

RED GUM still the answer . . . ?

Vic Eddy: The red gum forest's ability to sustainably supply the demands of the Victorian Rail System for timber sleepers.

There is no problem with maintaining the current level of sleeper production if the current commercial forests are maintained, and no further misguided precautionary restrictions are imposed on harvesting in those forests. In fact if reliable markets could be found to sell products from small and inferior trees and forest residue, these forests could be far more drought proof and also experience improved growth rates.

Where patches of forest have been adequately thinned using best silvicultural practice there is very little sign of the current flood drought.

The trees have healthy crowns and are showing good growth. In recent years the impact of a very active, but misguided, conservation movement has severely limited our ability to maintain these forests in good condition. While lack of flooding is seen as the primary cause of ill health, the fact these forests are now far denser than 100 years ago is badly affecting the trees least adapted to tough conditions. Drought is often more likely to kill the bigger, better, and older trees because they are not as well adapted as the forest runts to tough conditions.

River red gum is a tenacious and invasive species, demonstrated by the fact it has the widest natural distribution of all the Eucalypt species. It is only here in the Murray-Darling Basin that the floods and floodplains are good enough to support forest formation. Much of today's forest has developed from open woodland in the last 150 years due to the way it has been managed. I guess that we are now finding that the worst fault of our management has been keeping too many trees to compete for limited soil moisture in times of stress, like now.

A well spaced vigorous forest will grow bigger and better habitat trees, and timber trees, better and faster than an overstocked suppressed forest. An open forest also maintains a greater and healthier range of biodiversity.

VEAC staff have agreed during the current consultation process that red gum forests in National Parks will need thinning. The problem with that is that in a National Park the thinning will be to waste as it can't be sold.

All it will do is increase the fire fuel load on the forest floor. *Is that Smart?*

I don't think the red gum forests have ever been the sole supplier of sleepers to Victorian Railways. Conversion of State Forests to National Parks in recent years has severely affected the supply of alternatives to red gum, though some broad gauge sleepers are currently being produced in East Gippsland.

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Twenty-one per cent of the Victorian System was already on concrete sleepers by mid 2005. The river red gum forests may not be able to meet Victoria's total demand for timber sleepers on their own, but they can maintain supply for a substantial proportion of the demand. Hence the industry objects strongly to unfounded criticism of its forest practices and the environmental qualifications of its product.

In recent years red gum sleepers have been supplied to rail customers from North-east NSW to South-west W.A. Since rail track maintenance was privatised, sleeper producers have supplied to a wide range of customers.

Before privatisation of rail maintenance, most of the red gum sleeper producers in both Victoria and NSW were committed to VicRail.

Today, sleeper production competes with the demand for other sawn products. Sawn timber producers are constantly looking for stable long term markets in preference to short term and fickle markets. Any industry hates to lose what it regards as a traditional market but if that market is unreliable the timber will be sold to the best buyer. Any trees that could have supplied sleepers to the Victorian tracks will still be cut, but sawn into other products for other markets.

At the moment the sleeper market has been de-stabilised in NSW so there are suppliers who would be only too happy to make up any shortfall of supply in Victoria on a permanent basis.

There can be various purposes, such as high speed and high tonnage, that justify or demand the higher cost of concrete. In Northern Australia, railways are forced to use concrete because of the species of termites that occur there. There are other areas though where the life of a concrete sleeper is no more than timber or even less.

In recent times a report has been taken out of context and misquoted to claim that the use of timber is less environmentally friendly than concrete. In truth, carbon emissions in the production and laying of concrete sleepers only favours concrete if you assume that none of the track seat steel is reused with timber sleepers and you also disregard the storage of carbon in the timber and the replacement forest growth.

Carbon storage related to maintaining the length of timber sleepers track in Victoria (Mid 2005) is equivalent to 5,900,000 tonnes of Carbon Dioxide. The concrete sleepers track, existing at that time, had caused the emission of an estimated 432,400 tonnes of Carbon Dioxide from fossil sources and the storage of none.

(Based on criteria accepted by the Australian Greenhouse Office.)