

Large Old Trees

Discussion paper – October 2015

Background

Timber harvesting operations are subject to environmental standards outlined in the *Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014* and associated regulatory documents. The Code has been designed to ensure sustainable timber harvesting and guides VicForests' planning and operational practices.

A recent DELWP investigation undertaken in response to the report provided by the Goongerah Environment Centre Office has identified a number of relevant issues with the regulatory framework, including:

- The current protection provided for very large (giant) trees in East Gippsland, (currently set at four meters tree diameter at breast height [DBH]) has resulted in the registration and protection of only three trees to date. The community may have expectations that the regulatory framework would result in the protection of a larger number of trees.
- Despite VicForests having a policy for voluntary (non-regulatory) protection of trees above three meters DBH in East Gippsland, there have been a number of examples of large old trees felled during local timber harvesting operations.
- Insufficient guidance may result in a reduced capacity for large old trees to continue to grow to become giant trees at some point in the future. Further regulatory guidance may be required to encourage the identification and reporting of large old trees at planned timber harvesting operations.

Large old trees are considered to be relatively rare and are consequently valued by many groups in the community. The value of such trees may lie in our appreciation of the extreme age of such trees; a general sense of awe and wonder; the level of sequestered carbon or associated timber volumes; the enhancement of biodiversity through provision of high quality tree hollows and associated animal habitat; and/or the potential to form visitor/tourist attractions (e.g. the Ada tree (Noojee) and also near Cambarville and Ellery Camp). The deliberate or accidental death or destruction of such trees can cause considerable public angst and impact on local biodiversity.

Scope of this consultation

DELWP is seeking to undertake meetings with representatives from local conservation groups to gain a better understanding of stakeholder views and knowledge on species and forest requirements. Additional consultation

will also be undertaken with appropriate forest management and scientific/technical experts to provide additional advice. The outcomes of these sessions will help inform further discussion with VicForests about potential interim (voluntary) harvesting conditions that can be agreed to address the identified issues in the short to medium term. The results of the review will ultimately be presented to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water for her consideration and decision.

Key issues and discussion points

1. It has been suggested that the current prescriptions for protection of giant trees do not provide sufficient protection and that revision of the rules should be considered. DELWP seeks comment and opinion on this.
2. A sized-based prescription is favoured in providing guidance to VicForests. DELWP seeks comment and opinion on what size should the sized-based protection be applied. Recent suggestions have included 3m DBH (9.42m circum.), and 2.55m DBH (8m circum.).
3. Large old trees left isolated in clear felled timber harvesting coupes may become exposed to higher risks of damage from storms and wind as the surrounding forest regenerates. DELWP seeks comment and opinion on the need to establish additional regulatory guidance around retained forest islands being established around large old trees? If supported, is there a specific radial measurement you think should be applied?
4. Large old trees retained within timber harvesting coupes may also be impacted by fire during regeneration burns. High-intensity regeneration burns are often seen to be important for the successful regeneration of eucalypt species after harvesting. The risk of damage may be especially high for hollow bearing trees and fire-intolerant species like the Mountain Ash. DELWP seeks comment and opinion on the type of measures that could be applied for the protection of large old trees during regeneration burns.
5. Should "clusters" of multiple large old trees receive special protection under the regulatory framework, such as through creation of special protection zones (SPZs) where timber harvesting is excluded? If supported, at what threshold (number of trees and size of trees) should this be applied?
6. Given the level of community interest in large old trees, should DELWP do more to maintain a publically accessible register and map of such trees on public land?