FoI documents corroborate Wombat forest overlogging

The yield of sawlog timber from the forest is dropping dramatically.

By **CLAIRE MILLER**
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Trees are becoming increasingly thin on the ground in the Wombat State Forest, according to State Government documents confirming community complaints of overlogging in the midlands region.

The documents, obtained by *The Age* under Freedom of Information, show that because there are fewer high-grade trees in the region than official estimates claim, yields per hectare have declined since 1995.

Tim Anderson, of the Wombat Forest Society, said it would be criminal to continue logging on this basis under the 20-year Commonwealth-state Regional Forest Agreement, signed in March.

He said the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, which vehemently denied there were problems until the change in government last year, must come clean "for everyone's sake".

Apart from community concerns about the effect of logging on conservation, water catchments and other forest industries, Mr Anderson said the timber industry was on its knees after investing millions on the strength of assurances in recent years that the estimates were right.

"You can't allow a forest to be destroyed," he said. "The government should really be having a full inquiry into the lies this region has been given over the last three years."

The Victorian Association of Forest Industries' executive director Graeme Gooding said he was past being shocked, and was just anxious that the problem be fixed as quickly as possible.

He said the industry "copped a lot of flak" for joining conservationists in appealing to former environment minister Marie Tehan for an independent inquiry. "In retrospect, we should have exerted even more pressure to get it investigated," Mr Gooding said.

Conservation and Environment Minister Sherryl Garbutt said in a statement that the government was prepared to reduce harvesting where analysis showed it was required.

But she said calculations of area and timber volumes in any year must take into account varying yields from blocks in different stages of logging. Most Midlands blocks are logged in two stages, the first removing most trees, allowing the rest to fill out to be cut several years later.

But the department has taken the mix of stages into account in calculating the sustainable yield in its Midlands forest management plan. The plan assumes the forests will yield an average net 47 tonnes of sawlog-grade timber per hectare between 1995 and 2005, and indefinitely thereafter.

According to the FoI documents, the forest returned 47 tonnes per hectare in the first year, but yields have declined ever since to a low of 25.6 tonnes per hectare this year.

The documents show the department has resorted to scheduling more areas for logging each year to make up the shortfall and so meet licence commitments.

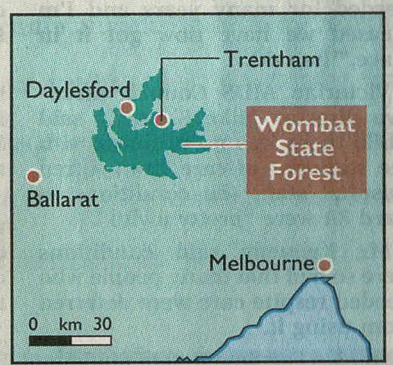
The department in January acknowledged a miscalculation. It means, under the regional forest agreement, that the total volume of sawlogs cut each year will be reduced from 58,630 tonnes to 40,000 tonnes over two years.

But the reduction is roughly in proportion with the reduction in area available for logging under the agreement, leaving open the question of whether volumes will be also adjusted to reflect declining abundance.

Declining timber resource

Year	net sawlogs harvested per hectare
1994/95	47 tonnes
1995/96	39.2 tonnes
1996/97	40.3 tonnes
1997/98	31.6 tonnes
1998/99	27 tonnes
1999/00	25.6 tonnes

Logging rates set in 1995 on the assumption each hectare will yield an average net 47 tonnes of sawlogs over 10 years to 2005 and indefinitely thereafter.



Source: Department of Natural Resources and Environment. JMB/THE AGE 20/11/2000