

In summary, I submit that

- **the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process is not fit for purpose into the future, and rather than extension,**
- **the NSW Government should work on a new whole-of-government approach that delivers ecologically, socially and economically sustainable management for NSW Forests into the future.**

Introduction:

The long-term integrity of NSW native forests, as a component of native forests across Australia, is of global interest.

Extraction of timber and other forest products that threaten this integrity is no longer acceptable as native forest cover overall declines in extent wherever the long-term survival of dependent biota and water catchment values is at risk.

Looking to the Future

The concluding years of the Eden and other Regional Forest Agreements provide an exciting opportunity to take a new and fresh look at future forest management in the best interests of NSW and Australia more generally.

This future needs to take into account the sadly intensifying climate change trends; the many new alternatives to native timber use in the construction and other industries; and the increasing appreciation of native forests as habitat for our wildlife, for their water catchment role, as a carbon sink, as recreational areas for our expanding population, and as a new source of employment in management for long term ecologically informed management that supports a growing tourist industry. Furthermore, plantation timber crops on previously cleared land, notably extensive soft woods, provide commercial harvesting opportunities for wood-derived products.

It is therefore profoundly disappointing that the RFA review process is being conducted in parallel with a call for submissions on 'extending' the RFAs. Indeed it is more than disappointing, it is wrong. The evaluation process should come first in order to inform decisions on future forest management.

Background

The Regional Forest Agreements were arrived at as a compromise in the face of widespread concern over the ongoing loss of native forest viability.

As an individual I was deeply involved in raising these concerns, including through presentation of evidence to the Stewart Royal Commission. I well remember observing the struggle faced by the then Commissioner for Forests, Hans Drielsma, in responding to questioning as to whether logging of native forests in NSW was sustainable. The best he could come up with was that the Forestry Commission were working towards such an outcome.

It was clear from his evidence that the Forestry Commission was under pressure post war to deliver timber to meet the needs of the era: an era when the politicians of the day demanded wood resources to satisfy an expanding building industry for a growing population in need of homes and jobs but with scant regard to best practice forestry, let alone ecological and water catchment issues.

Submission: Regional Forest Agreements in NSW, March 2018.

The negotiations that led to adoption of the Eden and subsequent RFAs were tough.

Some useful and good information emerged to inform the debate but some of the data, particularly with respect to estimation of wood available to meet the promised supply, was shaky at best.

The RFA debate was compounded in Eden by the shift towards wood-chipping as a revenue source while native hardwood timber was increasingly replaced by plantation softwood and other techniques in the building industry.

RFAs no longer fit for purpose

Observation and documentation over the years since the Eden RFA was adopted have shown up many inadequacies that demonstrate that the RFA has failed to deliver on promised outcomes, and is quite inappropriate as a model for best practice natural resource management into the future.

I specifically note:

- (1) the ongoing failure to deliver genuine ecologically sustainable forest management, including as demonstrated by a considerable number of breaches with respect to logging and damage to endangered ecological communities, species and crucial habitat;
- (2) the lack of accountability, exacerbated by the exclusion of third party rights to take action where breaches occur;
- (3) the effective subsidisation of native logging overwhelmingly for export of a non-value added and declining natural resource;
- (4) the decline of jobs in native forest harvesting as the industry becomes increasingly mechanised;

The failure of the Eden RFA as a harmonious solution to conflict over commercial native forest logging is also evident in many of the concerns that have led to the still ongoing public protests.

The above points are relevant and apply also to both the Southern and North-Eastern RFAs.

Conclusion

The RFAs in their present form are unsuited to deliver for the future.

It is time to re-evaluate the role of our remaining native forest areas more generally and to develop a strategic but sustainable framework for native forest management that will benefit all.

12 March 2018