

Audit criticises VicForests bid for green rating

■ Stephen Cauchi

VicForests needs to “significantly” improve its care of the state’s forests if it wants international accreditation of its timber products, according to an unflattering audit.

VicForests, a Victorian government-owned business, is seeking certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), based in Germany, to demonstrate that its harvesting of the state’s timber is sustainable, ethical, and protects natural forest. FSC accreditation is widely recognised in the paper and printing industries and would allow VicForests to more effectively market its products to environmentally-conscious customers.

But the FSC’s preliminary assessment report, handed down in June, criticised VicForests and highlighted a number of areas that needed reform before certification could be considered. FSC rejected VicForests’ first attempt for certification in 2008.

In its summary, FSC stated that VicForests’ wood-harvesting

standards showed “significant deficiencies”. “Significant modifications” to the current forest management system would be required to meet certification, said the report. But provided this was done, VicForests would have a “realistic” chance of being accepted.

VicForests needed to improve in dozens of areas, according to the audit. These included better:

- Natural forest management.
- Controlled burning.
- Retention of downed woody debris and standing “stags” within regeneration harvest areas.
- Recognition of Aboriginal tenure.
- Ways of reaching out to critics.
- Communication with stakeholders, including non-government organisations.

VicForests should also look at supplying products other than saw logs and pulp, it said.

The audit is the latest stumbling block for VicForests. It has been criticised by environmentalists for logging bushfire-ravaged mountain ash forests in the central highlands, home to Victoria’s endangered faunal emblem, the Leadbeater’s



possum. It has also faced criticism for being an inefficient business, losing \$22.1 million from forestry activities since 2005.

VicForests corporate affairs director Nathan Trushell said the organisation had a reasonable chance of getting a certificate and none of the problems were insurmountable.

VicForests would be making “major changes to our harvesting practices” with regards to the Leadbeater’s possum, he said. “We’ve had a robust process with the Leadbeater’s advisory group ...

we knew it was something [that] needed to be addressed.”

The report was by the California-based auditors SCS Global Services. Mr Trushell said VicForests deliberately chose a “frank and fearless” auditor.

This was to avoid a repeat of 2008, where the final audit rejected VicForests’ bid despite a “very encouraging” preliminary assessment. Mr Trushell said there was “discontentment” with the FSC after the rejection. Since then, “we’ve reconsidered our position and we’re comfortable with where

Logging in Leadbeater’s possum habitat in Victoria is just one of many activities that have sparked criticism of VicForests.

FSC as an organisation is heading. We are comfortable with seeking certification, we are well placed.”

He said certification was being sought in two stages: a controlled wood certification by 2015, and full certification the following year.

Controlled wood certification ensures timber is legally harvested and doesn’t result in forest being converted into plantations.

Griffith University academic Tim Cadman, an adviser to environmental groups such as the Wilderness Society, said VicForests had to greatly improve consultation with other stakeholders if it was to get an FSC certificate.

VicForests needed to recognise FSC certification was not business as usual, he said. “You can’t do tokenistic consultation in order to tick a box. You have to listen to the stakeholders and incorporate their requirements into your management strategies in addition to delivering specifically on how you are going to protect high conservation values.”

FSC is one of two forest certification schemes available. The other, which VicForests has gained, is the Australian Forestry Standard. AFS is recognised by the Program for Endorsement of Forest Certification, the world’s largest forest certification scheme.