

Submission to the draft Leadbeater's Possum Recovery Plan 2016 By Rubicon Forest Protection Group

The Rubicon Forest Protection Group (RFPG) was formed in 2015 by local community members concerned about the extent and intensity of timber harvesting in the area, particularly its significant impacts on ecotourism businesses that totally depend on the area's outstanding scenic landscapes and biodiversity values for their survival.

In contrast to paragraph 4 on page 85 of the draft Recovery Plan under **8.3.2 Social and economic considerations**, a detailed analysis of forest harvesting in the montane ash forests of the Rubicon and Blue ranges carried out by RFPG (copy attached and also available on our website: www.rubiconforest.org), reveals that the industry is unsustainable based on the available ash resource and ecological principles. In response, Vic Forests has confirmed that harvesting levels have substantially increased in the Rubicon area since 2010, in addition to post-fire salvage logging.

The aerial photos included in the RFPG report illustrate the issues associated with the current extent and intensity of timber, pulpwood and post-fire salvage harvesting, leaving only token, small, isolated patches of Leadbeater's Possum habitat that do not reflect the known or potential occurrences of Leadbeater's Possum. The impacts of this extremely high intensity of timber harvesting on Leadbeater's Possum and associated biodiversity values are further exacerbated by overlaying the approximately 10,000 ha of ash forests burnt in the 2009 wildfire seen on the air photo as grey green areas, virtually surrounded by harvesting coupes, regenerating coupes and access roads, with few, very small, isolated and vulnerable pockets of remnant ash forest.

In addition, as the photos in the RFPG report show, some coupes that fail to regenerate mountain or alpine ash are subsequently reburnt or the ground is scarified with machinery, then reseeded, but in the process further reducing biodiversity and creating dense wattle stands with extensive, impenetrable blackberry infestations throughout all disturbed areas, including logging road corridors. Others remain in this state for many years with minimal if any mountain or alpine ash regeneration.

Significantly, the Rubicon Forest Protection Group's analyses of timber and pulpwood harvesting and post-fire salvage harvesting concludes on Page 8 that at current estimated harvesting rates (around 600-700 ha p.a. net) and allowing for further future losses to bushfires, all the remaining area of maturing 1939 regrowth ash forests of the Central FMA outside buffer areas and reserves will have been harvested in 7 years.

The draft Leadbeater's Possum Recovery Plan does not reflect the above realities of rapidly diminishing habitat connectivity and critical habitat characteristics, particularly 1939 regrowth, large old trees and hollow-bearing trees, despite proposing improved prescriptions for protecting Leadbeater's Possum whilst also permitting large scale, intensive timber harvesting that continues to threaten the survival of Leadbeater's Possum.

Accordingly, the Rubicon Forest Protection Group recommends:

1. Immediately instigate a moratorium on all timber, pulpwood and post-fire salvage harvesting activities and associated road works in long unburnt and/or previously unlogged mountain and alpine ash forests, cool temperate rainforest and riparian habitats, with appropriate amendments to the Central Highlands Regional Forest Agreement;
2. During operation and rehabilitation of harvesting and post-harvesting forest coupes and logging access roads, immediately implement prescriptions required to urgently protect Leadbeater's Possum, in particular, protect all known and potential habitats of Leadbeater's Possum with a minimum of 1km natural forest buffer;
3. Establish a comprehensive conservation system throughout all the mountain and alpine ash forests of the Central Highlands, including adequate forest habitat buffers between harvesting coupes and adjoining cool temperate rainforest/riparian zones, for biodiversity conservation and specifically to protect Leadbeater's Possum from extinction;
4. Provide funding for conservation reserve management and support for local communities to promote and facilitate ecotourism and recreation in the area.

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Photo of Flea Ck coupe area/LBP known habitat ©KD

