Western Victorian Forest Protection Network
p.o. box 428, daylesford 3460

press release
14th October, 1999

re: West Victorian Regional Forest Agreement

The Western Victorian Forest Protection Network, set up to provide a networked community voice for the West Victorian Regional Forest Agreement, have recently lobbied both State and Federal governments and agencies expressing detailed concerns regarding the current management and deadlines of the agreement process. Following a recent meeting (3rd October) held in Camperdown, attended by 20 member groups from across the West region and interested representation by the Wilderness Society, Friends of the Earth and Environment Victoria, a provision of shared concerns and stuctural demands was collectively drafted and sent to all major political parties (State & Federal) and the appropriate government agencies involved in the RFA process, DNRE and the National Forest Task Force.

The WVFPN member groups believe that the definition of the West region as one entity is preventing proper analysis of the many differing forest values. The Comprehensive Regional Assessment report, part of which was released in July as a status document, has failed to provide non-timber forest interest groups with much confidence due to an unbalanced approach to other relative forest values (ie.tourism, water catchment, beekeeping) and contains severe qualitive shortcomings. Also, the WVFPN believe that the RFA process is being driven by the Forestry Division of the DNRE which appears too closely aligned to timber and woodchipping interests. In fact, the CRA report document included DNRE staff members in the timber industry employment data. Furthermore, the release and public consultation of the CRA report was mostly unprofessional and lacking any strategic guideline. The RFA process has delibrately excluded the City of Geelong, the regions largest population centre, despite its vital interest in forest management issues related to maintaining tourism and water values.

The WVFPN letter has demanded that the RFA process be extended for one year beyond the current December 31st deadline to enable adequate research to be completed and appropriate community consultation to occur. An extension of this deadline has already been supported by the Victorian Association of Forest Industries, the Forestry Divsion of the Construction, Mining, Forestry and Energy Union and now other key stakeholders in the Gippsland RFA, the only other remaining unsigned Regional Forest Agreement on Australia. Any new research within this extension must provide a comprehensive assessment of non-timber values, including water catchment, tourism, biodiversity, plantation and other non-destructive forest activities

ATTACHMENT 1.

Western Victorian Forest Protection Network

Statement of Concerns Relating to the Current Regional Forest Agreement Process for Western Victoria

The Network's concerns about the current process fall under three headings:

Substance and Content of the Process

- The definition of the Western Region as one entity is preventing the process from properly analysing the important differences that exist between the several Forest Management Areas in the region, which imply the need for a range of policy prescriptions. Continuing on the current track will lead to "lowest common denominator" outcomes that will serve no one.

- The research that has been completed by the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments as a foundation for community consultation and policy formulation is completely inadequate. The Comprehensive Regional Assessment (CRA), part of which was released in July, completely lacks vision and is essentially a compendium of disconnected facts and DNRE "dogma". The CRA fails to give adequate consideration to forest values other than timber, does not explore the linkages and trade offs between the various forest values, and contains many factual errors. In addition, vitally important research on flora and fauna in the region has yet to be completed and publicised.

- The CRA presents an inaccurate, biased assessment of the current forest management regime in the Western Region and fails to incorporate information communicated to the DNRE and the Taskforce on numerous occasions relating to forest management practices.

Management of the RFA Process

- The RFA process is clearly being driven by the Forestry Division of the DNRE, which has also provided four of the nine members of the Steering Committee. Unfortunately, there is also no community stakeholder representation on this RFA steering committee. Our specific concerns about DNRE are:

    - The Forestry Division of the DNRE is very closely aligned to timber interests (evidenced by the fact that, in the CRA document, DNRE staff numbers were included in the timber industry employment data);

- Driven by woodchipping, the active destruction of biodiverse native forest is continuing throughout the Western Region under DNRE stewardship;

- The DNRE acts generally as if it is a law unto itself, often withholding information on its activities and dismissing or ignoring any community input or criticism. In particular, DNRE officers have revealed an evasive and defensive attitude at RFA process meetings and have displayed little genuine interest forest values other than timber.

The Consultative Process

- The DNRE and Federal Forest Taskforce have failed to provide adequate dialogue opportunities for the WVFPN member groups, local community and non-timber stakeholders. This is a serious concern to the network given our substantially shortened RFA process to meet woodchip demands. The Wombat Forest Society's RFA funded local meetings, collectively attended by 500 people, had only representation (Ian Miles) by either Department on only one occasion;

- Deliberate exclusion of Geelong, the region's largest population centre, from the RFA process. The City of Geelong has a vital interest in forest management and related issues due to the importance of the Otway State Forest in maintaining tourism and water values;

- A complete lack of community consultative strategy and planning including the failure to adequately inform important stakeholders in the RFA process including local councils (City of Greater Geelong) and water authorities (South West Water);

- Inadequate CRA report meeting infrastructure and sophistication, such as an independent chairperson, meeting agendas and secretarial provision;

- Reluctance by DNRE and the Forest Taskforce to provide requested reference material and data breakdowns;

- Defensive and often evasive responses to community and stakeholder concerns during CRA meetings;

- Shallow and unrepresentative analysis of significant local communities within the CRA report due to a failure to adequately locate important community stakeholders;

- Failure of DNRE/Forest Taskforce to meet any process timetable;

- Lack of proactive dialogue from both DNRE and Forest Taskforce regarding delayed timetabling;

- Inadequate RFA community facilitator to provide input, policy, process and outcome liaison.

such as beekeeping and recreational fishing. The extension should contain appropriate provision of applying 'interim protection' to areas indentified in the CRA report as being deficient in Reserve levels in each vegetation class and any new areas of important community forest value. The WVFPN member groups want DNRE to be excluded from the management of the West Victorian RFA and an independant committee, including community stakeholder representatives, to oversee the detailed research.

If these demands are not met, then the member groups of the Western Victorian Forest Protection Network will seriously consider withdrawing from the West Victoria RFA process.

The WVFPN now awaits a reply from all concerned parties.

Written by Peter O'Mara, Community Liasion Officer, WVFPN.

For further comment, please contact Tim Anderson, 5348-1141 or Chris Tippler, 9670-0455

WVFPN MEMBER GROUPS
Wombat Forest Society
Otways Ranges Environment Network
ANGAIR
Enfield Forest Alliance
Actively Conserving Trentham
Daylesford Walking Group
Portland Field Naturalists
Hamilton Filed Naturalists
South West Environment Action Group
Friends of the Lerdederg
Ballarat Field Naturalists
Dhuart Warrong Elders Coorporation
Victorain Apiarists Association
Enviro West
Apollo Bay Landcare Group
Friends of Bannockburn Bush
Geelong Field Naturalists
Golden Plains Tourism Association
Break'O'Day Forest Environment Group
Barwon Biodiversity Watch

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
Midland Express
fax no: [redacted]

The recent timber industry incarnation, the deceptively named Regional Forest Agreement and Community Coalition (Midland Express, Oct 12) has one vital missing ingredient, the community. Like their bogus environment group, the Forest Protection Society, the local timber industry has once again attempted to "greenwash" themselves within the RFA process and local community with nothing more than industralised propaganda. If Mr Geoff Proctor, resources manager for Black Forests Timbers, believes that the forest is well managed and sustainable, then can we assured that he will not avail himself to RFA industry compensation if the agreement proves otherwise? I think not! The real truth is that while the timber industry continually reinvents their public front, the Wombat Forest is being logged (not harvested) at an unsustainable rate. Surely, the local community are too intelligent to believe such blatant misrepresentation by a fat bellied timber industry clutching at a diminishing supply of straws. Or is that native trees?

Peter O'Mara
Community Liasion Officer
Wmbat Forest Society
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