

**Submission
No 144**

**INQUIRY INTO LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY AND
FUTURE OF THE TIMBER AND FOREST PRODUCTS
INDUSTRY**

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Submission to the NSW Legislative Council inquiry into the long-term sustainability and future of the timber and forest products industry

I appreciate the opportunity to make this submission to your inquiry. In my submission I wish to address points 1(b), 1(e), 1(f), and 1(g) of the Terms of Reference.

My submission will focus particularly on the native forest logging part of the timber industry and is based largely on 14 years experience (from 2000-2014) living on the Far South Coast of NSW, on a block of land which shared a boundary with the Corunna State Forest.

My experiences of NSW state forests management

During this time I observed the management practices of Forestry Corporation NSW at close range and the impacts of these practices, not only on my local area, but, at less close range, the whole of the SE and Eden RFA areas.

In 2002 I had an experience that galvanized me into finding out as much as I could about the timber industry in the SE, and the degree to which it was sustainable.

My husband and I were travelling through SE Gippsland near the NSW border. We took a public side road off the highway to camp for the night. As we wound through tall healthy Mountain Ash forest, we stopped every now and then to take photographs. By the time we had found a camp site it was well after dark.

Early the next morning the rumbling and rattling of a large truck woke us. Emerging from our camper, we were confronted with a devastating sight. We were beside a logging road, in the middle of a logging coup. The truck was carrying logs over the border to the Eden woodchip mill. Looking over the hills below us what we saw resembled a bombed site. There was hardly a tree standing, just smashed up and broken remains flattened on the earth, stumps of all sizes bearing witness to what had been there just a few days before. This was my first experience of clear felling.

Then in 2004, we hired a small plane and, along with a photographer, flew from Moruya down to the Eden area. Having seen what was happening in Victoria, I wanted to see the situation in SE NSW. It was soon clear that the extent of clear fell logging in the Eden RFA area was extensive.

An industry that is ecologically unsustainable

Follow-up investigation at ground level revealed many dried up water courses, extensive erosion caused by logging on very steep sites, and virtually no regrowth for years on the log dump sites which had been very heavily compacted by heavy machinery.

My own local observations of post logging burns in the Corunna State Forest demonstrated clearly that regrowth is highly dependent on reliable rainfall. Too little and regrowth, even of ground cover, takes years; too much and erosion is extensive, permanently changing stream flows and silting up the many coastal lakes in the area. Since that time we have suffered extended droughts, and devastating fires followed by floods.

It was clear to me, as a geographer with some understanding of natural systems including the water cycle, that these forestry operations were not sustainable.

Healthy native forests provide essential ecological services to the planet. They regulate run-off, hence our water supplies; they provide habitat for native species; they provide a critical link in the water cycle, transpiring moisture into the atmosphere, which is then the basis for our rainfall; and most important of all now, they take absorb carbon dioxide and sequester the carbon.

Unsustainable forestry practices

I do not believe the Forestry Corporation is managing the logging of forests in SE NSW in a sustainable manner. During my years living in the Tilba area I witnessed many breaches of the Corporation's own regulations by contractors. It was local residents who time and again had to alert authorities, either Forestry Corp or the EPA, to these. Only very rarely did they result in a fine or any change in behaviour. In one case, on a logging coup near Narooma, the number of habitat and feed trees left was significantly below the required number per hectare. Then the unsupervised post logging burn got away and destroyed the few habitat and feed trees that had survived the logging operation. These breaches resulted in no sanctions.

In about 2010 a post logging burn on the western side of Gulaga (Mountain) near Tilba was left unattended, the wind came up, the fire took off up the mountain and burned for days. Post logging burns being left unattended and getting out of control, was a relatively common occurrence in our area.

The very structure and species in the forests is being controlled by Forestry Corp to suit both their market and their machinery. The cutting cycles have got progressively shorter as the forests are over-harvested and logging quotas are harder to fill. These practices are unsustainable.

The impact of logging on bushfire intensity

I'll leave it to others to discuss in detail the devastating impacts on our native forests of the 2019-20 fires along the NSW coast.

However I do want to refer to recently published research findings, which relate to these fires. On February 11, 2021, Peter Hannam writing in the SMH reported on a very important meta-study which assessed 51 peer reviewed papers. This research, based on the work of hundreds of scientists and peer-reviewed by hundreds more, found that logging increased the severity of forest fires from about 10 years after the trees are extracted, with the effects lasting more than 30 years. Selective logging or thinning (which is the modus operandi of Forestry Corporation) can also increase fire risks, according to the Bushfire Recovery Project, a joint project between Griffith University and the Australian National University.

The research showed that it is up to seven times more likely that the canopy in a logged forest will burn, compared with an unlogged forest, and once the canopy is burnt, it takes a long time for recovery.

As with research conducted by David Bowman from the University of Tasmania, this review found climate change was the key contributor to increased bushfires in Australia. It points to an industry that has to radically change its practices if it is to protect our native forests into the future.

Forestry Corporation's own website claims: "The Australian forest industry is smart, modern and high-tech, and importantly our forests are managed sustainably." From many recent research studies and my own close observation of this industry, and its impact on our environment, I would have to respectfully disagree very strongly.

An industry driven by woodchipping

I must now turn to the driver behind the timber industry on the Far South Coast – that is woodchipping. This was the driver during my time living in the region and it still is.

Recent figures shared by Harriet Swift, writing for Michael West Media in April 2021, reveal that in 2020 “96% of trees felled in the NSW region of Eden were turned into woodchips, with 1.5% for firewood...This is potentially illegal.” The legal framework that regulates logging in coastal NSW states: “an operation must not be conducted for the primary purpose of producing low quality logs (including salvage and firewood) and pulp logs.”

For 50 years now the industry, and governments, have been pedaling the myth that the NSW woodchipping industry only uses waste wood (heads and butts) which the sawmills can't use. A visit to Edrom Road Eden will soon dispel this myth – the trucks going into the chipmill carry NO heads or butts, only the trunks of trees varying in girth enormously, from old growth to regrowth, depending on where the logging is taking place. Few sawmills still exist on the coast, and those that do largely turn out low value products such as pallets, planks and fence palings. The government funded and heavily subsidized Blue Ridge sawmill in Eden used to produce high quality flooring, however it closed in 2020 and to my knowledge has not yet reopened. The Eden Chipmill is the driver in this region.

An industry that is not economically viable

The NSW native forest logging industry has not been financially viable for many years, with the softwood plantation sector cross subsidizing the loss-making native hardwood sector. In 2016 Roderick Campbell and Richard McKeon reported for The Australia Institute that logging by the Forestry Corporation of NSW generated losses of \$79m over the previous seven years. They claim discontinuing the practice could deliver significant benefits to the state of NSW.

It seems that the industry is looking for a way to improve this situation by using woodchips to generate electricity. The same authors have deduced from their research that this will not provide the economic uplift required to make the industry viable. Potentially, they say, the highest economic use of native forestry would be to leave the trees standing.

Direct employment in the native forestry industry is minimal in NSW, accounting for less than 0.1% of the total workforce. As Campbell and McKeon point out, if native forest logging was discontinued in NSW, existing grants, subsidies and avoided losses could provide funding for ongoing restoration and management by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and hence large numbers of jobs in the affected regions.

In conclusion

My experiences lead me to have to conclude that this is an industry that is economically and ecologically unsustainable. It has been heavily subsidized by the taxpayer for many years and has done untold damage to our native forests, which are becoming more and more valuable for their ecological services as the effects of climate change rapidly increase.

I believe it is time now for open and frank discussion around what is needed to phase out the native forest logging part of the timber industry and to plan for the transition of workers and communities to new sustainable jobs providing rehabilitation and ongoing protection of our precious native forests. End the mythology that this is an industry based on sawmilling, end the cross subsidization within the timber industry and end the conflict within the forest communities by providing a plan where all can work together towards a common goal of long term sustainability.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Anne Maret
27 May 2021