

Make a submission – Contact Details

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Stakeholder type (circle)*: Industry Group

Organisation name: Newell's Creek Sawmilling Co

What is your preferred contact method (circle): email

Would you like to receive further information and updates on IFOA and forestry matters? Yes

Can the EPA make your submission public* (circle)? Yes

Have you previously engaged with the EPA on forestry issues? Yes

1. What parts of the draft Coastal IFOA are most important to you? Why?

Newell's Creek Sawmilling Co (NCS) is interested in entire draft Coastal IFOA and considers all parts to be important. As a regulatory instrument IFOAs are a critical determinant of the timber industry's continuing commercial viability and its vital importance to regional economies in NSW. The way and extent to which native timber harvesting operations is regulated has an impact on the amount, type and quality of timber that comes to market and its price. All sectors within the NSW hardwood timber supply chain will in some way be affected by the IFOA remake.

2. What parts of the draft Coastal IFOA do you think have a positive outcome on the management of environmental values or the production of sustainable timber? Why?

NCS supports the need for an effective regulatory instrument that maintains forest values in accordance with ecologically sustainable forest management (ESFM) principles. NCS also recognises the value of operating rules which are transparent and easy to interpret. The consultation draft is much easier to read and interpret than the existing IFOAs. The new layout is also an improvement allowing detailed information to be more easily found. Splitting the instrument into Conditions and Protocols is supported as it will enable prescriptive details to be more easily updated. In terms of enforceability there can be no doubt that the draft is water tight comprising almost 250 pages of detailed regulation.

3. What parts of the draft Coastal IFOA do you think have a negative outcome on the management of environmental values or the production of sustainable timber? Why?

The consultation draft introduces a raft of new conditions and protocols and additional layers of complexity. Of all the proposed changes the new individual tree retention prescriptions pose the greatest risk to sustainable timber supply, particularly those relating to koala habitat retention. The industry is totally committed to the protection of the koala and the recent research by Dr Brad Law indicates that the koala numbers are far higher than previously thought. So simple tree retention strategies will not necessarily improve the population of koalas.

NCS accepts that the proposed changes are designed to improve accountability and transparency. What appears to have been overlooked is at what cost? Potentially the general increase in the number and type of regulatory obligations might manifest themselves in higher harvesting rates. Harvesting rates for high quality sawlog are borne by the industry (not the Forestry Corporation) and consequently its competitiveness.

It can be anticipated that the proposed changes will also likely impact on forest productivity, timber quality, quantity and species mix. If history is any guide, these impacts will subtly emerge over time (years). In the absence of any testing or trials we can only guess at their quantum and timing.

Excessive regulation of operational activities is also having a perverse effect on the culture and mindset of Forestry Corporation staff and the industry contractors that they employ. The Forestry Corporation's senior management are focussed on their compliance obligations when their skills and expertise should be used for the wider benefit of state forests, other forest tenures and improved forestry outcomes. This results in activities which are subject to minimal regulatory oversight now, being given minimal attention. Controlled burning, road and trail maintenance, pest and weed control and infrastructure maintenance have all become lower priority activities which are afforded minimal resources.

Under the IFOA draft penalty changes, Forestry Corporation has acknowledged that its exposure to potential fines and prosecutions is greatly enhanced and that to mitigate this risk, the Corporation may shift responsibility to harvesting contractors. Shifting more of the regulatory burden onto contractors will have two effects; harvesting rates will rise and the commercial attractiveness of the activity will decline (as a consequence of the increased liability).

In summary, the excessive regulatory control model being proposed by the EPA will not deliver positive ESFM outcomes envisaged because of the lack of acknowledgment that forestry science has equal weighting with environmental science. These impacts are not in the overall public interest.

4. What are your views on the effectiveness of the combination of permanent environmental protections at the regional, landscape and operational scales (multi-scale protection)?

NCS has consistently advocated for careful consideration of environmental protection at the regional, landscape and operational scale. Before the EPA was involved in the regulation of forest management the then Forestry Commission employed professional foresters who applied the multi-scale protection principle which achieved the same aim. This was undertaken without the need for excessive prescriptive regulation.

The benefit of the less regulated approach was that it gave the organisation flexibility and discretion to optimise the management of all forest values not just those considered important to the EPA whose charter is only focussed on environmental values.

5. In your opinion, would the draft Coastal IFOA be effective in managing environmental values and a sustainable timber industry? Why?

The source of concern about the IFOA regulatory approach is that it attempts to deliver an outcome to environmental critics rather than demonstrate that forestry can operate as a renewable and sustainable activity with improved environmental values. Ever increasing regulation appears to correlate with the politicisation of forestry operations in concert with the philosophy demonstrated by some government agencies that oppose in principle any forestry practices.

A major consequence of the draft IFOA's political focus is a lack of attention to the calculation of sustainable timber supply. There is no publicly available information about how the impact of the new operating conditions and protocols will affect sustained timber yield. The lack of accountability and transparency around this key issue is deeply concerning for the industry. It is unreasonable that the industry is expected to accept at face value that the proposed changes will have no effect on timber supply.

The proposal to ensure retained trees in permanently protected clumps is an example of a significant change whose effect has not been tested. NCS acknowledges the practical benefits of clumping but are not convinced that such a rigid commitment to the concept has been fully considered. What is known is that the distribution of our native forests trees (in terms of their age, species, condition and structure) is highly unpredictable. Trees with environmental values like hollows do not naturally occur in clumps, they are randomly spread across the landscape.

Similarly, the location of individual trees that are preferred browsing by koalas is unpredictable. Trying to clump trees for environmental protection purposes will not work if they are not distributed in this way. Large old trees which have good habitat value typically have no value for commercial timber. Where these and other trees - with special environmental value - occur in isolation it is unclear how they will be treated and how their influence on timber productivity and sustainable supply will be modelled.

The IFOA draft's focus on the identification and recording of trees for 'permanent retention' is of concern to the industry. Forests are dynamic ecosystems which are constantly changing.

The use of new mapping technology is presented as the answer to addressing an additional compliance burden and the growing complexity of environmental protection rules. The recording of the location of individual trees and important environmental features will undoubtedly increase transparency and will hopefully also reduce ambiguity. GPS accuracy – there needs to be some tolerance built into the IFOA for operators around GPS accuracy. The increase in fines has operators rightfully scared and there is nowhere it says there is tolerance for GPS accuracy issues. Operators need to know if they try and do the right thing to locate boundaries with GPS they can't get pinned because the EPA come back after the event and find a 5m breach due to GPS accuracy.

6. General comments

A disappointing fact is that the NSW Department of Primary Industry (DPI) appears to have no role in the IFOA remake process. It is our understanding that DPI is meant to be taking a lead role in the development of forestry policy being instrumental in the underpinning of the NSW Forestry Industry Roadmap. With significant specialist forestry science resources NSW DPI could have contributed enormously to address the aspects of sustainable timber supply which are of critical concern to the industry. Had DPI been part of the negotiations with Forestry Corporation and the NSW EPA it could have also facilitated a more open and transparent process.