

REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENTS REPORT

The Regional Forest Agreements: failed experiments in native forest management

NPA Senior Ecologist, Oisín Sweeney, has written a report analysing the aims and outcomes of the Regional Forest Agreements in NSW which will be launched in early May, 2016. Here's a taste of what the report contains.

Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) are 20-year agreements between the state and federal governments that were designed to provide for multiple use of public native forests, including nature conservation, timber extraction and recreation. Many dedicated people, including staff at NPWS and some NPA members, went to great lengths to engage with the RFA process; and there were some good outcomes, such as the addition of significant areas to the reserve network. However, the process of RFA development was flawed and subsequent governance in regards to formal changes to the RFAs and timely reporting has not been to a sufficient standard. The RFAs had a number of key aims which were evaluated in the study to determine the degree of success of the RFA model, and provide recommendations as to the future management of native forests in light of the findings. Those aims were:

1. Identify areas in the region or regions that the parties believe are required for the purposes of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System, and provide for the conservation of those areas;
2. Provide for the ecologically sustainable management and use of forested areas in the regions;
3. Provide for the long-term stability of forests and forest industries; and
4. Have regard to studies and projects carried out in relation to all of the following matters that are relevant to the regions:
 - i. Environmental values, including old-growth, wilderness, endangered species, National Estate values and World Heritage values;
 - ii. Indigenous heritage values;
 - iii. Economic values of forested areas and forest industries;
 - iv. Social values (including community needs); and
 - v. Principles of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management.

It's not possible to analyse all of these in detail here, but some of the key issues of concern to NPA members will be the impacts on nature and protected areas, and these are addressed here:

Australian forests in context

When we consider native forest logging, it's important to put Australian forests in their global context: Australia has one of the lowest total areas of closed forest cover on earth at just 4% of land mass, approximately 50% of woodland and forest ecosystems have already been destroyed and 70% of remaining forests are degraded by logging. The Forests of East Australia were listed in 2011 as the world's 35th Biodiversity Hotspot (hotspots are areas with exceptional concentrations of endemic species coupled with high loss of habitat), recognising them as globally significant to the world's biodiversity. In the Forests of East Australia, 77% of forest cover has been lost completely or degraded, and protected areas cover only 18% of the hotspot. The hotspot incorporates two RFA regions of NSW entirely (Upper North East and Lower North

East) and a portion of the Southern RFA region. The Southwest Forest RFA Region of Western Australia is also entirely contained within a Biodiversity Hotspot, Southwest Australia. Almost unbelievably, eastern Australia was identified by WWF in 2015 as a deforestation front (the only developed country to have this dubious distinction).

Although the RFA process did see a lot of land added to the reserve system, the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system was not achieved as promised. In addition, current reserves are biased towards steep or infertile land and do not protect those ecosystems most vulnerable to clearing, or which are already most compromised. So there is a long way to go to ensure the unique values of Australia's forests are protected.

Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management

Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM) sounds great: just adhere to these principles and we can log forests and maintain the natural values *ad infinitum*. You know the phrase if it sounds too good to be true? Well, unfortunately there is an inherent contradiction between managing forests under the principles of ESFM and maximising wood production and profits: this is simply because measures to protect the environment, like employing ecologists and carrying out pre and post-harvest surveys, add costs and reduce the ability of Forestry Corporation to compete with plantation-grown timber including, ironically, eucalypt plantations overseas. Tragically, instead of seeing this intractable situation as a reason to end logging and complete the transition to plantations (which already supply over 80% of our wood) the response has been to develop a new set of logging rules that reduce the need for on-ground surveys and provide for shorter rotations.

Native forest logging is identified as a threat to forest fauna as it drives habitat destruction and the loss of key habitat features such as large old trees and the hollows they possess. Logging is identified as a contributing factor to the Key Threatening Process in NSW 'loss of hollow-bearing trees' because it shifts the age-class distribution of trees from old, hollow-bearing trees to younger trees with fewer hollows. The most recent NSW State of the Environment Report shows that native forest logging is now responsible for by far the greatest loss of canopy in the state. These impacts are the reason that hollow-dependant wildlife is most sensitive to logging. One of the more sobering findings was research from the 1980s that used counts of dead animals by logging crews to determine distributions of arboreal mammals. Over 900 dead animals were recorded, including yellow-bellied gliders, greater gliders, feather-tailed gliders, sugar gliders, pygmy possums, brush-tailed possums and ring-tailed possums.

So besides the insidious impacts of logging, such as the loss of tree hollows, bell-miner associated dieback, changes to fire regimes and impacts on soil and water, there are direct and lethal impacts on some of our most special species.

Climate change

Since the signing of the RFAs climate change has become the number one global conservation issue, and the Paris meeting recognised the huge importance of forests to help tackle climate change. Fortunately for Australia, some of the best forest carbon scientists are located here! Those scientists have shown that temperate eucalypt forests in Australia are the most carbon-dense in the world. But unfortunately, 44% percent of carbon stocks have already been lost from Australian forests and logged forests store between 40 and 60% less carbon than undisturbed forests. There are thus substantial emissions reductions to be gained from simply ending logging. However, transfer of carbon away from forests is increasing, not decreasing as we so desperately need. So forests are acting as a carbon source not a carbon



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sink. To make matters worse, over 50% of the wood from forests is turned into short-lived materials such as pallets and paper, and therefore the carbon they contain is quickly returned to the atmosphere where it speeds up climate change. Not exactly the optimal use of such important forests.

What happens next?

We're at a crucial crossroads: the 20-year RFAs are due to expire over the coming years and this gives Australia an outstanding opportunity to take the next leap in environment protection. But Commonwealth policy is to roll over the RFAs. The findings of the report suggest that this would be an irrational decision that we will pay dearly for: we need to make sure that the government understands that we want wood that doesn't cost the lives of our wildlife and contribute to climate change.

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