

Submission re Draft Report on progress with Implementation of NSW Regional Forest Agreements

By
Vince Phillips

As an individual who was involved in all of the negotiating processes that led up to the Eden RFA and parts of Southern RFA, I would like to provide personal comment on progress of the Agreements covering Eden and southern regions.

In an overall sense the RFA processes were very much a watershed in creating a serious national policy platform for Governments that allowed Australia to build and promote a globally significant forest reserve system and provided a basis for contractual arrangements that would allow native forest based industries to continue in business across rural Australia.

While outcomes on important issues like environment and heritage and ESFM may be embodied in a form in annual reports and reviews by various departments, it is very difficult to access information systems of Governments and obtain a straight forward picture of RFA outcomes. The general public has real difficulty in obtaining knowledge of the benefits RFA' s have delivered.

There appears to be no detailed presentation that divides areas of public forest into what is available for timber production and those areas that are not available.

My own enquiries, pulling together information from a variety of NSW Government reports, shows that less than 7% of the public native eucalypt forests in eastern NSW are available for timber harvesting. This position is constantly misrepresented by anti forestry factions and NSW residents are none the wiser.

It is clear from Government reports that the management of forested reserves is an expensive and quite demanding task. Biodiversity outcomes and ESFM rely on a broad range of management approaches including fire management and feral animal control and in particular, control of predators.

There is still a lack of understanding in the general community about how important the interface between forest reserves and private forests and other private lands is to this management. Key values are not generally understood or promoted. People in the community do not recognise the full impacts of foxes, dogs, cats, etc to ground dwelling fauna.

The RFA's have sought to deliver protection via predictive models and extensive reservation but ground truthing outcomes and other research data seem to be either not available or poorly promoted.

The community still has little understanding of the dynamic nature of Australian eucalypt native forests.

In my view the RFA processes and outcomes have seriously advanced ESFM as a forest management concept and practice.

The IFOA's that followed RFA outcomes and further subsequent regulation changes have increased the effect of management controls in forest operations. The further extension into private forest codes of practice and adoption of formal accreditation schemes such as ISO14001, Australian Forestry Standard and Chain of Custody standards by forest management agencies and major mill customers has expanded the intensity of forest management regimes and enhanced ESFM.

ESFM outcomes in the Reserve system are probably much harder to measure and will largely be influenced by natural events such as storms and fire. If the dry conditions of recent years persist then management decisions are likely to become more crucial for those values that are sensitive to impacts such as high intensity wildfire. Fire intensity is one aspect that fuel management can influence as opposed to ignition sources and weather.

From an industry performance perspective the RFA's have provided a solid base for contractual outcomes albeit at a reduced level of timber mills and employment.

The intense emphasis on renewable resources and their use at the expense of fossil based fuels and resources has shifted the value of wood in a very positive way as both an industrial and consumer product and further in the area of renewable fuels.

Across the Southern and Eden RFA zones and extending into the adjacent East Gippsland zone there remains a sizeable native forest industry sector that underpins the employment of over 1200 persons.

This mainly full time employment remains important across a region where a lot of part time work occurs in sectors such as tourism, retail and leisure industries. There has been little evidence of forest ecotourism in the expanded Parks under the RFA's.

There appear to be no new facilities in the escarpment Parks that underpin any form of full time employment and as far as I know none are planned.

Despite resource reductions and some mill closures a very significant modernisation has occurred across forest harvesting systems and at the Eden chipmill and Eden sawmill. There have been serious improvements in product quality and in the occupational health and safety aspects of the industry.

Nationally Australia continues to be a significant net importer of forest products from around the world. This is likely to continue due to our relatively small population and very broad range of consumer tastes and technical requirements in construction, printing and retail products.

The forest sector looks forward to an increased status in a world short of renewable resources that recycle greenhouse gases across all facets of growth, regrowth, use and re use. Wood fibre is such a resource. Investors and employees in the forest sector can take great pride in their industry sector. The RFA's help provide a genuine sustainable basis to continue in forest based industries.

I understand that opponents of forestry do not share this positive outlook but they are in the happy position of not having to deliver real outcomes in a consumer world with population growth a key challenge.

So far, under the Eden and Southern RFA's, theory and mantra have a poor record in creating employment and investment in rural communities and an even poorer one in key areas of natural resource management.

What serious evidence have forestry opponents and their supporters placed before the community to support the conversion of all public native forest to reserve. To my knowledge physical evidence is something that they do not generally produce.

On the other hand the RFA outcomes have produced a serious degree of balance to the debate over the use of native forests. The RFA 's were never designed to deliver an absolute 100% outcome to any one interest group. Industry is left with making the best of access to a minor part of the public native forest estate. Industry opponents are demanding a 100% outcome in their favour. RFA reviews will not deliver that according to the draft document.

The question of accurate ongoing resource assessments is an important one. It is particularly important to value adding sawmills such as Blue Ridge Eden. Their return on investment is likely to be a lengthy process dependent on ongoing quality log supply. It is already evident that the Forests NSW approach of identifying and accessing specific high sawlog value compartments is of critical value to the overall balance of sawlog supply.

Essentially the basics of the RFA 's have held strong. The comprehensive reserve system remains in place with some arbitrary additions. Industry has been able to substantially reinvest and improve product outcomes. A significant economic contribution is still flowing from the native forest sector in rural communities.

Due largely to climate change considerations the international community has developed a far more collective approach to renewable resources such as wood fibre and their management. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was directly supportive of RFA outcomes when they stated in 2007 that

“ In the long term, a sustainable forest management strategy aimed at maintaining or increasing forest carbon stocks, while producing an annual sustained yield of timber, fibre or energy from the forest will generate the largest mitigation benefit. “

The huge forest fires of 2003-04, 2006-07 and 2009 in south eastern Australia have been a clear demonstration that forests, their biodiversity and carbon values, cannot be simply managed as natural museums. They are dynamic places where human intervention, including commercial timber extraction, has a place, at least in part, as happens under the RFA's.

Australia does set high standards in respect to forest management and these are recognised among our major trading partners, such as China and Japan. These standards have been enhanced within RFA outcomes.

Under the RFA's, access to areas of old growth forest have been seriously restricted and/or closed off permanently. It is now important that the regrowth forests, to which industry has been largely confined, are managed to long term advantage.

This requires a commitment to practices such as thinning of regrowth stands, a protective fire management approach and continued research support into the processing of younger, less stable fibre. Industry is able to meet significant parts of this challenge but the support of Governments is vital.

The RFA structure can be a long term basis for combined environmental and commercial outcomes in Australian forests. The forest industry and business large and small has delivered on its part of RFA's to date.

It is reasonable to expect that Australian Governments will also deliver a continued balanced approach particularly in a climate where renewable resources are becoming more important every day on a global scale.

Those who oppose forestry need to come up with some serious alternatives if they are to stay relevant in a debate that is driven largely by reality rather than endless theory. How things are done is the key and RFA type processes are deciding how things are done.