

SOUTH EAST TIMBER ASSOCIATION SUBMISSION TO THE TEN & FIFTEEN YEAR REVIEWS OF THE NSW REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENTS

Regional Forest Agreement Principles.

The principles underpinning the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) were to:

- establish a framework for the management of forests in the RFA regions;
- identify areas and regions that the Parties believe are required for the purposes of a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserve system, and provide for the conservation of those areas;
- provide for the ecologically sustainable management and use of forested areas in the Regions: and
- provide long-term stability of forests and forest industries.

The South East Timber Association (SETA) agrees with and supports those principles.

While the first principle has been met, SETA believes that the second point has been over-subscribed. With almost eighty percent of public land in NSW being in formal parks and reserves and large areas of the remaining two million hectares of State Forests being unavailable for timber supply, due to environmental requirements, the RFAs have failed to provide long-term stability of forests and forest industries.

SETA is most concerned that the current regulatory and management framework fails to provide ecologically sustainable management in either the parks and reserves or the remaining areas of State Forest. In addition, environmental charities and various activist groups continue to harness an ill-informed public to put an end to timber production in all Australian native forests, on the simple assumption that a simple change of land tenure will ensure the survival of a currently growing list of threatened species.

As the review is so long overdue, SETA comments will focus on the RFA principles, rather than the raft of commitments detailed in the report.

What is Wrong With the Current Conservation Framework?

The current conservation framework appears to have roots in the concept of terra nullius (nobody's land). Conservation management language, concepts and practices that underpin the terra nullius approach, include wilderness, precautionary approach and passive management. For example, the precautionary approach is too often used as an excuse to do nothing.

A common management principle for NSW National Parks, Nature Reserves and State conservation areas, is *the conservation of biodiversity and the maintenance of ecosystem function (National Parks & Wildlife Act 1974)*. In a practical sense this largely defaults to passive management, with some fuel reduction or ecological burning across a small percentage of the estate each year.

Consequently, understorey in many forest areas is much denser and there is much more competition for soil water. With altered fire regimes, nutrient cycles have changed and flammable litter levels are at an all-time high, compared to historical (more than 200 years ago) times.

The frequency of intense wildfires has increased and once large bushfires have become mega fires. Unhealthy forests (dying branches replaced with epicormic crowns) have become the norm and bell birds have become a scape goat, when they are merely reacting to the more favourable breeding conditions that unhealthy forests create for nesting and their prime food source, psyllids.

SETA is concerned that the terra nullius management approach, including insufficient traditional and/or ecological burning and insufficient broad scale predator control, is leading



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South East Timber Association Inc PO Box 773 Eden NSW 2551

to suboptimal conservation outcomes across large areas of the NSW conservation reserve system. The same issues also affect parts of the state forest estate to a varying extent.

The burning that is done is generally too infrequent and has poor operational implementation, including lighting lines of fire around perimeters, across the wind and from the bottom of slopes and hills. When large blocks are burnt in one day, significant areas of the block may be subject to higher than desired fire intensity.

What Needs to Change?

The existing regulatory frameworks need to be amended to codify active and adaptive management as a blue print for future ecologically sustainable forest management across all land tenures.

Scientific research needs to be interpreted in the context of over 50,000 years of management, at a landscape level, by aboriginal people. The combination of aboriginal and natural fires had a fundamental effect on the development of ecology and ecosystems that existed at the time of European arrival.

The loss of aboriginal management of the land has created a major ecological disturbance, that many ecologists fail to recognise, when interpreting research results. The problem is further exacerbated when scientists report research outcomes, with an eco-political agenda, rather than a specific scientific objective.

Parks and reserve managers must undertake co-ordinated surveys for a broader range of key species and report on a five yearly basis, in line with RFA reporting, to demonstrate the CAR reserve system is delivering the conservation outcomes that were expected at the time this land was reserved. The limited amount of work that has been done makes it clear that ecologically sustainable forest management is not being achieved.

If the CAR reserve system provided the environmental services that should be produced, the pressure to transfer more land from production forests to the reserve system would be greatly reduced.

SETA believes that the ongoing campaign to close down all native forest harvesting will shift more and more of the impact of Australia's forests product consumption offshore, often to countries with lower environmental protection standards. This is unacceptable.



Harvested & Regenerating Australian Forest



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When members of the public respond to this issue with a simple "so what" or believe that NSW only has ten to fifteen percent of public land in the parks and reserves, this highlights that the public is not in a good position to make informed contributions to the native forest debate.

Conclusion

The politicisation of forest reservation decisions, such as the 2010 redgum decision, will support an immoral shift of environmental impacts offshore and decimate small regional



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communities. For example, the combined impact of the Victorian and NSW government red gum reserve decisions resulted in a twenty three percent decrease in visitor numbers to the town of Mathoura within four years.

For over 25 years, small communities across NSW have experienced negative social impacts following cutbacks to the native forest industries. The promised replacement jobs in eco-tourism have proved to be nothing more than eco-activist and political hot air.

Native forest management across all tenures must be driven by active and adaptive management processes, that incorporate a historical ecological perspective.

Parks and reserves must to subject to higher levels of biodiversity monitoring, with five yearly reporting in line with RFA reviews.

A reformed conservation management framework will allow for the ongoing use of less than twenty percent of the total public native forest estate for the sustainable production of forest products, as well as providing a fair share of environmental and recreational services.

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SETA President

