Submission to
Review of the native vegetation clearing regulations – consultation paper
by [REDACTED]

Significant anomalies relate to key elements of the Review, especially protecting biodiversity through the ‘no net-loss’ objective, offset delivery and also, compliance and enforcement, particularly in relation to the Mountain and Alpine Ash forests and associated rainforest/forest ecotones in the Central Highlands. The unique values of these exceptional, yet highly restricted ecological communities, are being rapidly lost to the detriment of biodiversity, climate, catchment hydrology and scenic landscapes together with major impacts on local ecotourism operators and also, recreational and educational opportunities.

In particular, the current intensity and extent of forest harvesting, pulpwood and post-fire salvage logging in the montane ash forests, with logging roads traversing through rainforests, are having significant impacts on biodiversity, particularly hollow-dependent fauna like the critically endangered Leadbeater’s Possum, despite prescriptions to protect this iconic species. Moreover, the recent change from clear-felling to retention harvesting is exacerbating the problem, with increased areas subject to logging to make up timber quotas, leaving few, small, isolated patches of remnant forest subject to extensive weed invasion, exposure to the elements like wind and the impacts of regeneration burns.

Importantly, some coupes that fail to regenerate Mountain or Alpine Ash are subsequently reburnt or the ground is scarified with machinery, then reseeded, but in the process further reducing biodiversity and creating dense wattle stands with extensive, impenetrable blackberry infestations throughout all disturbed areas, including logging road corridors and adjoining forests. Others remain in this state for many years with minimal if any Mountain or Alpine Ash regeneration.

Significantly, a recent ecosystem risk assessment, based on the IUCN Red List of Ecosystems criteria, was applied to the Mountain Ash forest ecosystem of the Central Highlands of Victoria (Burns et al, 2014). This assessment determined a rank of critically endangered in terms of the risk of ecosystem collapse, including the decline of hollow bearing trees, a critical Leadbeater’s Possum habitat characteristic.

Lindenmayer et al (2015) highlights that Mountain Ash is the tallest flowering plant in the world and it is among the fastest growing tree species. Montane ash communities are integral to ecological processes, biodiversity conservation and carbon storage, yet only 1.16% of old growth montane ash forest remains. Importantly, according to a detailed assessment carried out by Keith et al (2009), “Mountain Ash forests are the most carbon-dense forests on earth. Old growth stands in which there has been no human disturbance can support more than 1800 tonnes of carbon biomass per ha”.

The issues highlighted above clearly indicate that exemption of public authorities from the Clearing Regulations, particularly VicForests, with inadequate justification, accountability and monitoring, contribute to the largest loss of native vegetation and associated biodiversity, including threatened species and ecological communities.
Recommendations

1. All Public Authorities be subject to the Native Vegetation Clearing Regulations;
2. All forms of timber harvesting impacting on native vegetation be immediately subject to the Native Vegetation Clearing Regulations;
3. Improved on-ground assessments and monitoring of offsets to verify computer mapping and models;

8 May 2016

References:


Mountain Ash: fire, logging and the future of Victoria’s giant forests by David Lindenmayer, David Blair, Lachlan McBurney and Sam Banks, CSIRO publishing.
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