are profound and far reaching. The ability of these forests to

hold carbon in their soil, trees and vegetation helps prevent further climate change which is a global ecosystem service. Given that climate change is the biggest public health threat we are facing this century, this mitigation service provided by forests is of public health importance and needs to be recognised as such.

- 2) We need to conserve forest biodiversity and maintain ecosystem health as a priority. In 2015, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List of Ecosystems added mountain ash forest as critically endangered. Species found there include the Leadbeater's Possum which is now also critically endangered. The mountain ash is a key target of VicForests logging program under current RFAs and loss of habitat the main threat factor for the Leadbeater's Possum. There is a need to improve connectivity between fragmented areas and this is best done by enhancing and expanding the reserve system by developing new national parks. For example, the proposed Great Forest National Park would protect the threatened mountain ash forests of Victoria's central highlands and the headwaters of the Yarra River.

In the far east of Victoria, ancient old growth forests continue to be logged despite containing threatened species like the Greater Glider and being of extraordinarily high value for biodiversity and all the ecosystem services outlined in above. Under the current RFA, the Greater Glider has dramatically dropped in numbers as logging continues apace. These forests can be included in an expanded national park and reserve system to protect their long-term future.

In the west of the State, an expanded reserve system could see some 50,000 hectares of forest and woodland protected, and the 380 threatened species that live in them. As recommended by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) in their Central West Investigation Report, new parks that could be created include the Wombat-Lerderderg National Park, Pyrenees National Park, Mount Buangor National Park, Hepburn Conservation Park and Cobaw Conservation Park and the Bendigo Regional Park and Greater Bendigo National Parks could be expanded.²

- 3) We need to promote Traditional Owner rights and partnership. As stated for this year's Reconciliation Week, we need to be grounded in truth and then walk together to a new and better future. In order to do this, we need to recognise the damage done to the ecological and cultural values of forests since colonisation and rather than give aboriginal people degraded land, help restore landscapes under the guidance of aboriginal people. We also need to begin the process of renaming forests and regions with their indigenous names;

acknowledge places of aboriginal massacre within these forested areas and sensitively conserve these cultural and historical values.

Theme 2- The long-term stability of forests and forest industries

- 1) We need to address climate change, biodiversity loss and other large-scale disturbances like weed and feral animal invasion. This will mean conserving all old growth forests and those native forests which support habitat for threatened species of plants and animals. Understanding that the historical widespread clear felling of Victoria's forests has left a legacy which includes climate change and the current biodiversity crisis. Climate change mitigation is a key priority, and this precludes further logging of Victoria's native forests.
- 2) Support the development of forest dependent industries- the current description of forest-based industries is limited to the forest and wood products (logging) industries, tourism and recreation, apiary, and the water industry. There needs to be a significant shift away from the extractive model, where forests are simply viewed as places from which timber is harvested/logged, to a model where the comprehensive values of forests are understood and long term, healthy jobs in the fields of health and wellbeing, scientific research, cultural development and education are cultivated.

Victoria is facing not only the ecological crises of climate change and biodiversity loss but also the health crises of non-communicable or lifestyle related diseases. Many of these challenges can be met if our forests are protected and understood as providing both crucial ecosystem services and places of psychological and physical illness prevention and treatment.

Firstly, the ecosystem services forests provide by mitigating climate change, generating and purifying our water supply, stabilising soils and being a source of medicines and native bush foods can sustain jobs. These jobs are within the scientific fields of biology, ecology, soil science, hydrology, pharmacology, climate science and bush fire science. They involve research into carbon, soil and water systems, development of medicines and bush foods as well as teaching at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

Forests are places of restoration, both physical and psychological. Given the leading burden of disease in our society is depression and other mental health issues the development of comprehensive, short- and long-term programs for the prevention and treatment of

depression/other should utilise our natural assets like forests. Other lifestyle related diseases including heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis require a multifaceted approach to prevention and cure. This includes exercise programs like walking as well as gentle movement practices like yoga and 'forest bathing'. Forest bathing, or 'shinrin yoku', was developed in Japan as a treatment modality for those suffering from stress and cardiovascular disease. In Japan doctors provide prescriptions for their eligible patients to spend specified amounts of time in forests on a regular basis. Forests are accredited for *shinrin yoku* and health agencies are involved in the implementation of activities.

There is a great opportunity for Victoria to lead Australia in developing our own version of this forest-based therapy with possible funding from private health insurers or superannuation funds and other companies interested in adding to their environmental and social credentials.

Programs for young people including Bush Adventure Therapy can support those adolescents experiencing mental health challenges and difficulty engaging with school. Our forests provide the perfect setting for these therapeutic approaches.

It is important that government and the extractive logging industry recognise that in this new era of climate change and its accompanying increase in the frequency and severity of bushfires and other extreme weather events forests are facing threats on many fronts. There is simply not enough timber in native forests which have been ravaged by fires over the past two decades to continue to supply the industry. Those in positions of power need to show leadership and vision and facilitate a just transition for logging industry workers and communities to the new economy. This is an urgent challenge.

Theme 3- Governance and management of Victoria's forests

- **Improve forest management planning**

There is an inherent conflict of interest with VicForests being owned by government and in the extraordinary situation of being responsible for its own oversight. There is no impetus for VicForests, whose goal is to extract timber from forests, to look for threatened species properly as this may reduce the area available for it to log. Therefore, the assessments into threatened habitats and species prior to logging activities has been woefully inadequate. Citizen scientists have been required to protect areas

which should have been recognised and protected by government agencies. This has led to a high level of distrust of forest agencies like VicForests. The Victorian government, despite rhetoric within such documents as the Biodiversity Strategy and Memorandum of Understanding between Health and Environment Departments on the value of nature for wellbeing has continued to oversee the logging of ancient forests of high conservation and cultural values. This is despite recognising our biodiversity and climate crises and is something of which to be ashamed.

- **Identify research priorities**

There is a need to broaden research priorities to include the wellbeing effects of forests for human health including developing clinical trials on physiological and mental health outcomes of forest bathing for cardiovascular, immunological and psychological health problems, bush adventure therapy for youth at risk and nature based psychological interventions like nature based individual, couple's and family therapy. Research into plant compounds like phytoncides in the Australian context is required as studies to date have been largely from countries like Japan, South Korea and China. Collaboration with indigenous people is essential as they have many thousands of years of accumulated knowledge on bush medicines.

Research into optimal management of weeds and feral animals and the impact of these programs on native species is required so that eradication of pests can occur without harming the ecological values of forests and adjacent waterways and flood plains.

Research into current and likely future impacts from increased severity of extreme weather events on biodiversity of forests is required to aid mitigation and adaptation efforts. Particularly important is the use of fire as a management tool- again, indigenous knowledge is an essential element.

- **Improve monitoring and reporting**

It is crucial that there is transparency and evidence-based decision making to help restore trust from the wider community that the Victorian government is acting in its interests, rather than in the interests of VicForests. The protection of the biodiversity values of Victorian forests is important for all Victorians now and into the future. These long-term interests need to take precedence over short term financial and political factors. The jobs of those working in the logging industry need to be realigned to ensure that Victoria transitions from native forest and old growth logging to plantation timber. As outlined above, burgeoning

industries in research, education, wellbeing, eco-tourism and cultural programs will need support and monitoring and reporting of this change in the employment landscape needs to occur.

Additional Potential Improvements to RFA's

There are several factors which are not included in the Victorian RFA review which impact on the future of Victoria's natural heritage.

- Population growth- loss of green wedges and the encroachment of housing and other development into green space both within cities and towns and in the surrounding countryside. Unfettered population growth and the pursuit of the development dollar over natural values has seen the ongoing and accelerating loss of biodiversity and increase in number of threatened species and ecosystems. State-wide consideration of the need for an overall increase in the protection of natural places should occur with legislative protection demonstrating an enshrined understanding that for optimal human wellbeing we require large amounts of natural vegetation.
- Major road projects- these detrimentally impact on green space and pose threats to biodiversity and indigenous cultural values in the State. Many areas of ecological value are not currently included in national parks or other reserves and so are especially vulnerable. For example, the proposed North-East Link will see the loss of 182,300 square metres of open space of green space, damage to the culturally significant Bolin Bolin Billabong and the removal of 26,000 trees, many of which provide important habitat for iconic species³. Also, the proposed widening of the Western Highway near Ararat sees the government planning to destroy ancient birthing trees as part of a total removal of 3,000 trees. These river red gums are of extraordinary cultural value and should be protected in a culturally sensitive manner, not sacrificed for the sake of a quicker trip along a highway and a few jobs in road construction⁴. The piecemeal destruction of green spaces for roads and housing development should be considered when a review of regulations pertaining to forests is occurring. The Victorian government needs to take a state-wide view of our natural heritage, both within the reserve system and outside of it, otherwise the progressive erosion will continue, and further species and ecosystems will be lost.
- Proposed lifting of the moratorium on unconventional gas extraction in Victoria. The Victorian government is in the process of exploring the potential for onshore gas extraction in June 2020⁵. The unconventional gas extraction industry poses a major threat to biodiversity as it

accelerates climate change and contaminates aquifers, river systems and soils. This will impact on forests and nearby communities and associated jobs. DEA has deep concerns regarding the health impacts of this industry and completely opposes any onshore fracking in Victoria.

- Toxins like glyphosphate, currently used to eradicate weeds in public reserves and parklands pose a major threat to biodiversity and are increasingly recognised as having human health impacts so their use needs to be curtailed.
- Funding for national parks and those working in the various government environment departments has been drastically cut over the past few decades. This has meant that, not only has oversight of management of Victoria's natural estate been limited, there has also been woefully inadequate resources for weed and feral animal eradication, public environmental and cultural awareness education programs and maintenance of infrastructure allowing safe public access to parks and forests. Even national parks which are flooded with tourists (thus demonstrating their values in terms of job creation for tourism and small business as well as their inherent natural values), like the Dandenong Ranges National Park, are riddled with weeds and have old, inadequate signage. There needs to be a significant increase in the Budget for Victoria's forest management. Currently, Parks Victoria receives just 0.5% of the State Budget for managing 18% of the State and approximately five per cent of our marine waters. DEA calls for Parks Victoria to receive at least 1% of the State Budget for managing the parks and reserves that fall under its care. Given that parks and reserves provide places where preventative health activities take place and where therapeutic interventions can occur a greater proportion of the budget seems reasonable. Currently, health receives 28% of the budget so, as forests provide multiple health benefits, funding for their protection needs to climb well above the inadequate 0.5% level.
- Climate change is referred to as having a 'likely impact' on threatening species and there is discussion of 'adaptation mechanisms'. The reality is that climate change has been impacting on forests and waterways of Victoria for decades. Mitigation of climate change needs to be a priority, and this is not emphasised enough in the report. Mitigation dictates that forests need protection from further logging and that Victoria moves rapidly away from fossil fuels like coal and gas as energy sources to renewables such as wind and solar.
- At the moment the forest industry is exempt from national environmental protection laws (the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999) and Forests (Wood Pulp

Agreement Act 1996). This needs to change. Whilst it may have slipped past most people back in 1999, in the context of a global biodiversity crisis and runaway climate change, this exemption is indefensible. It is illogical that the Victorian logging industry, through the instrument of government, VicForests, essentially self regulates without the necessary oversight to protect biodiversity values. DEA calls for the removal of the exemption of the Victorian logging industry from these environmental laws. We also support the complete revamping of environmental laws as outlined in the Policy paper⁶ developed by the Places You Love Alliance in 2018 of which we are a member.

- The Western Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) should be cancelled, as was proposed by the Bracks Government in 2010. The state government funded VicForests plans to log 50-60 forests and woodlands in western Victoria, an area which is already ecologically fragile. Analysis by Victorian National Parks Association demonstrates that 70% of the area targeted for logging contains native vegetation types that are either endangered, vulnerable or depleted⁷. The financial argument for this logging is also questionable with VicForests own report from 2017 showing revenue from logging in this region generated \$700,000 total revenue with State funding to VicForests being \$678,000. This leaves \$22,000 annual surplus. A paltry return for the loss of biodiversity and contribution to climate change this logging activity generated. These forests can instead be incorporated into an enhanced reserve system where biodiversity is protected, jobs are created in eco-tourism, conservation, nature-based education and nature-based health interventions.

Conclusion

DEA calls for the Victorian RFAs to be abandoned. They have no place in the ecological situation we find ourselves in currently with runaway climate change and biodiversity loss contributing to an extinction crisis. With the enormous stress on natural systems due to these environmental challenges, in addition to population and development pressures, we need to build on Victoria's formal reserve system by creating new National Parks and expanding current reserves.

Key recommendations

- Abandon Victorian Regional Forestry Agreements.
- Increase spending on Parks Victoria to 1% of the annual State Budget.
- Expand reserve system to include new national parks.
- Expand understanding of values of forests to include ecosystem services and their relevance to human health and wellbeing.
- Expand understanding of forest related occupations to include those relating to health, education and scientific discovery as well as eco-tourism and recreation.
- Enhanced protection for biodiversity with removal of exemptions for logging and other extractive industries from national environmental laws like the EPBC Act.
- Foster research to better understand potential for climate mitigation by forests and threats to forests posed by bushfires and climate change.
- Continue moratorium on onshore unconventional gas extraction in Victoria.
- Act urgently to address climate change through mitigation which includes a just and rapid transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, protection of carbon sinks like forests and other natural areas and prioritisation of public and active transport over road projects.
- Protect 'green wedges' around Melbourne and abandon plans to build major road projects which threaten natural assets ie. North-east link and duplication of Western Highway near Ararat.

References

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⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-25/federal-government-rejects-indigenous-bid-to-save-trees/10749388>

⁵ <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/search-for-underground-gas-set-to-ramp-up-as-prices-hit-10-year-high-20190412-p51dof.html>

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⁷ www.vnpa.org.au/regional-forest-agreements