

VAGO Report Slams DELWP and DEDJTR¹

The Victorian Government has failed, abjectly, in its stewardship of Victoria's native forests. This conclusion leaps out from the pages of the latest Auditor-General report on the management of Victoria's native forests.

Multiple rules in the governance handbook have been broken: a lack of clear goals, failure to monitor and evaluate, neglect of regeneration failure and inadequate regard for forest values other than wood production.

RFPG has developed a set of governance reform proposals that, if implemented, would address the criticisms made by the A-G as well as a range of other forest management shortcomings that have been identified by RFPG and the wider conservation movement

More detail

In Dec 2013 the Victorian Auditor General reported on the [Management of Victoria's Native Forest Timber Resources](#). In his covering letter the AG wrote:

DEPI [see footnote for abbreviations] and VicForests demonstrate many environmentally, socially and economically sustainable practices to fulfil their roles in timber resource management. However, DEPI is not effectively delivering its approach to protect forest values, and needs to improve the way it documents decisions affecting where harvesting can occur.

I could not assess whether the agencies had made suitable progress in sustainably managing the timber resources or if they had achieved the desired outcomes, such as protecting endangered species from harvesting impacts, because DEPI has not had the measures, monitoring and data in place to assess this.

As the logging of the Rubicon State Forest expanded and intensified the Rubicon Forest Protection Group wrote to the Auditor General (in April 2016, September 2017 and again in Jan 2018), highlighting the shortfalls in implementation of the 2013 recommendations and urging a review of the 2013 report.

In June 2018 VAGO published [Follow Up of Selected 2012–13 and 2013–14 Performance Audits](#) including the 2013 forestry report. The 2018 Follow -up focused on whether native timber resources on public land were being managed productively and sustainably.

The AG found that the responsible agencies (DELWP and DEDJTR taking over the functions of DEPI) had not adequately set sustainability goals, objectives and performance measures with a view to identifying areas where harvesting could occur and setting sustainable harvest levels. They had not effectively managed regeneration and delivered the management actions needed to protect forest values. Further their planning of future options and direction for the timber industry and regional communities was inadequate.

In sum:

- forest management zoning has not improved;
- management and protections for forest values are insufficient;
- there are failures in regeneration of forest after harvesting;
- the overarching goal for state forest management remains unclear;

- DEDJTR¹ does not have a strategic plan for the timber industry.

Recommendations

In 2013, the AG had made 11 recommendations but two were split between agencies, making 13 to be followed up on. Of these 13 recommendations only two have been completed since the original audit, and there were five incomplete recommendations for which the agencies intended no further action. Six were ‘in progress’.

The AG (2018) recommends that “all three agencies need to complete further work to fully address the 2013 recommendations”.

“In addition DELWP needs to review forest management zoning, as a priority, and take the lead on the development of a clear goal for state forest management.”

In his response to the AG report the Secretary of DELWP:

- agrees that current forest management zoning system needs to be reviewed;
- welcomes the AG’s recommendation that DELWP take the lead in developing a clear goal for state forest management;
- notes that the Government’s response to the recent VEAC report, Statewide Assessment of Public Land, commits to legislative reform which will include clear management objectives;
- notes the recent enhancement of its compliance capacity; and
- proposes that the structural and strategic reforms which are being called for will be appropriately addressed in the context of the current “modernization” of the regional forest agreements.

In his response to the AG the Secretary of DEDJTR accepts the AG’s findings and recommendations but notes that further work to implement the 2013 recommendations will require increased funding and further policy guidance.

1. VAGO: Office of the Victorian Auditor General; DEPI: Department of Environment and Primary Industries; DEDJTR: Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources; DELWP: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning