

AUDIT OF CHERRY TREE STATE FOREST: KEY FINDINGS

Cherry Tree State Forest is situated on the Richmond Range next to Mallanganee National Park, 29 km west of Casino in the 'Border Ranges North and South', one of Australia's 15 recognised biodiversity hotspots. The Forestry Corporation undertook logging operations in 496ha of compartments 359, 360 and 361 from January to September 2015. NEFA undertook brief inspections in March and August and detailed investigations in September and October.

The results of NEFA's investigations are detailed in 'Audit of Cherry Tree State Forest, Compartment 359, 360 & 361'. The following are the key findings from NEFA's audit:

NATIONAL RECOVERY PLAN

The Border Ranges Rainforest Biodiversity Management Plan, which is the formal national recovery plan covering the region, specifically identifies this part of Cherry Tree SF as both a "Conserve" and "Repair" priority precinct. The Forestry Corporation ignored this recovery plan, and undertook logging operations in a manner that contravenes its objectives and aims by roading and logging rainforest, failing to buffer rainforest, facilitating the spread of lantana and dieback, failing to maintain hollow-bearing and recruitment habitat trees, and inadequately protecting streams.

THREATENED PLANTS

The vulnerable Onion Cedar is the only threatened plant recorded in this part of Cherry Tree SF, the rules require that *"an adequately trained person must conduct a thorough search"* for it ahead of roading and logging, and that any found are protected with a 20m exclusion zone. With its large pinnate leaves it is readily identifiable, particularly here as many were young trees with leaves at eye-height, yet the Forestry Corporation constructed a road within what should have been buffers for over 26 vulnerable Onion Cedars, physically damaging at least 4 in the process, leaving debris around others, affecting the microclimate and leaving survivors vulnerable to weeds and burning. It is likely that many more were killed and bulldozed into the piles of debris. The Forestry Corporation obviously did not bother looking before they logged.

RAINFOREST

The rainforests within Cherry Tree SF are primarily the Endangered Ecological Community Lowland Rainforest. These rainforests clearly satisfy the Forestry Corporation's own identification guidelines (except where they have more than scattered eucalypt emergents) for Lowland Rainforest, and it was identified as *"potentially present"*, yet the Forestry Corporation inexplicably failed to recognise that any was actually present.

The Forestry Corporation obtained EPA approval to construct tracks through 4 stands of mapped rainforest. The Forestry Corporation went so far as to fraudulently describe one stand as *"field verified as dominantly Spotted Gum, Grey Gum and White Mahogany with some rainforest understorey elements"* when most of the road was clearly through mature Lowland Rainforest with no eucalypt emergents at all.

Based on clearly inadequate and erroneous assessments the EPA gave approval for the tracks to be constructed, though where the rainforest qualified as the EEC Lowland Rainforest the EPA had no power to do so. Had due diligence been done these roads should never have been proposed or approved.

The Forestry Corporation have cleared, roaded and logged significant areas of the EEC Lowland Rainforest in direct contravention of the National Parks and Wildlife Act and the national recovery plan.

HABITAT TREES

The retention of hollow-bearing (H) trees, and the recruitment (R) trees needed to replace them when they die, are amongst the most vital necessities to reduce logging impacts on a plethora of native animals.

In NSW at least 46 mammals, 81 birds, 31 reptiles and 16 frogs, are reliant on tree hollows for shelter and nests, of these, 40 species are listed as threatened. Hollows don't develop in eucalypts until they are 120-180 years old, and the big hollows required by larger animals until the trees are over 240 years old. Given that healthy trees generally only live for 300-500 years (and damaged trees a lot less) it is essential to retain strong and healthy mature trees as recruits to grow into the hollow-bearing trees of the future. While some surviving hollow-bearing trees are now being retained, many are being damaged and killed during logging, and the needed healthy mature recruitment trees are mostly not being retained, meaning that as the hollow-bearing trees die out there is a developing housing crisis. (see nefa.org.au/old_trees)

NEFA assessed compliance with habitat tree retention requirements across 50ha (14%) of the net logging area, with 10ha subject to more detailed assessment, and concluded:

- In the order of 2,000 (44%) of the habitat (H&R) trees required to be protected were logged;
- Of the habitat (H&R) trees marked for retention there have been over 1,600 breaches of selection and retention requirements;
- Of the retained habitat (H&R) trees, 22% were physically damaged in the logging operation, with some 520 retained habitat trees likely to have suffered significant physical damage; and
- Of the retained habitat (H&R) trees, 38% had debris left around them, with some 680 retained habitat trees likely to have had debris left around them, increasing the likelihood of their being killed or damaged in the post-logging burn.
- Of the trees marked for retention as hollow-bearing (H) trees, 10% were considered inappropriate selections due to their small size, suppression and lack of hollows;
- Of the trees marked for retention as Recruitment (R) trees, 63% were considered to be inappropriate selections due to pre-existing damage, being suppressed, or being too small;

THREATENED FAUNA

The Forestry Corporation have once again failed to ensure that *"an adequately trained person must conduct a thorough search"* for threatened fauna features, such as Koala high use trees and Yellow-bellied Glider sap-feed trees, ahead of roading and logging. While the Forestry Corporation found nothing, NEFA managed to find 3 Koala high use trees and 12 Yellow-bellied Glider sap-feed trees. Identification and retention requirements were not met.

There are 7 records of the endangered Black-striped Wallaby in the area, necessitating the retention of 50% of the canopy cover and minimisation of understorey disturbance. Yet many areas have been logged excessively heavily.

The boundary of the Squirrel Glider exclusion area had not been marked on the ground and numerous intrusions cross the boundary were identified.

TRACKS

In constructing and draining their snig tracks the Forestry Corporation has frequently failed to construct adequate cross drains to stop overland flow developing channels and transporting silt and pollutants into streams. In some cases the Forestry Corporation have not bothered to construct cross drains at all and in others they have been so poorly constructed that they have already failed. They were also found to have used tracks when the soil was saturated, resulting in severe degradation of soil structure and rutting.

STREAMS

The Forestry Corporation were found to have had significant machinery impacts on some drainage depressions and to have undertaken extensive earthworks and machinery disturbance within some stream exclusion zones, without bothering to rehabilitate degraded areas. This is likely to result in sediment inputs to streams.

DIEBACK

There are already significant parts of Cherry Tree SF suffering from lantana invasion and dieback from past logging. By removing overstorey, disturbing understorey and creating bare ground, logging and roading are assisting the spread of lantana through these forests, which will both initiate and aggravate Bell Miner Associated Dieback, degrading ecosystems and further threatening the survival of plants and animals. Despite these being Key Threatening Processes and their aggravation being a contravention of the basic principles of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management and the national recovery plan, neither the Forestry Corporation nor the EPA will do anything about it.

LOGGING INTENSITY

Numerous areas have been logged in excess of 40% basal area removal limit in contravention of the IFOA silvicultural prescription for Single Tree Selection.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

A Regional Forest Agreement Cultural Heritage site, in part constituting a 50m wide visual buffer along Cherry Tree Road, has had two large log-dumps constructed within it and has been significantly degraded.

HAULAGE

Parts of Cherry Tree and Bulmer Roads were clearly identified in the Harvesting Plan as "no haulage" because an endangered plant grows beside the road and the poor sight distances turning onto the Bruxner Highway, though were used for haulage.

In undertaking the above activities, NEFA has documented that the Forestry Corporation of NSW have breached the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act by not abiding by a national recovery plan, the National Parks and Wildlife Act by roading and logging the Endangered Ecological Community Lowland Rainforest, as well as committing breaches of 4 conditions of the Integrated Forestry Operational Approval, 41 conditions of the Threatened Species Licence, 19 conditions of the Environment Protection Licence, 7 conditions of the Fisheries Licence and numerous conditions of their own Harvesting Plan.

ENDS