



Submission from RFPG on Timber Release Plan (TRP) Proposed Changes, Jan 2018

The RFPG considers that the proposed TRP changes that apply to the Rubicon State Forest and the Marysville State Forest contravene five mandatory actions required by the *2014 Code of Practice for Timber Production* (the Code) and that a new TRP should be prepared that is consistent with the Code.

As a result we reject all the proposed changes to the TRP, which we will elaborate in more detail.

This should not be taken to mean that we agree with the TRP as it stands – we do not. In line with our July 2016 submission on the 2016 TRP change proposals, and our earlier submission *Unsustainable!* made to the VicForests Board, we consider that the TRP as it stood, and as it now stands is wholly unsustainable, also from a timber supply perspective.

Contravention of Mandatory Planning Principles

The five mandatory actions contravened are:

- A. 2.1.1.1 Long-term forest management planning must . . . (ii) . . . provide for the perpetuation of native biodiversity¹
- B. 2.1.1.1 Long-term forest management planning must . . . (v) . . . minimise impact on water quality and quantity within any particular catchment
- C. 2.1.1.1 Long-term forest management planning must . . . (vi) . . . minimise adverse visual impact in landscape sensitivity areas²
- D. 2.2.2.2 The precautionary principle must be applied to the conservation of biodiversity values. The application of the precautionary principle³ will be consistent with relevant monitoring and research that has improved the understanding of the effects of forest management on forest ecology and conservation values.
- E. 2.2.2.3 The advice of relevant experts and relevant research in conservation biology and flora and fauna management must be considered when planning and conducting timber harvesting operations.

We outline below our reasons for making these assertions on the following pages, but are prepared to reconsider these arguments should VicForests provide evidence to refute them in the meeting we have sought with the planning section experts responsible for developing the TRP.

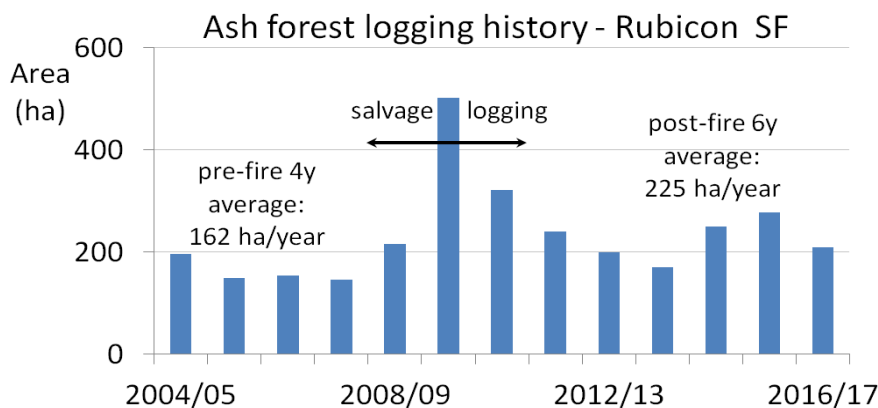
¹ **'biodiversity'** is defined under the Code to mean the natural diversity of all life: the sum of all our native species of flora and fauna, the genetic variation within them, their habitats, and the ecosystems of which they are an integral part.

² **'landscape sensitivity area'** is defined under the Code to mean areas identified as having a high scenic quality and visual sensitivity. They are usually areas that are readily visible from high-usage recreational facilities such as look-outs, walking tracks, tourist roads, or campsites.

³ **'precautionary principle'** is defined under the Code to mean when contemplating decisions that will affect the environment, careful evaluation of management options be undertaken to wherever practical avoid serious or irreversible damage to the environment; and to properly assess the risk-weighted consequences of various options. When dealing with threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.

A – Failure to provide for the perpetuation of native biodiversity.

As shown below timber harvesting (excluding fire salvage harvesting) in the Rubicon State Forest has increased by 40 per cent since the 2009 fire, despite the extensive area on the Blue Range killed in the fire.



However, for every hectare harvested, at least half as much again is impacted by roading and exposure to wind, fire, weeds, especially blackberries, and pests, especially deer, as a consequence of ecologically inadequate coupe boundary and watercourse buffers. Therefore while VicForests figures may indicate that there is around 8,000 ha of '39 ash regrowth still available for logging⁴, much of this is associated with, or within, previously logged coupes and so is seriously ecologically compromised. If all the areas on the TRP, as proposed, are harvested, all broadly intact areas of '39 regrowth across the entire Rubicon State Forest will be gone. This will leave most of the Rubicon State Forest under 30 years old, most of it under 20, and so ecologically vulnerable to further inevitable fires and to climate change.

Across the Central FMA logging rates are now around double those envisaged in the Allocation Orders of 2004 and 2007, ahead of the devastation wrought by the 2009 fire.

The scale and intensity of logging in the nine years since the 2009 fire is starkly seen on the Royston Range where there are at least two areas of aggregated coupes exceeding the 120 ha contiguous threshold required by the Management Standards. These contiguous coupe areas are themselves largely surrounded by logged coupes the bare minimum 20m buffer separating them from each other

The proposed dramatic increase in harvesting on the Torbreck Range envisaged under the TRP change proposals will see it and the Snobs Creek valley suffer a similar fate to that of the Rubicon and Royston River valleys and the adjoining ranges.

Crucially, from an ecologically perspective the Rubicon State Forest contains probably the largest contiguous area of alpine and mountain ash forest area in Victoria. Under these circumstances it plays a special role in the conservation of the biodiversity of this 'combination ash forest ecosystem'. For this role to be fulfilled, basic ecological principles require much greater protection from harvesting than the TRP, now and as proposed, entails.

As is argued below the precautionary principle has not been applied, and nor would it seem has the relevant conservation biology research, or the views of relevant conservation experts been properly considered.

The combination of these circumstances means that section 2.1.1.1.ii of the Code has been breached.

⁴ This figure applies to the Alexandra Forest District, and so includes some ash forest areas in the Black Range State Forest. The residual '39 regrowth in the Rubicon State Forest will therefore be even less.

B – Failure to minimise impact on water quality and quantity

The Rubicon State Forest spans two major water catchments: the Royston/Rubicon and Snobs Creek.

Snobs Creek supports Victoria’s only native fish hatchery at its confluence with the Goulburn River. The decision to site the hatchery at this point was made in the mid-1940s when the Snobs Creek catchment would have been covered with 39 regrowth barely 6 years old. At that time the prospect of future massive logging of the catchment, as the proposed TRP amendments foreshadow, would have been an insignificant consideration in the decision.

In the mid-60s, well before there was any prospect of logging the Snobs Creek valley, the then Fisheries and Wildlife Department which managed the hatchery, had major concerns about the prospect of riverside camping on private land upstream⁵. Were the players alive today, they would have been horrified by what the TRP and its current amendments entail.

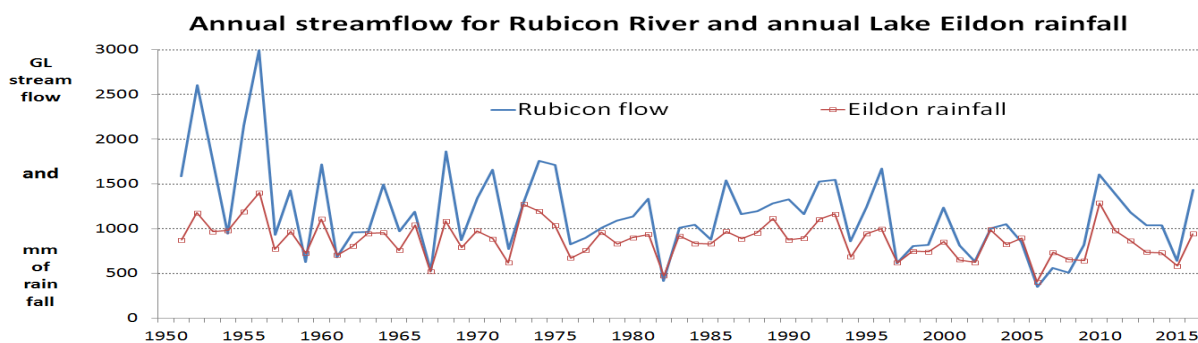
The proposed TRP amendments pay no regard to:

- the increased siltation at the hatchery that has already followed road capacity improvements along Snobs Creek Road and connecting roads, such as No.5 track,
- the inevitable further increase in turbidity, despite even the most stringent abidement (which recent practice shows to be most unlikely) with watercourse protection obligations under the Code⁶,
- the inevitable increase in water temperature at the hatchery that will follow the opening up of the many coupes (proposed and existing) along the Snobs Creek valley.

Salmonids require cold water for hatching, something that the forest planners responsible for the new coupes in the Snobs Creek Valley may not have been unaware of. The extensive previously forested areas adjacent to the creek that will be directly exposed to bare (or almost bare) ground for several years will lead to a significant water temperature increase. Crucially, cold water temperatures was a key reason why the site was originally chosen, something else that the planners may have been unaware of.

While water quantity is not a critical factor in the Snobs Creek catchment, it is certainly a critical factor in the Rubicon/Royston system. The Rubicon Hydroelectric scheme depends on the flows in these two river systems to produce a small but not insignificant share of renewable energy supplied to Victorians.

The climate was much wetter when the Rubicon Scheme was conceived, and as the chart below shows, up until the 1970s, river flow was much higher than at present despite the extra water consumed by the younger forest. But with global warming accelerating lower rainfall and lower streamflows are the new norm. Had the relevant VicForests planners been aware, as they should have been, of these trends, and paid attention to clause 2.1.1.1.v. of the Code, then the TRP amendments would have entailed a net removal of coupes rather than a net addition.



⁵ Town And Country Planning Board 19th Annual Report (1963-64), pp. 23-24

⁶ Ref current legal action by RFPG regarding non-compliant watercourse protection in the coupe “Calvin” on the Royston River

C – Adverse visual impact landscape sensitivity areas

The current TRP, and the proposed amendments, are totally at odds with section 5.3.1 of the Planning Standards. The general requirement under Code mandatory action 2.1.1.1.vi to minimise adverse visual impacts on landscape sensitivity areas is in addition to those requirements under the Code in regard to landscape protection specified elsewhere, such as in section 5.3.1 of the Management Standards and clause 6.1.1.1 of the Planning Standards. The fact that the Royston River Road, the Snobs Creek Road and the summit of Mt Torbreck may not be specified in Table 9 in Appendix 5 of the Planning Standards does not mean that their importance as landscape vantage points can be ignored. For example, the summit of Mt Torbreck, and the walk to it, is featured in the DELWP brochure on the Rubicon State Forest.

These two roads – at least their northern ends - and the summit of Mt Torbreck are significant tourist areas and undoubtedly meet the definition of ‘landscape sensitivity areas’ specified in the Code.

The northern end of Royston River Road is the principal access to the Rubicon Valley Historic and Cultural Features Reserve (RVHCFR), to the Royston Falls and to Elephant Rock all of which are of great tourist potential, especially in the light of the three camping grounds short distance away. The logging of coupes on the western flank on the Royston Range, and in the RVHCFR itself is a clear breach of the 2.1.1.1.vi.

But the logging of these areas is also a breach of section 5.3.1 of the Management Standards relating to landscape protection in the Central Highlands FMAs. It includes clause 5.3.1.6 as follows:

Middleground (500 m – 6.5 km)

5.3.1.6 In the middle ground, between 500 m and 6.5 km, seen from the features listed in table 9 in Appendix 5 of the Planning Standards:

- (a) manage timber harvesting operations to ensure landscape alterations are only subtly apparent within 5 years of the operation; and
- (b) shape, position and time timber harvesting operations and new roads to minimise their visual impact.

Table 9 of Appendix 5 of the Planning Standards lists the Rubicon Historic and Cultural Features Reserve, as one such feature (on p.142).

However the coupe Calvin (currently being logged) and the two proposed new coupes just north of it are clearly visible from the Reserve (as are Bonds and Rio which were logged last year), as of course is the proposed new coupe on the Reserve itself. The proposed re-inclusion of the coupe Holeproof is particularly egregious in the light of its removal from the TRP a year ago.

The existing TRP and the proposed amendments must be revised to ensure consistency with Clause 5.3.1.6 of the Management Standards. **At the minimum** this would include removal of the two additional coupes proposed south of Calvin, as well as the proposed new coupe on RVHCFR.

Views from the Snob’s Creek Road – which provides access to the popular Snobs Creek Falls, the Snobs Creek Wildlife Reserve and Mt Torbreck – need to be protected as far south as Conns Gap Road (which provides access to Mt Torbreck via Barnewall Plains Road) as if the road to that point were listed in Table 9 of Appendix 5. Views from the summit of Mt Torbreck likewise need to be protected as if it were listed in Table 9 of Appendix 5. These steps **are the minimum necessary** to ensure consistency with Clause 2.1.1.1.vi of the Code.

D – Failure to apply the precautionary principle

Some features of the particular ecological and conservation significance of the Rubicon State Forest are discussed above and these demand that the precautionary principle be applied. At the minimum this requires detailed on-ground flora and fauna surveys by wildlife specialists in all remaining unlogged coupes in view of the extensive logging that has already occurred and thus the increased importance of remaining unlogged areas as conservation refuges, especially given the clear risk of further bushfire losses (assessed as 20 per cent by VEAC) and accelerating global warming.

The RFPG believes this has not been done in the preparation of the TRP amendments, as required under Clause 2.2.2.2. in conjunction with Clause 2.1.1.1.ii.

The maintenance of the same area in the harvesting pipeline – as under the proposed TRP amendments – is also starkly at odds with VicForests own Resource Outlook which should see a substantial reduction (although still insufficient) in harvesting levels in 2017-18 and again from 2020-21.

The Resource Outlook sees the sustainable supply of ash sawlogs fall from 230,000 m³ pa in 2016-17 to 153,000 m³ pa in 2017-18 and then to 130,000 m³ pa from 2020-21. The fact that no such reduction is reflected in the amended TRP as proposed is wholly at odds with the application of the precautionary principle.

Given that there is no old-growth left in the Rubicon State Forest, the application of the precautionary principle requires that some broadly intact areas of '39 regrowth be left untouched in order that there be some mature ash forest in the not-too-distant future. Failure to allow for such areas to come into existence would also be at odds with mandatory action Clause 2.1.1.1.iii which requires that long term planning “maintain a range of forest age classes and structures”.

E – Failure to fully consider the advice of relevant experts and relevant research in conservation biology and flora and fauna management

VicForests has accepted the validity of the IUCN Red List in successive Sustainability Reports, but has remained conspicuously silent on the recent inclusion of the mountain ash ecosystem on IUCN's Red List of endangered ecosystems. Had proper consideration been given to this, the proposed TRP amendments would have seen a net shrinking of the areas on the TRP, rather than maintaining the same area in the harvesting pipeline as in the past.

Specific coupe removals sought

In line with the above arguments, RFPG seeks removal of:

- all coupes at the northern end of the Royston Range
- all coupes in the SMZ on the Blue Range, including Snifter whose removal we sought in 2016
- all coupes bordering the Mt Bullfight conservation reserve and between the reserve and Lake Mountain, as we sought in 2016
- all coupes in the RVHCFR (which we believe are illegal), and
- all coupes in the Snobs Creek valley (ie on the western flank of the Torbreck range and the eastern flank of the Royston Range).

For further information contact info@rubiconforest.org