

Spectator Tues March 14, 2000

RFA process

## Letters to the Editor

### Issues not heard

THE Regional forest Agreement (RFA) process has great implications for biodiversity, a very important issue for south-west Victoria, because actions taken now virtually seal off any future possibilities for improvement.

The Shire of Southern Grampians, among others, has completely ignored this issue and elected to promote the logging interests without making any effort to understand the complete picture.

We believe that issues that have not been dealt with adequately in the RFA process are:

- Employment — the extent of losses is due mainly to poor forecasting by NRE of sustainable yield and has little to do with conservation reserves. Forty-eight of the possible 67 job losses are due to NRE getting its sums wrong. Employment alternatives have not been canvassed. These include tourism resulting from a proper regard for our native forests, and employment in plantations on cleared farmland. It is time to consider better long-term objectives and act to safeguard the future.

- Export woodchips — export of woodchips from native forests are the real reason for the RFA, not biodiversity considerations. Exports cannot continue after December 1999 until the RFA is signed, and currently this makes up most of the wood from our forests. Basically, our forests produce D grade logs or pulp logs. Our forests are not an economic proposition for logging. Plantations on farmland are the answer, where foresters can pursue unrestrained policies to maximise timber yield and quality.

- Biased and misleading information in the RFA draft document. NRE forest service made no mention in its submission to the draft of:

- Growing plantation sawlog timber on cleared farmland as an alternative to logging native forest;
- State pricing of timber (public subsidy) is so low as to lock in woodchipping of the native forests;

- Low royalties preventing economic investment in sawlog production from farmland;

- The current boom in blue gum plantations for woodchip on farms. More than 60,000ha will have been planted by the end of 2000 and there is only a six-year gap before this woodchip begins to compete with woodchip from the forests.

NRE's anti-biodiversity policy of clearfelling with coupes averaging 70ha and as large as 130ha in the Cobboboonee forest. A pity the shire did not ask us to show them the other side of the picture.

This is absolutely incompatible with biodiversity objectives. NRE is unwilling to return to the older single-tree selection method for logging. We believe that system is more compatible with conservation of biodiversity.

The current proposed wood utilisation plan is to continue clear-felling plantation policy regardless of the biodiversity issue.

- Plains grassy woodlands. The proposed reserves have omitted proper consideration of this rare vegetation type which once dominated large areas of our region. Most importantly, the extremely under-represented Yellow Box- Yellow Gum-Grey Box woodland areas linking the Black Range and Grampians have not been adequately catered for in the RFA draft.

- Process of RFA selection. The conservation values of all under-represented vegetation types that are classed as 'endangered', 'vulnerable' or 'rare' should have been the primary concern of the RFA process. Some of these areas, including the plains grassy woodlands, represent less than one per cent of the original extent, whereas 15 per cent representation is the RFA 'ideal'. Any competing alternative landuse, such as grazing or firewood gathering, should be obliged to demonstrate to an independent panel why their use should continue. That has not happened.

- Portland NRE forest management. There appears to have been a cynical campaign by Portland NRE forestry service to pre-empt the RFA process by destroying as much as possible of the Portland area older forest by clearfelling, woodchipping and other means, before the RFA process is complete. We have cited many examples of these acts in our submission to the RFA panel.

- NRE biodiversity objectives. We do not believe that NRE is serious in its resolve to stand by Victoria's biodiversity — directions in management' statement released in 1997 as a blueprint for the future. The evidence so far indicates a contempt for such ideals and efforts, and an unwillingness of the department to take issue with the actions of the forest service section.

DAVID MUNRO,  
Hamilton Field Naturalist Club.

- Threatened species. Continuation of present policies will see local extinction of threatened species such as Tiger quoll, Powerful owl and Yellow-bellied glider which have been able to hang on in the Portland area until recent times.

The furtive advent of clearfelling in 1997 has changed all that and, if the current plans are put into effect, there will be little old growth forest left, except for NRE's few miserable little strips along streams. These provide too few trees to ensure long-term survival of these magnificent predators or the prey species upon which they must live.

- Composition of RFA's proposed additions to the reserves. The 168,000ha of Crown Lands that are proposed for addition to the reserve system basically comprise a host of small areas of bush and larger areas of heathland that the forest service does not want.

The areas contain little timber of commercial value. The forest service has conceded virtually nothing in terms of mature old growth forest. Some bodies have falsely misrepresented these figures to suggest that this is the area of timber resources lost to the region.

- Non-conformity with RFA criteria. The proposed reserves in the Portland area do not conform with criteria which stipulate that they be large areas with a small boundary to area ratio. The RFA has proposed small, long, narrow strips which have no chance of resisting threatening processes (weed invasion, disturbance from adjacent logging, feral animals etc) and which do not provide enough living space and diversity for the fauna they are supposed to protect.