

Devil in detail of Andrews' logging announcement

Nick Legge



Those of us fighting to save what remains of the mountain forests in Victoria's Central Highlands were set to celebrate Premier Dan Andrews' announcement of an end to native forest logging in 2030 – until we studied the detail.

While we applaud the decision to immediately protect all of the Strathbogie Ranges, and a considerable area of the Central Highlands south of the Great Dividing Range, most of the Central Highlands mountain and alpine ash forests still face a bleak future.

Before white settlement, the ash forests of eastern Victoria were largely all old-growth – now barely 1 per cent of that natural legacy is left. The 80-year-old, 1939 regrowth forests in the Rubicon, Toolangi and Marysville areas are already highly fragmented. For these fire-ravaged and over-logged forests, the government's decision to allow current cutting rates to persist for five more years will be devastating.

Victoria's ash forests, prized for their sawlogs and pulpwood, were overwhelmed by the successive forest infernos of 2003, 2006-7 and 2009. Across the state these fires killed or severely damaged 189,000 hectares of ash forest and since 2010 another 11,000 hectares have been logged. That means well over one-third of Victoria's ash forests are juvenile and unable to set seed, and much of the remainder is under 40 years old. In the ash forests of the Central Highlands, there are not enough trees left to last until 2030.

The looming closure of the hardwood sawmilling industry has its origins in the overriding need to meet the pulpwood supply agreement for the Maryvale pulp and paper mill which, due to the age structure of the ash forests after the 1939 fire, required them to be logged while still very young. Other contributing factors include timber supply models that do not allow for the future impact of megafires on either forest age or biodiversity and, as the Auditor-General reported in 2013, inaccurate wood supply forecasts.

The decision to immediately protect forests in a few areas and wind back native forest logging is largely welcome, but if current cutting rates in the Rubicon State Forest are maintained, the timber will all be gone in five years. And with it will go enough forest to provide effective wildlife refuge and a viable local forest tourism industry.

It is a shame that Victoria's remarkable ash forests, whose biodiverse understoreys provide abundant bird and animal habitat, continue to be cut primarily for pulpwood. Right now, VicForests is logging a beautiful part of the Rubicon Forest near Mount Torbreck where by its own assessment, 80 per cent of the log volume is destined for pulping.

We in the Rubicon Forest Protection Group are dismayed by the fact that the government's promise to stop logging native forests relies on the further excessive logging of the magnificent Rubicon State Forest which sits atop the Cerberean Caldera, created 365 million years ago by the greatest volcanic eruption on Earth. Of the 2700 hectares of this forest protected by this latest announcement, most was already safe in special protection zones.

By our reckoning, only 125 hectares of the area that had been set to be logged in the Rubicon area in the near term will be protected. This means virtually the entire Snobs Creek Valley, source of water for Victoria's main fish hatchery, as well as the ridge along the Torbreck Range visible from far and wide, is still up for logging.

While some regional communities face a difficult future, this was largely set to happen given the dwindling ash sawlog supply.

These communities deserve properly funded measures to help ease their transition to a tourism-oriented future.

Global warming is setting forests around the world on fire. Previously protected areas of the Amazon and US are now opened for logging, thanks to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and US President Donald Trump.

The forested strip on the east coast of NSW and Queensland is in flames. It is astonishing that in deciding logging rates for the Central Highlands, no account is made for the likelihood – if not certainty – of further devastating fires in Victoria's forests.

Nick Legge is a former forestry academic and member of the Rubicon Forest Protection Group.