

# Ray of hope in battle against unsustainable logging

Ill-considered forestry policy endangers more than wildlife, writes Nick Legge.

Last week's injunction granted by the Federal Court stopping VicForests from logging certain areas in the Central Highlands until a court hearing next year is a ray of hope for those seeking an ecologically sustainable approach to native forest logging.

The case, brought by Friends of Leadbeater's Possum, is based on the failure by VicForests to abide by the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014, the regulations governing timber harvesting.

Yet the regulatory breaches cited to the court only scratch the surface. The Rubicon Forest Protection Group presented evidence to the current review of Victorian Regional Forest Agreements showing clearfelled areas far larger than permitted; blackberries rampant and unchecked; washouts on slopes that should not have been logged; the Rubicon Historic Area logged; tourist roads left with no buffers; retained trees killed in regeneration burns; springs and ephemeral watercourses logged and silted.

As well as such breaches of the code, other provisions of the Central Highlands RFA have been breached, including failure to adopt sustainable harvest levels by Forest Management Area (FMA) and failure to implement a proper system of forest reserves. By maintaining accreditation of Victoria's forest management system in the face of these breaches the Commonwealth government has breached its RFA obligations.

That Victoria's native forest timber supplies are dwindling is well understood. What is less well known is that this is partly due to past timber supply projections being based on overstated timber resource estimates, as the Victorian Auditor-General reported in 2013. VicForests prefers to gloss over this, blaming the need to protect Leadbeater's possum for the latest cutback. This may be so, but it ignores the main cause of the possum's perilous status

– habitat loss from intensive logging plus the Black Saturday fires.

Victoria's timber supply shortfalls are principally due to the devastating forest fires of the 2000s, which, in 2010, led the state government to quietly make a key change to the timber allocation order, the legal device giving VicForests the authority to log. Rather than harvest levels being set by Forest Management Area and by various forest types, a statewide aggregate only was set, specifying just two forest types, "ash" and "mixed species".

The absurdity of regarding all the ash forests and all the mixed species forests of eastern Victoria as single systems for the purposes of ecologically sustainable forest management was conveniently overlooked.

Despite the ecological impact of the 2009 fires, the rate of logging across the Central Forest Management Area soon rose to around double the rate stipulated in 2004 and again in 2007

when the earlier rules were in place. In the Rubicon State Forest, near where I live, the remaining broadly intact areas of mature ash will be gone in as little as five years. Regrettably for those affected, the timber industry jobs the Rubicon forest logging supports will be lost too, along with the local income they bring.

A public inquiry by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council into the existing reserve system in the Central Highlands is urgently needed, not simply an increase in pre-harvest surveys as the state government has decreed.

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