



Bendigo Forest Management Plan

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Submission by TCA Victorian Office

Timber Communities Australia would like to thank the planning staff involved in the Proposed Management Plan for their efforts in producing a document that may become a model for all future plans.

With the completion of the ECC Box and Ironbark report some 6 years ago, the framework was set in place to develop a plan to address the ECC findings. Whilst this has caused great pain and stress in many communities and particularly the Timber Industry, the affected people of the region have continued to work with DSE and move forwards with the limited timber resources available to them.

This plan accepts forests as a living thing and has put processes in place that will allow for the changing values of forests as they grow and mature. TCA hopes that this plan will deliver the certainty and stability required for the future of the timber industry.

The vision (P.2) set out for how the Box and Ironbark forests are to be managed encompasses a wide range of views. Whilst community involvement is a good thing, care must be taken as to not follow the disastrous Wombat community forest program path. Forests are best managed by foresters if a wide range of uses are to be delivered. Forests should never be managed for politics as has become the practice over recent years.

People and Forests

Forests tend to draw out a range of emotions whenever they are discussed. Most of the concern comes from a lack of knowledge into how forests are managed. The plan talks about involving the wider public in management. TCA would like to see more effort into educating the public on all aspects of forest use.

There is, unfortunately, a group of people involved in the forest debate who will not give any ground. The extreme greens that wish to lock everything up never want to meet halfway. This has been demonstrated time and time again through various forests management processes. Bush user groups have always given ground in the name of sustainability. It is about time that extreme environmentalist's views were ignored if we are going to get to a truly workable forest plan.

There has been enough pain inflicted on the timber industry in the attempt to appease the green movement. Areas such as the Wellsford forest are on the environment movement wish list even though there has been no scientifically based reason to include them in the reserve system. This is an area that will be important to the viability of the timber industry and we are concerned that too much ill informed people pressure may change this.

TCA accepts that communities want to be involved in forest management. We do not want to see forests being managed to satisfy the political climate. Forests management decisions should be underpinned by science not emotion.

Biodiversity Conservation

This plan builds on the ECC report and delivers the outcomes that were set out to obtain biodiversity values. The concept of adaptive management is often talked about and it is refreshing to see this concept being applied to a forest management plan.

It is still somewhat frustrating that sustainable timber harvesting is seen as a potentially threatening process. There is still no evidence of species extinction due to sustainable timber harvesting operations, indeed species loss has occurred mainly due to urban development.

There needs to be more research undertaken into the links between forest disturbance and biodiversity enrichment. Even though it is outside the scope of this plan this link needs to be investigated to ensure that management techniques are best practice. It is somewhat ironic that when you research most forest reports there is always a rare or threatened species population occurring in areas of past disturbance.

This is not a real surprise as it is the nature of Eucalypt forest to thrive with disturbance. The box and ironbark forests have been regularly disturbed by indigenous firestick practices for thousands of years to more recent disturbance in being heavily utilised through the gold era. Through all this native species have managed to survive and adapt to disturbance.

The desire to reserve more areas to expand the forest base set aside through Janis criteria requirements is something that will have impacts on the timber industry. The ECCC process set areas aside for this requirement and if the expansion of the reserve system is being undertaken to fulfil this requirement then it can be accepted. If it is another excuse for a land grab for green appeasement then it is intolerable for the timber industry.

The army base at Puckapunyal should also be included when setting aside reserve areas. It is quite ludicrous to have such a large tract of forest not included in the forest estate because it comes under federal jurisdiction. Trees don't recognise federal and state boundaries' and neither should we when calculating forest estates.

Cultural Heritage and the Landscape

Our desire to protect cultural heritage sites whilst accepted as a good practice needs to be carefully monitored so as to avoid over protection at the expense of other user groups. It is also somewhat perplexing as to those people that are opposed to the timber industry are so keen to see history preserved yet they will not

accept the presence of traditional and historic forest users such as the timber industry.

Landscape and scenic values reservations can be a point for debate. In the Box and Ironbark forests scenic values often comprise larger trees and with protection measures that are already in place there seems little value in putting areas of forest into reserves for just scenic values.

Water Catchments and others

With current timber practices and regulations water catchment protection is a non issue. Public perceptions are the danger in regards to this matter. As with most forest issues the general public are unaware of the prescriptions, regulations and legislation that overlay any harvesting operation. If the public were educated on this matter there would be better understanding and less anti forestry sentiment within the community.

Issues such as fire and pests are given greater emphasis than the benefits of sustainable forest management. TCA accepts that it is vital to educate the public on these important matters but would like to see more efforts made into informing the greater public of the benefits and importance of the timber industry.

Timber

TCA commends DSE for its commitment to local timber production. In the forest debate, local forest users are deemed more environmentally friendly and acceptable. Process such as the UN forest forums recognise this and the challenge is for DSE to follow their lead and give greater emphasis to those local business that are contributing to their local communities. To achieve this goal to local value adding and employment TCA believes that DSE could change some of the criteria in the tendering process to give more weight to business that are located within the FMA and are undertaking steps to value add and expand their business.

To have a successful resource based business certainty of supply is a key component. Changes to log sizes will affect the industry. Consideration needs to be given to bark thickness in determining log size. In the case of ironbark the 65cm log size should remain to compensate for bark thickness.

It should also be noted that much of the yellow gum forest types have been included in the reserve system. This timber is important to the timber industry and the locking up of such a large percentage will be detrimental to businesses that have established markets around this timber.

Longer terms for licenses would also alleviate the stresses and concerns for the timber industry. To allow for investment and growth this matter needs to be looked into. Whether it is 3, 5 or 10 year licenses that are awarded, there is a need to move away from the current annual tendering process. Once this is achieved the position

for many of timber related business will be more secure and attractive for investors and those seeking to work within the industry.

Since the ECC report and the reduction of commercial firewood cutters firewood theft has become a threatening process for forest biodiversity values. Commercial cutters operated under the code of forest practice and DSE supervision. This meant that only trees that were within harvesting prescriptions were harvested. What is occurring now is that many of the trees larger trees and hollow bearing trees that were left are being indiscriminately cut down placing biodiversity values at risk.

This problem could be alleviated by extending the collection period for local communities as well as making access available to areas closer to towns. Making permits more obtainable could also help reduce this problem. Utilising local business as points where permits could be obtained could help ensure that people purchase a permit.

Of course the logical step would be for DSE to be given more staff to help with forest management. If this could be achieved then many of the forest issues could be researched or managed to find a balanced outcome. To achieve this will require the willingness of government to put on more staff. This is something that environmentalists and the Timber industry could work with each other on to achieve better forest outcomes.

Summary

There has been enough pain and suffering felt in the forest communities that utilise the box and ironbark forests. The ECC process set aside enough forests to meet the Janis criteria and the remaining forest estate can now be managed to deliver best outcomes for all forest values.

This plan should help deliver this outcome. We are cautiously optimistic that if this plan is applied in the right manner it can lead to a brighter future for the timber industry. There is another group who believe the timber industry has no place in the forest. If their views are deemed to be more acceptable than science then the plan will be a dismal failure.

The plan (with a few suggested amendments) should end much of the debate and see the Box and Ironbark forests as the benchmark for how all forests can be managed to provide a sustainable future, both economically and ecologically for the communities who are a part of them

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