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7 Feb 2020

Ms Jaclyn Symes MP
Member for Northern Victoria

By email to: jaclyn.symes@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Symes,

Request to Meet

On several occasions since 2018 we have written to you seeking to meet you to outline the dire situation facing the Rubicon State Forest. The need to meet has become even more urgent in the wake of the terrible fires in East Gippsland and in North East Victoria, coming on top of the massive extension of logging in the Central Highlands contemplated by the latest TRP, which the Rubicon Forest Protection Group strongly opposed.

If, despite the fires, current timber supply contracts are to be fulfilled, the Andrews Government could well preside over the end of the remaining ecological integrity of the Rubicon State Forest, and indeed all the ash forests of the Central Highlands. It could see the local, statewide or global, extinction of threatened species including the greater glider, smoky mouse, Leadbeater's possum, sooty owl, broad-toothed rat, and spot-tailed quoll for which the Rubicon State Forest and other parts of the Central Highlands provide critical habitat.

As Minister for Forests, you will know that the announced protection of old-growth forests and of greater glider habitat has no material effect on VicForests' plans for the Rubicon State Forest, nor the Central Highlands ash forests generally.

As has been fully documented by our group (www.rubiconforest.org) and others, the ash forest ecosystems of the Central Highlands are now seriously degraded by unsustainable logging, particularly over the years since the 2009 fires, and are gravely threatened by climate change and future fires. There is now a very real and substantial risk that they may not survive as ash forest ecosystems, with dreadful outcomes for the flora and fauna which constitute them.

We were naturally deeply dismayed that despite the red-listing of the mountain ash ecosystem by the IUCN, the Scientific Advisory Committee appointed under the Flora and Fauna Act failed last year to recognise the dire fate these forests face.

The Rubicon Forest Protection Group is extremely mindful of the many jobs, especially regional jobs, that depend on logging Victorian native forests, however we also see that many worthwhile jobs can be created by dramatically expanding non-exploitative forest uses, especially tourism. The ash forests of the Central Highlands, especially those in your electorate north of the Divide, could with a modest investment, become tourist meccas, and not just for Victorians, but for international visitors as well.

As you know the Yarra Ranges National Park is mostly off-limits to visitors, yet barely an hour further north in the Rubicon State Forest the tourist potential of places like Mt Torbreck, the

Rubicon Valley Historic Area, and the Royston, Rubicon, Taponga and Torbreck River and Snobs Creek Valleys is simply stunning. The same incredible opportunities exist in the Toolangi State Forest, which is even more accessible. But only if logging of the ash forests ceases immediately.

Over the past 4 years we have lodged many reports to DELWP alleging breaches by VicForests of the 2014 Code of Practice for Timber Production, including of scenic protection provisions, of soil protection provisions, of biodiversity protection provisions and of water protection provisions. While some of these cases remain open, many have foundered, not on their merits, but on inexcusable ambiguities and drafting 'errors' within the Code itself. As a result, your colleague, Lily D'Ambrosio, Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, promised a review of the Code which, although scheduled for last year, has still not commenced.

We appreciate that the above matters are principally the concern of your colleague, Lily D'Ambrosio, rather than you as Minister for Forests, however we wish to speak to you chiefly as our elected representative.

We would, however, take the opportunity to point out key systemic failings which you, as Minister, are responsible including the TRP, the Allocation Order and, as a Cabinet Minister, with the Central Highlands RFA and its proposed renewal next month.

We recognise that much of the problem facing the Government today also stems from the deplorable abandonment of the plantation expansion program, both hardwood and softwood, following the Kennett Government's sale of the public plantation estate to Hancocks. It has been very disappointing that neither the Bracks/Brumby Governments, or the Napthine/Baillieu Governments, saw fit to correct this, and so we applaud the decision of the Andrews Government to dramatically expand the plantation estate in Gippsland.

While it will obviously be several decades before this new pulpwood resource becomes available, the opportunity still exists for the Government to buy some of the woodchip export contracts from South West Victoria and rail pulplogs (or woodchips) to Maryvale. While this will certainly be costly, if proper values were placed on the many forest services that unlogged forests offer, especially in the face of climate change and the extinction crisis we now face, we believe that such a strategy would certainly stack up financially. With its economic modelling expertise, your Department would be very well placed to conduct such an analysis.

We stand ready to meet with you at any time and would especially welcome the opportunity to take you on a tour of the Rubicon State Forest so show you some of its extraordinary qualities.

We look forward to a positive response to our request in the near future.

Yours sincerely,



Ken Deacon
Convenor
Rubicon Forest Protection Group

CC: The Hon Lily D'Ambrosio, Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change
The Hon Jaclyn Symes, Minister for Agriculture