

Victorian Government response
to the State of the Forests
2018 report

Contents

Minister Foreword	5
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Introduction	6
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Victorian Government Response

Summary table of responses

Recommendation	Level of Government Support	
1	Support	8
2	Support in principle	9
3	Support in part	10
4	Support	12





Minister's Foreword



I am pleased to present the Victorian Government Response to the State of the Forests 2018 report.

The Victorian Government is responsible for sustainably managing 6.4 million hectares of forest on public land, and has oversight of ecosystem health across over one million hectares of forest on private land.

The State of the Forests 2018 reminds us of the value our forests provide for Victoria's environment and our communities.

The report underscores the challenges our land managers face in ensuring our forests are managed sustainably. It highlights our successes and guides improvement within our forest management system.

The State of the Forests 2018 report sets a baseline from which we can monitor the health of our forests into the future.

The report provides valuable data on our forests' productive value, employment in the forest sector, and contribution to cultural, recreational, and spiritual values – including their significance in connecting indigenous communities to their ancestral lands.

It provides an important stocktake of our effectiveness in managing forests for multiple values and its insights advance our understanding of forest health, extent, and recovery from disturbance across Victoria.

In this context, the government has acted to ensure a long-term and sustainable future for Victoria's forestry industry with a new 30-year plan to support a transition from native timber to a plantation-based industry. This includes an immediate end to logging in old growth forests, and an end to all native forest harvesting by 2030.

A key part of managing forests better is effective community engagement.

It is through our community engagement activities that we unlock the knowledge held by local land owners, recreational users, and traditional owner communities who have been managing their land for thousands of years. This knowledge allows us to support the implementation of traditional land management practices and capture new perspectives through citizen science.

It is also important to acknowledge that the 2019-20 summer bushfires resulted in far reaching devastation of Victorian ecosystems, communities and industries, with over 1.5 million hectares burnt. Habitats and national parks were significantly impacted, with devastating effects for Victoria's biodiversity. Over 240 of Victoria's rare or threatened plant and animal species had over 50% of their known habitat burnt.

Supporting communities and the environment to recover from the 2019-20 summer bushfires is a priority for the Victorian Government. My Department is coordinating a significant program to support recovery of our flora, fauna and biodiversity; cultural healing in partnership with Traditional Owners; restoration of visitor and community assets, roads, waterways and catchments; land rehabilitation and management; and planning measures to support rebuild of fire-affected communities.

In presenting the Government's response to the State of the Forests 2018 report, I thank the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability for her work. The report provides information that will underpin the development of forest policies and our forest management planning framework, and contributes to our ability to sustainably manage forests for Victorians, now and in the future.

Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP
Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change
Minister for Solar Homes



Introduction

THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE STATE OF THE FORESTS 2018 REPORT

The Victorian Government represents its commitment to the process and principles of sustainable forest management through the delivery of the State of the Forests report every five years. This reporting is a requirement under the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* and outlines the Government's progress in upholding the Sustainability Charter for Victoria's State Forests, as well as its performance in managing over 6 million hectares of forest on public land. In 2018, the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (the Commissioner) was designated to produce Victoria's fourth State of the Forests report (the Report) in conjunction with the Secretary of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. The Report was submitted to the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change in early 2019.

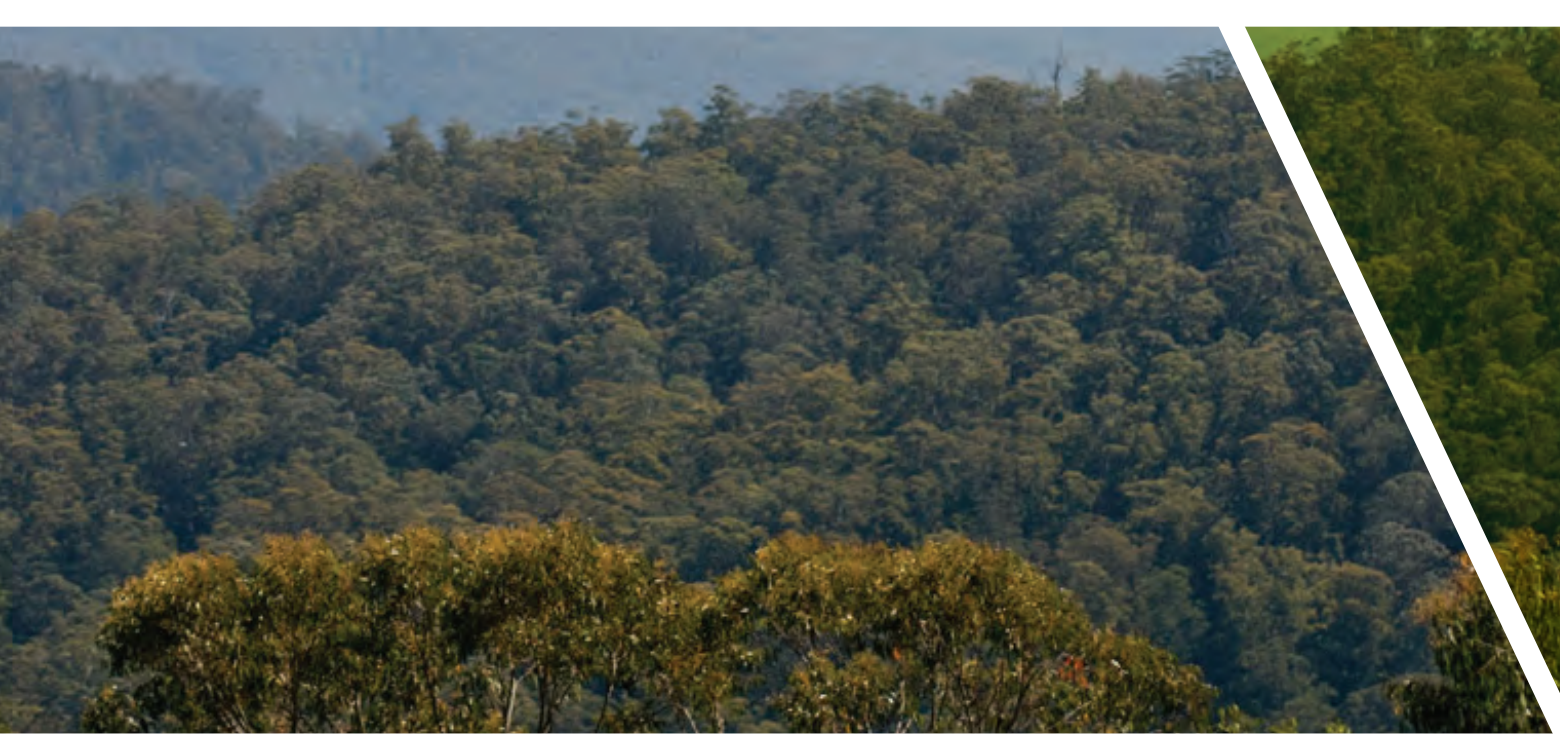
The Report provides an indication of the health of Victoria's forests, based on the analysis of the seven criteria and 45 indicators of the Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management, covering both biophysical and socio-economic factors. These are based on the Montreal Process, a voluntary agreement between 12 nations for the conservation and sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests. The Report has four recommendations, two of which are replicated in the State of the Environment 2018 report. A third recommendation is specific to forests but is derived from a recommendation in the State of the Environment 2018 report. The Government's formal response to the four recommendations is presented within this document.

USING DATA TO RESPOND AND ADAPT TO FOREST DISTURBANCE AND CHALLENGES POSED BY CLIMATE CHANGE

The Government recognises the need for accurate data to support decision making. From targeted species detections to broadscale, long-term monitoring programs, these datasets provide critical information about the status and trends of ecosystem health, assist in detecting change and facilitating the observation of trends over time.

The recommendations within the Report recognise this, and the Government has responded with initiatives and programs that address these recommendations. This is illustrated through enhancements to the Victorian Forest Monitoring Program, the development of new tools to monitor disturbance and the effect of fire on sensitive ecosystems, and continuous improvement of data interpretation and storage capabilities.

New data collection technologies, including new and upgraded remote sensing platforms, terrestrial laser scanning, and the tools and techniques available to interpret them are constantly being sought, developed, and evaluated by Government departments, agencies and their partner organisations.



ACHIEVING OUTCOMES FOR COMMUNITIES

The Government is committed to delivering a sustainable forest management system for all Victorians. This means targeting our investment and programmatic activities across all forest values, including social, economic, ecological, cultural and spiritual. The ability to acknowledge and consider a range of values underpins the forest management system and the ability to determine trade-offs to achieve the maximum benefit for the most people. The State of the Forests reporting process provides a critical tool for the Government to monitor its performance in these areas.

In this context, a recommendation to review the criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management supports our efforts to ensure reporting meets community expectations, addresses emerging socio-economic factors, and can meet the challenges of the future, including those posed by climate change.

Recommendation 1

That DELWP maintain their commitment to resourcing and maintaining the VFMP and enhance it to (i) improve statewide understanding of the impacts of forest fragmentation on forest-dependent species (including the development of an authoritative list of Victorian forest-dependent species), and (ii) improve assessment of protected areas by conducting detailed research to identify the benefits of various types of IUCN-protected areas for target species. Any amendments to the VFMP must not disrupt future trend analyses.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT

The Victorian Government supports this recommendation.

The Victorian Forest Monitoring Program (VFMP) has been collecting information on the biophysical attributes and botanical diversity of Victoria's forests since 2011. The Government understands the benefits of the program accrue over time and is committed to the continuation of the program.

Botanical information from the program is delivered in the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas, which also now includes the authoritative list of Victoria's forest-dependent species. Data from the VFMP more broadly underpins a range of derived datasets and modelling processes and provides valuable ground truthing data used to verify satellite image analysis, including the assessment of forest fragmentation. Recent time series forest extent data has been used to assess the status of fragmentation across time.

The program is specifically designed to differentiate forest health characteristics between state forests and conservation reserves, including national parks. The information generated through the program and its contribution to complementary scientific studies assists the Government in understanding the utility of the state's reserve system, and in doing so, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected areas. In addition, the forest values assessment program currently being implemented through the forest management reform program, is undertaking a review of the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system, which is underpinned by the IUCN criteria.

Any amendments to the VFMP program will ensure the time series data is complemented and enriched and will not undermine the legacy of information collected to date. At the same time, a process on continual improvement is applied through annual review. In the 2019/20 field season, additional metrics were included to strengthen assessment of vegetation condition; and for the first time, Traditional Owner groups were engaged for the dual benefit of enabling working on country opportunities and to advise on the development of cultural health indicators across public forests. Future enhancements may include integration of new remotely sensed imagery to assist long-term assessment of impacts associated with climate change and other disturbances.

Current and future data derived from the VFMP will contribute to Government initiatives aimed at understanding the effectiveness of the protected area estate in the conservation of target species and key forest values.

Recommendation 2

That DELWP develop its spatial information capability and database, and ensure it is regularly and routinely updated, to inform decision-making across the environment portfolio.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PRINCIPLE

The Victorian Government supports the intent of this recommendation and acknowledges the important role of spatial data to inform decision-making across the environment portfolio.

Spatial data and services are fundamental to the delivery of many of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's (DELWP) core service obligations. The Department is uniquely placed to take a leadership role in spatial data service design and delivery, given DELWP's expertise, custodianship of essential data sets and the role these services provide for so many public and private sector activities.

DELWP maintains a wide range of spatial information—including topographic, public land, forestry, biodiversity and marine data – and has several systems already in place to store, update and share it. The Department's spatial data is stored in the Victorian Spatial Data Library, which contains over 2,000 datasets that are made available externally through both the Spatial Datamart Victoria and the DataVic website.

Released in 2018, the DELWP Core Spatial Data Services Strategy sets the direction for the core spatial data services that underpin the State's spatial offerings. The strategy emphasises the need for efficient foundation data infrastructure and the development of spatial products and services that are informed by customer insights and envisages a three-year implementation plan which is well progressed.

In delivering the strategy DELWP has been investing significantly in modernising its spatial infrastructure, establishing cloud-based storage for its spatial data, exploring the potential for foundational spatial datasets to take on a 3D form and trialling new technologies, including digital twins, machine learning and artificial intelligence. To ensure clearer governance and coordination the Department is also establishing the DELWP Spatial Steering Committee that will set the vision and strategy for future spatial service modernisation.

DELWP will explore the following options to improve its spatial information capability and database:

- ensuring that Victorian Spatial Data Library contains a comprehensive list of spatial data collected by DELWP
- promoting awareness and supporting greater access to DELWP spatial data
- developing a roadmap to deliver improved spatial infrastructure and building the case for 'One-VPS Shared Services'.

While the Government acknowledges the risk associated with not actively curating datasets, there are significant costs associated with the collection and management of spatial data to achieve this outcome. In line with existing Government commitments and portfolio priorities, DELWP will consider a review of its information asset register to identify core spatial datasets as a platform to support effective decision-making.

Recommendation 3

That DELWP establishes environmental-economic accounting as a core capability and delivers a set of environmental-economic accounts for Victoria by 2022, consistent with the SEEA guidelines, the DELWP Valuing and Accounting for Victoria's Environment strategy and aligned with the agreed common national approach. Further, that the Minister for Environment include in the Statement of Expectations to the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability a requirement to incorporate reporting against Victoria's environmental-economic accounts in State of the Forests reporting for Victoria from 2023.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PART

The Victorian Government supports the overall intent of this recommendation. The recommendation to deliver a set of environmental-economic accounts for Victoria by 2022 is not supported at this time. The production of comprehensive state-wide environmental-economic accounts by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is not currently feasible.

DELWP will continue to build on its capabilities in environmental-economic accounting and produce accounts to improve the evidence base available for future policy development, planning and decision making in Victoria. This work will be consistent with the current experimental UN SEEA guidance and the revision process due to be completed by December 2020, DELWP's Valuing and Accounting for Victoria's Environment Strategic Plan 2015-2020 and the common national approach. The scope and depth of DELWP's program on environmental-economic accounting will be driven by policy needs, focusing on areas where there is greatest need for building the evidence base on connections between the environment and economy to tackle future challenges facing Victoria. The current program includes an assessment of ecosystem services and benefits from Victorian forests using the SEEA framework.

The recommendation for a requirement for environmental-economic accounts in the Ministerial Statement of Expectations to the Commissioner for Environment Sustainability is also not supported at this time. DELWP will continue to provide the Commissioner with products from its environmental-economic accounting program to support future reporting and contribute to the development of a comprehensive state-wide environmental-economic accounting framework in the future.

Recommendation 4

That DELWP review the current criteria and indicators for State of the Forests reporting especially sociocultural indicators, and align reporting with relevant Victorian legislation, policy and programs and the UN Sustainable Development Goals and targets. Further, identification of the knowledge gaps in monitoring the social benefits of forests will be critical for managing forests for all Victorians.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is committed to reporting robust and accurate information on the health and condition of forest ecosystems as well as the communities and industries they support. This is achieved by adhering to and maintaining the key principles defined under the Montreal Process' criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management.

The Montreal Process defines the framework for reporting that facilitates coordination and collaboration between state, federal and international levels, and this coordination needs to, and will continue to ensure consistency, accuracy and efficiency through the data collection and reporting process. However, DELWP acknowledges that periodic review and critique of reporting systems needs to be undertaken to ensure they continue to align with and reflect contemporary values and effectively encompass new and emerging data capture techniques. A review of the current State of the Forests reporting process will therefore be undertaken.

In this way, the Government is committed to a process of continual improvement in forest monitoring and reporting, ensuring that socio-cultural indicators are addressed through new research and research approaches, and that these are founded on up-to-date understanding of forest values - work which has already begun through the current forest management reform process. Moreover, DELWP is willing to work with the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability to ensure the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are addressed and where possible, align with relevant Victorian legislation, policy and programs.

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

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