

# VicForests' High Conservation Values Management System consultation draft v1.0

## Submission by Rubicon Forest Protection Group Inc.



### Background

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The consultation draft (the *Draft*) outlines a few management tweaks that VicForests proposes to adopt in an effort claimed to protect the ever-shrinking high conservation values of native forests through more effective protection of habitat and hollow-bearing trees, and through a larger suite of silvicultural strategies as alternatives to the widespread use of clearfelling. It suggests that these will be better than current approaches and help it achieve FSC Controlled Wood certification and eventually full FSC certification.

### Key Points

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- The *Draft* contains fundamental errors.
- We refute VicForests claim that it only need consider protections 'at a coupe level' and that protections needed at scales above coupe but below 'whole of Eastern Victoria' are not its problem.
- The wider adoption of alternatives to clearfelling could only possibly constitute an improvement on current regimes if overall harvest levels are more than commensurately reduced, otherwise forest disturbance and fragmentation will become more widespread (see separate RFPG consultation response to Harvesting and Regeneration Systems paper).

### Failings

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1. The *Draft* claims that VicForests has already undertaken to protect all old-growth ash, defined as pre-1900, across eastern Victoria, yet in February this year a giant shining gum (defined as ash under the Allocation Order) was felled on Granite Mountain in East Gippsland (see Appendix A). Under these circumstances, how are VicForests' commitments to be judged? While DELWP has undertaken to revise the 2014 Code of Practice for Timber Harvesting (the *Code*) to make such protections mandatory<sup>1</sup>, how are we to have confidence in the various other undertakings proposed in the *Draft* that are not to be made mandatory?
2. Moreover since the definition of old-growth as pre-1900 was conceived 20 years ago, and that fires and logging over the past 20 years have decimated the old-growth that existed then, the definition must be recast to include all trees >100 years, rather than pre-1900.
3. At several points the *Draft* requires us to take as given that the reserve system managed by DELWP and Parks Victoria protects the HCV values beyond the coupe-level under the new FSC HCV standards<sup>2</sup>, yet the current reserve system was designed well over 20 years ago, and has hardly been changed since<sup>3</sup>. Appropriately, the State Government has decided to review Victoria's RFAs, which necessarily includes an examination of whether the current reserve system still fully meets the JANIS criteria underpinning it<sup>4</sup> which, like the FSC's HCV principles, aim to protect high conservation value forests.
4. Under these circumstances it is unacceptable for VF to simply assert that it need not consider the various values that the FSC criteria aim to protect as part of the broader environment of a coupe. Rather it is obliged to specifically evaluate whether broader local and regional factors are indeed properly protected by the existing reserve system, and if not revise the TRP accordingly. RFPG has long argued that the conservation values of the Rubicon State Forest are not adequately protected by the existing reserve system which was established based on data that is now almost 30 years old and, self-evidently, cannot take account of the overlogging that has occurred since.

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<sup>1</sup> [DELWP. Response to the Independent Review of Timber Harvesting Regulation. March 2019](#)

<sup>2</sup> E.g. last para. p.19 (HCV 1.1), middle p.21 (HCV 2)

<sup>3</sup> Apart from an enlargement by a few hundred hectares for the protection of leadbeaters possum, for example.

<sup>4</sup> JANIS criteria set out in [Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System for Forests in Australia](#) document

5. Astonishingly, the *Draft* fails to acknowledge the TRP as a long-term forest management planning tool that needs to consider coupe distribution – which is self-evidently at scales above the coupe level – in order to take proper account of the *Code* principles designed to protect HCVs. This is a crucial omission. RFPG made a submission on VicForests' 2017 TRP proposals<sup>5</sup> raising a raft of issues relating to HCV protection which we expect to be ignored as were our arguments on the 2016 TRP change proposals. The bottom line of our 2017 submission was that almost all of the proposed new coupes needed to be removed if the remaining HCV values of the Rubicon State Forest were to be protected.
6. VicForests' proposed approach to protection of values under HCV 1, *Species Diversity*<sup>6</sup>, relies on assessments made 5 years ago and so is deeply flawed. The document not only fails to acknowledge that new information has come to light since 2014, such as the precarious state of various threatened species like the greater glider, but misrepresents the prevailing FSC framework. The new HCV sub category 1.5, *areas of high species/communities diversity*, did not exist when the 2014 analysis was conducted yet the *Draft* suggests it was assessed and found to be fulfilled by the existing CAR system<sup>7</sup>!
7. HCV sub-category 1.5 is particularly relevant for the Rubicon State Forest. At the regional scale, the 2017 VEAC report on conservation values of state forests<sup>8</sup> identifies various State Forest areas, including most of the Rubicon State Forest, with the highest concentrations of forest-dependent species (ref VEAC Report fig 2.12). The Rubicon State Forest is the most easterly major outlier of the Victorian Alps bioregion which includes 40 separate EVCs<sup>9</sup>. The Rubicon Forest also has a multitude of ecoclines extending from the near sea-level slopes of the Goulburn River Valley to snow gum forest and alpine meadows over relatively short spans. Thus, the entire area of unlogged 1939 ash regrowth (and older ash forests) could be regarded as fulfilling the criteria for sub-category 1.5, regardless of whether DELWP or the State Government has chosen to incorporate it into designated reserves.
8. This landscape scale diversity arguably also meets the criterion for protection under HCV 2, *landscape-level ecosystem and mosaics*, sub-category 2.2, *forests recognised as being regionally significant at the bioregion or larger scale in formally recognised reports or peer-reviewed journals, due to the unusual landscape scale biodiversity values provided by size and condition of the forest relative to regional forest land cover and land use trends*.
9. While VicForests may not be responsible for the reserve system, an assessment is still needed - -not simply an unqualified assertion - - to establish whether the existing system within the ash forests of the Central Highlands RFA area, including Rubicon State Forest, does indeed adequately protect its *high species/communities diversity* and its *landscape-level characteristics*. Given that the main reserves had their altitude boundaries defined to largely exclude commercial forests, it would be astonishing if the JANIS criteria - - which the reserve system is supposed to meet - - are being met.  
  
Where the boundaries did encompass some commercial ash forest areas, as in the eastern half of the Cathedral Range State Park or the western part of the Lake Mountain section of the Yarra Ranges National Park, the 2009 fires killed most of it, as well as large areas of State Forest.
10. For the purposes of HCV3, *ecosystems and habitats*, specifically sub-category 3.1, *ecosystems (including rainforests) that are threatened, depleted or poorly reserved at the IBRA bioregion scale, or are subject to threatening processes predicted to substantially reduce their extent and function*, the consultation draft, not unreasonably, equates ecosystems with ecological vegetation classes (EVCs). Yet despite the peer-reviewed work of Burns *et al* arguing that mountain ash forests (EVC 30) are a threatened ecosystem due to fire, climate change and continued logging<sup>10</sup> the consultation draft ignores this

<sup>5</sup> [Submission from RFPG on Timber Release Plan \(TRP\) Proposed Changes, Jan 2018](#)

<sup>6</sup> Concentrations of biological diversity including endemic species, and rare, threatened or endangered species, that are significant at global, regional or national levels

<sup>7</sup> p.20

<sup>8</sup> Conservation Values of State Forests Assessment Report, VEAC, February 2017

<sup>9</sup> See [https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/48751/VALp\\_EVCs\\_combined.pdf](https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/48751/VALp_EVCs_combined.pdf). EVCs present in the Central Highlands RFA area are also set out in the Appendix B of the Central Highlands FMP

<sup>10</sup> Burns, Lindenmayer, Stein, Blanchard, McBurney, Blair & Banks. (2015). *Ecosystem assessment of mountain ash forest in the Central Highlands of Victoria, southeastern Australia*. *Austral Ecology* 40:386-399

important work, suggesting that the only threatened ecosystems in state forests in eastern Victoria are cool temperate and warm temperate rainforests. VicForests is clearly free to dispute the work of Burns *et al*, but to ignore it entirely is a fundamental flaw.

11. The draft document wrongly claims that VicForests' *Rainforest Identification Instruction* document is consistent with the *Code* and the *Management Standards and Procedures (MSPs)*<sup>11</sup>. This claim conceals the fact that the two documents have subtly different ways of defining rainforest. The definition in the *Code* provides that:

*Rainforest includes closed transitional and seral communities, with emergent eucalypts, that are of similar botanical composition to mature rainforests in which eucalypts are absent*

While the definition in the *MSPs* purports to adopt the definition in the *Code*, the *MSPs* include a qualifying definition of 'mixed forest' designed to narrow the rainforest definition in the *Code* so that seral stages where overstorey eucalypts make up as little as 10% foliage cover are effectively redefined as 'mixed forest'. Since the *MSPs* include a provision that they override the *Code* in the event of any interpretive conflict, the *MSPs* prevail. The *MSPs* definition, therefore, allows more logging of rainforest than if the *Code* definition prevailed. None of this contradictory situation is alluded to in the consultation document, which treats the rainforest definition as settled, notwithstanding the VF website stating that the definition is under review<sup>12</sup>.

12. The failure to identify any values under HCV 5, *community needs*, further illustrates the inadequacy of VicForests' assessment. The vital need to protect the waters of Snobs Creek in order to safeguard Victoria's main fish hatchery meets the definition of subcategory 5.1, *unique/main sources of water fundamental for drinking and other daily uses*. The RFPG has already presented evidence to the State Government and to VicForests pointing to the risks that widespread clearfelling has on water quality in Snobs Creek – both temperature and turbidity – and flow volumes. So far these arguments have been rejected by VicForests despite evidence showing these impacts are already occurring.
13. With the proposed TRP changes adding 14 new coupes in the Snobs Creek catchment (forest block 288) totalling 240 ha (net area), on top of around 300 ha on the current TRP that is yet to be logged, the risk to the viability of the hatchery, and the well-being of the community that depends on it, is clear.
14. The proposition in the consultation draft that the protection of a set of quite distinct separate cultural values under HCV 6 (scientific, aesthetic, social, historic and spiritual) all relate to protection of Aboriginal cultural values<sup>13</sup> and that these are well protected is absurd. The RFPG is well aware of the significant spiritual and scientific significance attached by a late Taungurong elder from our group to the Rubicon State Forest immediately south of Camp Jungai which was an open air classroom for generations of Indigenous Victorians. VicForests had no regard for these values when many of the coupes within it were logged, or in its TRP changes proposed in November 2017.
15. VicForests' management regime is also at odds with various FSC requirements<sup>14</sup> such as requirement 5.2.2 which specifies how much logging can occur:

*5.2.2 For native forests, the average annual timber harvest level across the Management Unit over a 20-year period does not exceed a level that can be sustained in the long-term (> 100 years).*

Thus with 36,515 ha of ash forest in the Management Unit area having been clearfelled in the 20 years to 2017-18<sup>15</sup>, and only 69,957 ha of 1939 ash regrowth remaining in the SMZ and GMZ<sup>16</sup>, about half of

<sup>11</sup> See p.22

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.vicforests.com.au/vicforests-forest-management-system/policies>, accessed 6 April 2019

<sup>13</sup> See 2<sup>nd</sup> last para on p.30 which states that 'These values are addressed together, in recognition they all generally relate to traditional cultural identity.

<sup>14</sup> 2019 FSC National Standard

<sup>15</sup> Data from DELWP datamart and updated using VicForests' 2017-18 annual logging history file. For the purposes of this analysis, the small area of ash forest logged and regenerated via the seed tree method (778 ha) is included in the figure.

<sup>16</sup> Figures provided to RFPG by VicForests on 9 June 2017

which (RFPG estimate) will now be in small inaccessible or uneconomic fragments or subject to Code protections, it is clear that the past rate of logging has been completely unsustainable, as RFPG has long maintained. Appendix B sets out how this is likely to unfold with the added risk of future megafires in the coming decade due to climate change.

16. While the sustainable logging requirement only applies to full FSC certification, not Controlled Wood certification, unsustainable timber harvesting in the Rubicon State Forest – an area marked by high conservation values (see para. 5) must surely be regarded – as inconsistent with HCV protection.
17. While the fate of unlogged mature and old-growth ash forests may fare better in coming years as a result of DELWP promising to improve the *Code* with new environmental protections and new SPZs being created in an effort to protect leadbeaters possum from extinction, RFPG has long argued that only a cessation or at least a long-term moratorium on logging in the Rubicon State Forest will be sufficient to protect its multitude of high conservation values.
18. The wider adoption of silvicultural strategies entailing greater retention of groups of trees inside coupes and less high intensity regeneration burning (see RFPG comment on VF's '*Harvesting and Regeneration Systems*' consultation draft) may be an improvement, but its implementation is not guaranteed and it leaves considerable leeway for the current ecologically damaging approaches to remain dominant. Moreover these alternatives can only possibly be an improvement if overall harvest levels are more than commensurately reduced since forest disturbance and fragmentation will otherwise become more widespread. The '*Harvesting and Regeneration Systems*' consultation draft fails to acknowledge this fundamental point.
19. Furthermore, unless there is a far wider adoption of silvicultural approaches that do not involve high intensity regeneration burning and massive soil disturbance with prolonged solar exposure, logging will continue to jeopardise HCV 1, *species diversity*. Current harvesting and regeneration approaches effectively ignore the protection of regeneration of many understorey species, such as treeferns, as well as mosses and lichens and the vast and little understood microbial and fungal ecosystem within the soil<sup>17</sup>. They also encourage the proliferation of blackberries<sup>18</sup> which is having a profound effect on the entire area, making it almost impossible for the original understorey diversity to recover. The biodiversity risks here are potentially massive. If the precautionary principle enshrined in the *Code* were followed, neither the current nor the proposed silvicultural approaches would be permissible.

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<sup>17</sup> For example see Mataix-Solera, J., et al. (2009). *Forest fire effects on soil microbiology*. *Fire Effects on Soils and Restoration Strategies*. A. Cerda. Boca Raton, FL, Taylor and Francis, CRC Press.

ABSTRACT: "Soil microbiology is crucial for soil system functioning. Fire can affect soil microbes directly through heating and indirectly by modifying soil properties. Microbes will also be affected by post fire environmental factors and the reestablishment of vegetation. The most important factor affecting soil microbes seems to be the burn severity, which is controlled by such factors as fire intensity, duration, and soil properties which normally causes a decrease in the numbers of microbes. The temperatures reached in the topsoil are often sufficient to affect soil microorganisms and other soil properties related to the post-fire microbial recolonization. In extreme cases, the topsoil can undergo complete sterilization. Fungi seem to be more sensitive to heating than bacteria and actinomycetes, and a higher impact under wet soil conditions has been reported. In the case of fungi that form arbuscular mycorrhizas, almost all the studies show a negative influence resulting in a reduced number of propagules. An important factor is the presence of fungal resistant structures, such as sclerotia, from which new mycelia originate to colonize new plants. The activity of soil microorganisms also decreases due to changes in the quality of organic matter. In the short-term, mainly due to the increase insoluble carbon and nutrients in affected soils, an increase in heterotrophic bacteria population basal respiration is commonly observed. After depletion of the easily mineralized organic compounds, this initial increase in microbial basal respiration is generally followed by a decrease as the remaining carbon and nitrogen forms are more recalcitrant to microbial attack. Some other changes in soil properties such as increase in pH (due to ash deposition) have been argued as the cause of the post-fire increase in the bacteria/fungi ratio. As pioneer species, a rapid recolonization of soil by photoautotroph microorganism (such as algae) has been reported after moderate and high intensity fires. The diversity of microorganisms can be modified by fire in several ways as a consequence of differences in heat sensitivity, survival strategies, colonization mechanisms, and sensitivity to soil and microclimate changes. Destruction and creation of new ecological niches and changes in biomass and composition of above-ground vegetal species can also impact microorganism diversity."

<sup>18</sup> See *Unsustainable!*, RFPG's 2016 submission to VicForests

# Appendix A



**Goongerah Environment Centre GECO**



13 March at 20:05 · 🌐

This was a giant Errinundra shining gum. It provided habitat for dozens of species. It turned carbon dioxide into oxygen for centuries. But it could not survive the policies of the Dan Andrews government.

This old growth forest was brutally logged last month on the eastern slopes of Granite Mountain in East Gippsland.

Logging these forests should've ended decades ago. But the Dan Andrews government still allows this senseless destruction. ... [See more](#)



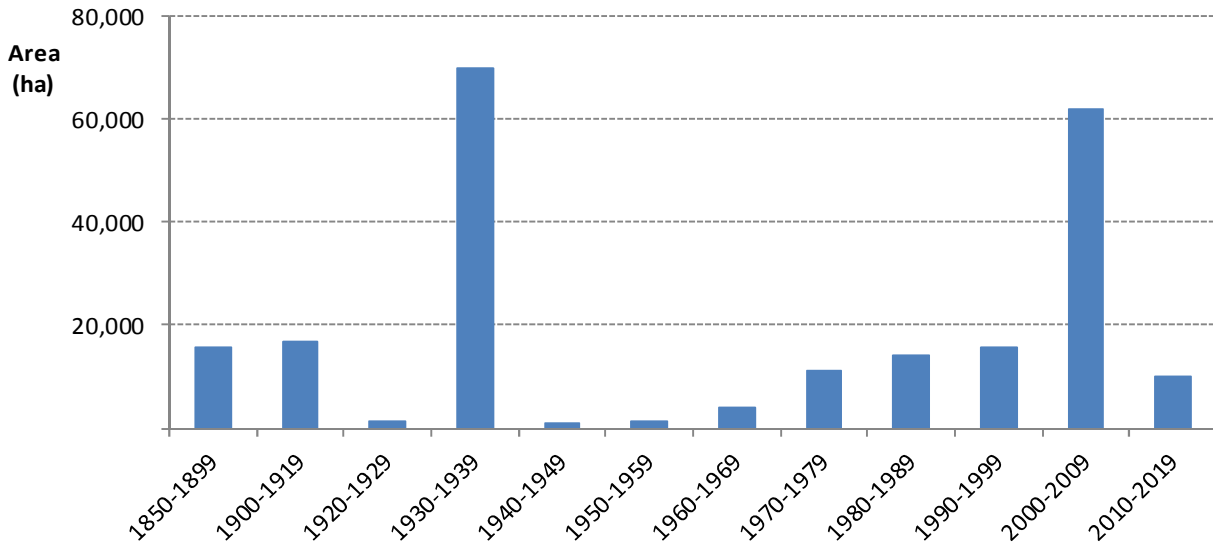
🔥🙄👍 1.8K

628 comments 2.9K shares

## Appendix B

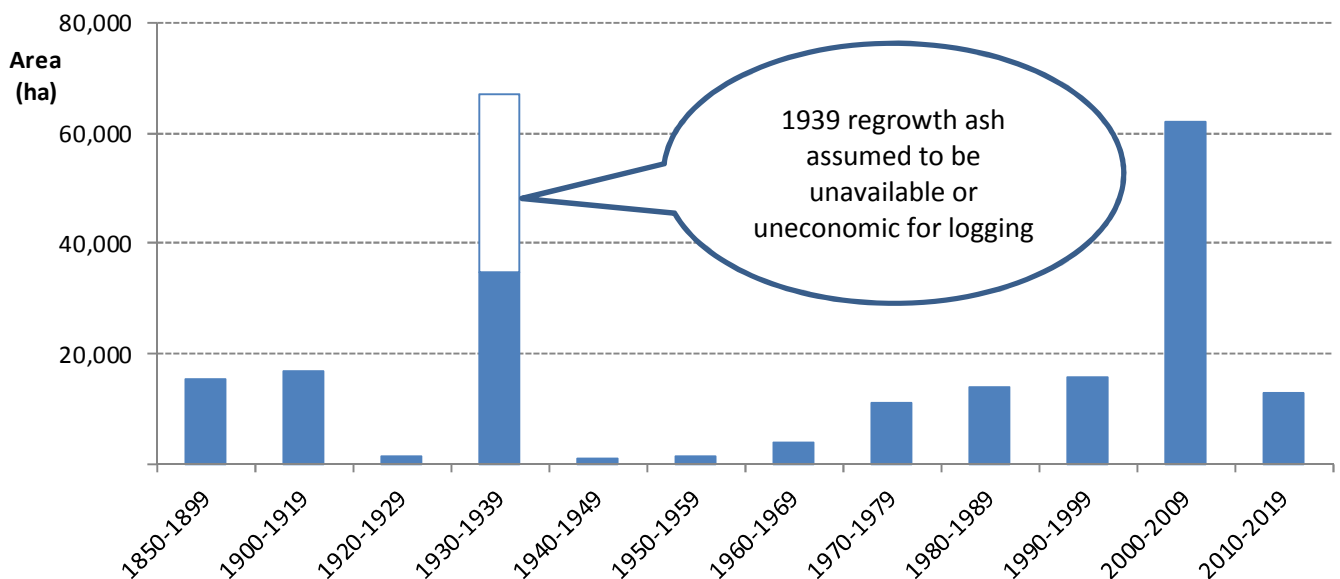
### **Analysis of current age class distribution and potential age class distribution by 2029**

In June 2017 VicForests provided data to Nick Legge showing the age-profile of ash forests in State Forests in Eastern Victoria by forest management zone (GMZ+SMZ and SPZ). The data for GMZ+SMZ – the zones in which logging is permitted - are reproduced below:



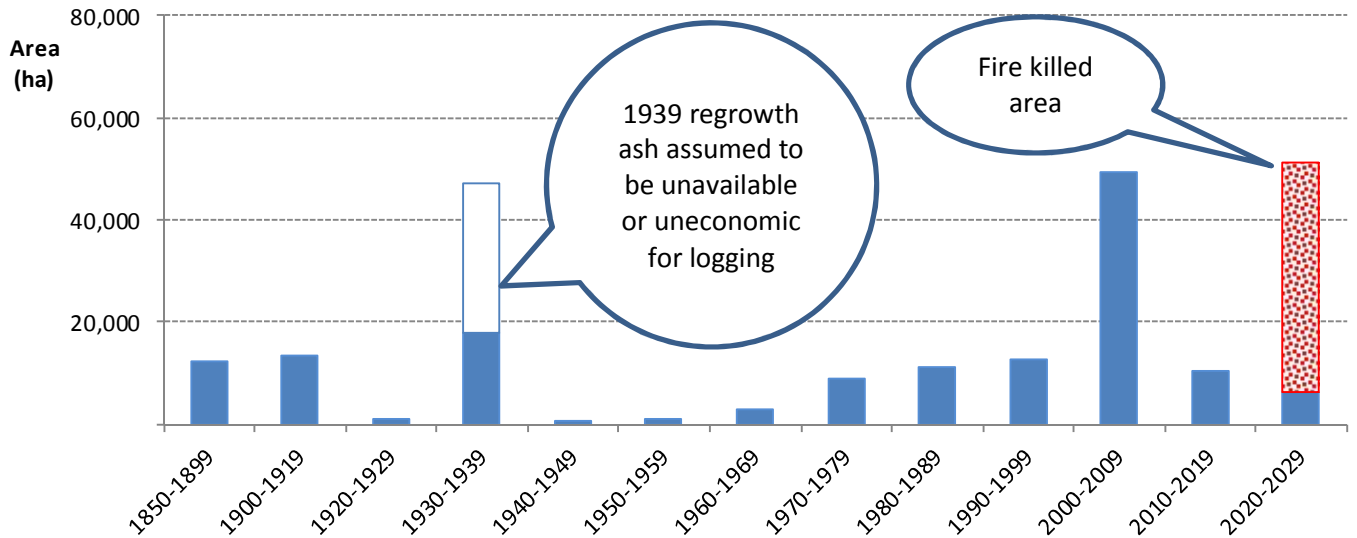
The data show that despite the three megafires of the 2000s and extensive post-war logging, the ash forests arising from the 1939 fires still account for 31% of the available ash forest resource, so suggesting that there is no shortage of forest for continued logging.

However the picture is deceptive. Much of the 1939 regrowth will, as a result of past logging, be in small inaccessible areas that will be uneconomic to harvest, or will have remained unlogged due to *Code* protections, such as for steep slopes and streamside buffers. TRP figures suggest that, around a quarter to a third of ash forest in an average coupe will be left unlogged. The chart below endeavours to model this. It also aims to give a complete picture for the decade 2010-2019 assuming that a further 3,000 ha of 1939 regrowth ash will be clearfelled over the 2016-17 to 2018-19 logging seasons. It is also likely that the Eastern Victorian fires in 2019 will have further reduced the 1939 ash regrowth resource by several thousand hectares but figures for this are currently unavailable.



The next step is to model the impact of further logging that is planned to occur over the decade 2020-2029. VicForests 2017 Resource Outlook indicates that it expects to produce 130,000 cubic metres of D Grade and better ash sawlogs over the coming decade. Based on VicForests figures indicating coupe yields are currently around 160 cubic metres of D Grade and better, this implies an annual net harvest area over the decade of 813 ha.

At the same time, continued global warming will make it very likely that the coming decade will see further megafires of the kind experienced in 1939 and in the 2000s. For illustrative purposes it is supposed that these fires kill as much as 45,000 ha of ash forest available for harvesting, and that the areas killed are spread across the age classes in proportion to their current extent. The chart below shows the impact of this on the ash forest resource.



For a forest type where the dominant tree can commonly live for many hundreds of years to keep logging these forests when half the total forest area is under 30 years of age is completely ecologically irresponsible.