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Hydrowood wins Green Building Material award

COVER STORY P5



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Victorian election overview

We sum up the timber and forestry promises of the main choices for voters this Saturday.

WITH just days to go before the Victorian election, issues including law and order and immigration have dominated media coverage. While there have been some welcome promises regarding the future of the state's timber and forestry sector, how some of these will be implemented is still a mystery.

On the following pages we provide a round-up of the forestry positions from the main parties (in alphabetical order: Liberal and National positions have been listed under Coalition as they are running a unity ticket on these issues) and one Independent running with a considerable timber industry platform.

T&F Enews is not supporting any specific option in this election; there are strengths and weaknesses in all the platforms when it comes to our sector. But familiarising yourself with the policies on offer may help you finalise your choice if you will be voting on Saturday.

For those wanting to learn more, VFPA has a handy overview of important issues that it has been championing for the Victorian forestry sector alongside the responses of the main political parties: **click here** to read.





1/ ***Victorian Agriculture Minister Michaela Settle.*** Image: supplied
2/ ***Melina Bath MP, Shadow Minister for Public Land Management.*** Image: supplied

Whoever wins, demanding that forestry become a more central part of Victoria's future is a key goal when it comes to meeting housing and climate goals, as well as delivering the regional jobs the state so urgently requires.

ALP

- Funding of $3.8 million over three years with Hancock Victorian Plantations and Green Triangle Fire Alliance to expand the network of AI-powered bushfire cameras
- Delivery of the $12 million Timber and Fibre Innovation Fund.
- Timber sector elements of the national platform, including legislation and regulations to prohibit the importation of illegally logged wood and forest products made from it; expanding Australia's plantation estate to meet domestic and international demand for high-value, sustainably sourced wood products; developing an industry plan that facilitates regional job growth and vibrant sustainable communities; and setting best practice, transparent, consistent and objective standards in sustainable forest management, chain of custody and labelling.
- Support for education and training needs for modern forestry.
- An $839 million commitment to upgrade 25 local roads, 19 in regional Victoria, on top of existing road pledges.
- Extend funding for its Forestry Transition Program to the 2027-28 financial year, with Victorian Agriculture Minister Michaela Settle saying that Labor is focused on "growing local plantation timber".

COALITION

- Double the quantity of planned burning and expand cultural burning in partnership with Indigenous Victorians.

Cont P 3



From P 2

Reduce fuel loads, including building and maintaining a statewide firebreak network.

- Control invasive pests and weeds: 5000 hectares of degraded public forest will be restored each year through targeted thinning and fuel reduction. Timber recovered as part of the fuel reduction and forest restoration programs will be made available for processing in Victoria to its highest-value use and the revenue reinvested.
- Put more rangers on the ground and deliver increased public reporting every year on biodiversity and ecological outcomes.
- Invest $2.52 million over four years, alongside industry co-investment, to deliver an expanded $4.41 million bushfire detection camera network across 18 locations in eastern and western Victoria. This will provide 24/7, 360-degree monitoring across more than 1.46 million hectares.
- A spend of $5 billion over four years for road maintenance, with regional roads a central part of the commitment.

Melina Bath MP, Shadow Minister for Public Land Management, said that the current "'lock it up and leave it' approach … has allowed fuel loads and risks to dramatically accumulate.

"Departmental fuel reduction has fallen. Fuel loads have grown. Sixteen years after the Bushfires Royal Commission called for a five per cent annual fuel reduction target, Victoria now treats less than one per cent of public land annually."

While she was unable to put a precise figure on the usable timber volumes that will be generated from this approach, she concluded: "Victoria can have healthier forests, lower fuel loads, regional jobs and productive use of forest resources. These are not competing priorities."

THE GREENS

- Support sustainable plantation forestry including a new timber strategy in Victoria that provides better planning and coordination across government and industry.
- Increased support for bushfire prevention and strategies for wildlife protection.
- Continue ban on native forestry. The Greens pledge to repeal laws that enable governments to bring back native logging on public land; "close Labor's logging loopholes that continue to allow native forests to be logged by Government Departments or by stealth"; and create permanent legal protections for previously logged forests, such as new national parks and cultural reserves, with Traditional Owners' rights and management front and centre.
- Support for innovation within the timber sector, such as for resource recovery, mixed-species plantations, and projects that strengthen sovereign manufacturing capability for products such as laminated veneer lumber (LVL) and glue-laminated timber (glulam).

Victorian Greens Leader Ellen Sandell said, "The Greens' priorities are to protect what's left of our incredible native forests, to restore and protect Victoria's habitat, forests and wildlife, and to grow truly sustainable industries to meet our need for building materials and construction.

"We believe the two can go hand-in-hand if we have Governments that are committed to these goals and plan for the future – and that sustainable plantations can play a strong role in this if we get the settings and supports right."

ONE NATION

- Support for country-of-origin labels on timber and wood products.
- 'Local wood first' policy for government procurement.
- Supporting training and education in forestry and associated roles.
- Provisions to protect old-growth forests and native habitat, requirements for selective harvesting models.
- Promised to revive the state's native timber industry. Unfortunately, details of costs or implementation are not yet available.
- Requirements for forest management practices that involve control of pest species and bushfire risk, ending the lock up and leave philosophy.

One Nation's Victorian leader Warren Pickering said, "We'll provide the access that's needed, implementing detailed forest practice plans based on sustainable selective harvesting models successfully used interstate and overseas, with detailed monitoring and oversight.

"Environmentally sensitive old growth forest and native habitats will be strictly protected, and the model will be self-sustaining by funding management operations through harvest revenue."

SHOOTERS, FISHERS AND FARMERS

- Reintroduce the sustainable native forestry industry with better legal protections against green lawfare.
- Manage the bushfire preparedness of public land in-line with the findings of the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires Royal Commission.
- Repeal the classification of National Parks like Wombat-Lerdederg, Barmah, Buangor and the Pyrenees and fight against any more national parks.
- Expand seasonal residential firewood collection into National or State Parks where appropriate.

Cont P 4



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2


3

1/ ***Victorian Greens Leader Ellen Sandell.*** Image: supplied
2/ ***One Nation's Victorian leader Warren Pickering.*** Image: supplied
3/ ***Tom Ward, Independent candidate for Eildon.*** Image: supplied

Workplace changes to take effect

NTHA's Member HR/WHS Manager Vicki Stableford flags updates.

LEGISLATIVE changes for airborne contaminant exposure limits and junior pay rate increases will affect some readers when they come into effect on 1 December.

Here is what you need to know and what to do before the deadline.

1. WES becomes WEL: New workplace exposure limits

From 1 December 2026, Workplace Exposure Limits (WEL) replace Workplace Exposure Standards (WES) for airborne contaminants.

Many limits remain unchanged, but some have been lowered, added or removed based on current health evidence.

This is particularly relevant to timber and hardware businesses where workers may be exposed to:

- timber and MDF dust from cutting, sanding and machining;
- respirable crystalline silica from concrete, bricks and masonry;
- welding fumes and diesel exhaust;
- chemical vapours from adhesives, paints, solvents and cleaning products; and/or
- spray mists from painting and coating.

From 1 December, persons conducting a business or undertaking must ensure airborne contaminant concentrations do not exceed the applicable WEL.



From 1 December, workplace exposure limits will change for airborne contaminants. Image: CC Wikimedia/Asurnipal

What you need to do:

- Review WHS risk assessments and identify relevant changes to exposure limits.
- Check dust extraction and ventilation systems.
- Review Safety Data Sheets (SDS).
- Consider whether air monitoring or occupational hygiene advice is required.

Safe Work Australia has also updated 15 model Codes of Practice to reflect WEL terminology and provide updated air monitoring guidance.

For details on the new limits, **click here**.

2. Junior pay rates increase under the Retail Award

From 1 December 2026, the first stage of changes to junior pay rates takes effect under the General Retail Industry Award.

The changes apply to eligible employees aged 18–20 who have worked for the same employer for more than six months, progressively moving them towards the full adult minimum rate for their classification. Retail Award employees at Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 are affected, among other awards that may impact readers.

Further increases will follow, with junior pay rates for eligible 18–20-year-olds phased out by 1 July 2029.

What you need to do:

- Review junior employee classifications.
- Check each employee's length of service.
- Check the new minimum pay rates.
- Update payroll systems to reflect the changes from 1 December.

For more on the new rates, **click here**.

From P 3

- Oppose in-ground carbon sequestration locking up agricultural land.
- Properly resource councils to maintain their roads to a statewide standard.

Former Senator for Victoria Ricky Muir is standing as the SFF candidate for East Gippsland. His party statement says: "During his time as a Senator for Victoria, Ricky consistently stood up for the state's native timber industry, supporting hardworking timber workers, contractors, families and regional communities whose livelihoods depended on it. Even when the political tide was turning against the industry, Ricky remained a steadfast supporter, refusing to abandon the workers and communities who relied on it.

"He understands the importance of regional jobs, local industries and responsible management of Victoria's natural resources."

INDEPENDENTS

Tom Ward, Eildon

- Prioritising maintenance for regional road repair ahead of new road building in the state.
- Real support for the workers, contractors and businesses still dealing with the loss of native timber forestry.
- Support for plantation timber and local processing jobs, "so we're not importing what we could grow".
- Active forest management, including fuel reduction, firebreaks and organised licensed hunters helping control deer. Ward suggests 'clearing weeks' where hunters, conservationists and rangers would work together pulling out blackberries and repairing habitat.
- An acre of state forest for every new acre of national park, so activities like mountain biking, firewood collection and so on aren't locked away from regional Victorians.
- Fire safety clearing around homes, fences and firebreaks kept simple, with no red tape for people protecting their property.
- Live issue-reporting website so that residents can report washouts, fires, fallen trees and other issues in forests.

Hydrowood scores coveted gong

Tasmanian underwater timber wins national sustainability award.

TASMANIAN timber company Hydrowood has won the Green Building Material/ Product category at the 2026 Architecture & Design Sustainability Awards, earning national recognition for its pioneering approach to timber recovery and contribution to a more sustainable built environment.





1/ ***Harvesting a myrtle log from Lake Pieman.***
2/ ***Specialist barges are used to both manoeuvre harvesting machinery around the lake and collect the sawn logs.*** All images: Hydrowood

Presented at a gala dinner in Sydney earlier this month, the award forms part of Australia's longest-running awards program dedicated to sustainability in architecture, design and construction. The category, sponsored by WoodSolutions, recognises environmentally responsible building materials and products that consider their impact across their entire lifecycle.

Hydrowood co-founder David Wise and board chair Radha Kuppalli accepted the award on behalf of the company.

The win marks a significant milestone for the Tasmanian business, which is giving some of Australia's most remarkable timbers a second life in contemporary buildings, interiors and furniture.

"This award belongs to everyone who has helped bring that timber back into use," said Wise. "That includes our team on the water and at our Hagley headquarters, plus the architects, designers, builders and customers who choose to specify it."

> "THIS AWARD BELONGS TO EVERYONE WHO HAS HELPED BRING THAT TIMBER BACK INTO USE

Wise said the win was also an important recognition of Tasmania's capacity for innovation: "This national award reinforces the role Tasmania can play in advancing sustainable material innovation and demonstrates how regional ingenuity can contribute to the future of Australia's built environment.

"For a forest that spent decades beneath the surface, its next chapter is being written in some of Australia's most thoughtfully designed spaces."

Since 2015, Hydrowood has worked to recover specialty Tasmanian timber from beneath the waters of Lake Pieman on Tasmania's remote west coast.

Cont P 7

Responsible Wood Community Grants are open...

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Application date extended. Closing 11.00 pm, Thursday 26 November 2026.

Responsible Wood RW/1-10-1

Anti-dumping investigation divides

The HIA says the problem is manufacturing; unions disagree.

LAST week, *Enews* (#925) covered the announcement by the Australian Trade Remedies Commission (ATRC) of an anti-dumping and countervailing investigation into claims that structural timber, particularly LVL, from China is being sold into Australia at unfairly low, subsidised prices, undercutting local manufacturers and putting Australian jobs at risk.

Since then, the Housing Industry Association (HIA) has argued that the real issue lies elsewhere, saying the investigation should instead prompt governments to address the underlying causes of Australia's declining manufacturing competitiveness.



The HIA is blaming manufacturing for slow house builds, but research shows Australia is building half as many homes per construction worker as it did when this North Balwyn home was built in the 1970s. Image: CC Wikimedia/Philip Mallis

HIA Managing Director, Jocelyn Martin, said the increasing number of anti-dumping cases should serve as a wake-up call about the competitiveness of Australia's manufacturing sector, rather than simply becoming another driver of higher housing costs.

"Australia needs a strong, sustainable and competitive manufacturing sector, particularly for products critical to housing construction," Martin said.

"Anti-dumping laws have an important role in ensuring fair competition and addressing genuine cases of unfair trade practices.

"But these investigations are also raising a bigger question: why are Australian manufacturers across a growing number of sectors finding it increasingly difficult to compete both here and overseas?

"The answer cannot always be another duty, another tariff or another trade barrier. At some point we need to address the structural factors that make it more expensive to manufacture products in Australia than in competing economies."

HIA said the latest investigation comes at a particularly difficult time for housing construction. The industry is already grappling with labour shortages, rising business costs, regulatory complexity, taxes and charges, insurance costs and softening market conditions. Every increase in construction material costs places further pressure on the delivery of new housing.

"Housing affordability remains one of Australia's most pressing economic challenges," Martin said.

"At a time when governments are calling for 1.2 million new homes to be built, policymakers must carefully consider the cumulative impact of policies that increase construction costs.

"Governments cannot on one hand call for more homes and on the other support policies that continue to make them more expensive to build."

HIA said both a strong manufacturing sector and a strong housing sector are essential to Australia's economic future and should not be viewed as competing objectives.

"We need policies that make it easier, less costly and less complex to manufacture in Australia while also ensuring Australians can access affordable housing," said Martin.

"Unless we address the underlying drivers of Australia's competitiveness problem, we will continue to see more trade disputes, more calls for protection and ultimately higher costs flowing through the housing supply chain."

The Timber, Furnishing and Textiles Union (TFTU), which supported the industry push for the investigation, hit back at these claims.

TFTU National Secretary Michael O'Connor said the HIA was taking the lazy option.

"Before lecturing Australian manufacturers about competitiveness, the building industry should take a good hard look at its own backyard," O'Connor said.

"The Committee for Economic Development of Australia found Australia is building half as many homes per construction worker as it did in the 1970s. Manufacturing labour productivity has risen 58% over three decades, compared with just 17% in construction. Housing construction is even worse, with productivity actually falling 12%.

"And the HIA reckons Australian manufacturers are the problem? Give us a break. An Australian manufacturer can be efficient, innovative and competitive and still be injured by dumped or unfairly subsidised imports. That's why we have anti-dumping laws."

O'Connor warned that relying on cheap imports could backfire badly on homebuyers. "Builders might save a few bucks today, but if Australian factories and sawmills close, we'll all pay for it tomorrow," he said.

"Once local competition disappears, overseas suppliers can put their prices up. That's a fool's paradise — short-term savings at the expense of the productive capacity Australia needs to build more homes."

O'Connor said Australian manufacturing was part of the solution, with prefabrication and manufactured housing offering ways to build homes faster and cheaper.

"The HIA should be backing Australian manufacturing and tackling its own industry's productivity failures, not attacking local businesses for seeking a fair go," he said.

"It's time the HIA stopped making excuses and got its own house in order."

DECEMBER

1: 2026 WoodSolutions Webinar – ONLINE EVENT, 11.00am AEDT. A special webinar featuring the winner from Timber Design Awards, Hoskins Building - Australia's First CLT Passivhaus School. For more information and to register, **click here**.

2027 EVENTS

APRIL - JULY: JASANZ Futures x Responsible Wood training program. Specialist training combining forestry expertise with accreditation and conformity assessment. Learn how forest management certification works from both sides, connecting what happens in the forest with the standards, audits and certification decisions behind it. Training is April - July 2027 but enrolments close 14 February 2027. For more information, visit https://www.jasanz.org/futures-responsible-wood

10-14 MAY: LIGNA. Builds – Exhibition Grounds, Hannover, Germany. Watch the LIGNA 2027 house take shape over the 5-day event. For more information, visit https://www.ligna.de/en/side-events/ligna-builds/

18-19 MAY: Forestry Australia 'Forests & Natural Capital' Summit 2027 - Melbourne. Save the date and join us for two days of thought-provoking discussions, interesting perspectives, practical insights and valuable connections. For more information, visit https://www.forestry.org.au/sponsorship-forests-natural-capital-summit-2027/

From P 5

When the Pieman River was flooded in 1987 as part of Tasmania's hydroelectric development, an extensive area of native forest was submerged. For nearly four decades, these trees have remained standing beneath the water, preserved by cold, low-oxygen conditions at depths of up to 26 metres.

Hydrowood became the first Australian company to develop the technology to recover this timber at a commercial scale, using a purpose-built harvesting barge to carefully fell individual trees underwater.

Once brought ashore, the recovered logs are milled at local Tasmanian sawmills, supporting regional businesses and drawing on the state's longstanding timber industry expertise. The timber is then dried and processed at Hydrowood's facility in Hagley, northern Tasmania, before finding its way into architectural projects, bespoke interiors, joinery and furniture across Australia.

The quality of the timbers has been a core part of the company's success, but alongside this is the environmental story they represent. Species including Celery Top Pine, Blackwood, Myrtle, Huon Pine and Sassafras are recovered from the submerged temperate rainforest, rescuing these native species – some very rare – from slow decay and providing unique opportunities for designers.

As architects, designers and developers increasingly consider the environmental impact, provenance and transparency of the materials they specify, Hydrowood offers a distinctive combination of sustainability credentials, natural beauty and design versatility.

Hydrowood timber is reclaimed, Responsible Wood certified and Red List Free. These credentials make it a compelling material choice for projects targeting 5 Star Green Star ratings and those pursuing the Living Building Challenge.

Hydrowood timber has been used in residential and commercial interiors, hospitality spaces, architectural joinery and bespoke furniture. The company works hard to ensure that each piece of recovered timber represents a meaningful connection to the Australian landscape, further reinforcing its green credentials.

On the cover: Hydrowood co-founder David Wise and chair Radha Kuppalli accept the Green Building Material/Product award at the 2026 Architecture & Design Sustainability Awards. Image: Hydrowood

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Timber transformation

Tiwi forestry project is delivering training, jobs, and growth.

A FIRST Nations-led plantation forestry project that has planted more than two million seedlings in its first year is delivering training opportunities, local jobs and ongoing economic benefits to the Tiwi Islands people.

The carbon plantation project exceeded its first-year planting target by more than 20%, with 1798 hectares planted on Melville Island since January 2026, marking an important step in the development of sustainable forestry on the Tiwi Islands.



Eucalyptus pellita is a fast-growing, strong and robust tree ideal for the tropical conditions of the Tiwi Islands. Image: supplied

As well as supporting training, employment opportunities and economic activity for Traditional Owners, the project is building a future source of Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs), expected to be available from 2027. The project is expected to generate approximately five million ACCUs under the Plantation Forestry (schedule 1) methodology over its lifetime in addition to 12 million m^3 of high-value wood products.

The project's benefits are already flowing through to the local economy, with Tiwi workers representing almost 60% of the workforce, contributing more than 33,000 work hours and earning more than $1.4 million in direct wages. It also delivered 196 formal Tiwi training sessions, supporting pathways into long-term roles in forestry, fire management and land stewardship.

The Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) has committed $40 million alongside a $41 million investment from River Capital to finance the planting and operation of the estate. CEFC CIO – Investment Alternatives Rory Lonergan said: "The first-year progress of this project demonstrates how investment in natural capital can deliver practical outcomes on the ground, from large-scale plantation establishment to jobs, skills and direct economic benefits for Tiwi communities. This is the kind of achievement that improves investor confidence in the long-term potential of plantation forestry to support high-integrity carbon abatement, sustainable timber supply and First Nations economic participation."

Tiwi Plantations Corporation chairman, Gibson Farmer Illortaminni said: "Tiwi people have always worked with wood for our culture, tools and fire. We've had forestry trials and plantations on the Tiwi Islands since the 1960s. We are really proud and happy to now be seeing the *Eucalyptus pellita* being planted. We've worked hard for this and we are creating jobs for our people here at home for the next 35 years."

Tiwi Plantations is 100% owned by the Tiwi people, making the project Australia's largest First Nations-led carbon project. Plantation and carbon management company Midway is partnered with Tiwi Plantations to manage the carbon forestry operations, including the plantation establishment, carbon registration, ongoing forestry management and marketing of ACCUs generated by the project.

Midway Limited CEO and managing director Tony McKenna said: "This is a significant long-term investment in the future of the Tiwi Islands: in people, skills, economic opportunity and regional resilience. We are incredibly proud to partner with the Tiwi people and Tiwi Plantations Corporation to deliver a high-quality, sustainable plantation and carbon project at significant scale. The outstanding first-year results demonstrate the capability of our team and give us great confidence in the long-term benefits and opportunities this investment will deliver for the Tiwi people."

> "TIWI PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS WORKED WITH WOOD FOR OUR CULTURE, TOOLS AND FIRE

As planting activities continue, the project is expected to play an increasing role in Australia's natural capital investment landscape, with a strong focus on ACCU delivery, First Nations economic empowerment, and community outcomes. Forecast to increase Australia's total plantation area by around 2%, the plantations will also support meeting international demand for high-quality timber products for construction, as well as reducing reliance on native forests.

The story doesn't end with these successes. Lessons learned from the Tiwi Plantations project are informing researchers and community development practitioners who are working with Aboriginal and rural communities across Northern Australia to document best practice forestry plantation establishment practices and develop a Northern Forestry Industry Growth Model.

Community based workshops, key stakeholder interviews, and historic industry analysis will be used to identify key forestry industry challenges and devise high-level industry development strategies.

This, alongside the existing trials of eucalypt species and hybrids and testing programs to ensure genetic improvement through selective breeding already underway by Tiwi Plantations Corporation, points to a very strong future for the Northern Australian timber industry.

Mass timber fire safety

IT'S one of the first things people ask when the topic of mass timber buildings comes up – particularly high-rise and multi-res – "How safe is that in a fire?"

While mass timber buildings have strong safety records, there is a real need for data. Accordingly, a team of researchers at the University of Queensland (UQ) have spent part of this month building CLT ceiling compartments and setting fire to them with the help of UQ fire safety engineers and the Queensland Fire Department at the QFD training ground at the Port of Brisbane.



Researchers led by Associate Professor David Lange and PhD candidate Josh Madden monitored the fire using livestreaming cameras and heat and pressure-sensing instruments.
Image: The University of Queensland

The tests were designed to see how construction methods could limit the spread and impact of fire in timber structures such as office blocks.

UQ Associate Professor David Lange said each compartment was monitored from the inside using livestreaming cameras and heat- and pressure-sensing instruments: "In each test we changed the design of the compartment slightly to reveal how design parameters – including ventilation, ceiling obstructions, and ceiling height changes – influenced fire behaviour."

The research is central to a PhD project led by UQ's Josh Madden and part of a wider body of work at the ARC Research Hub to Advance Timber for Australia's Future Built Environment – administered by UQ's School of Civil Engineering – exploring barriers to the wider use of mass and engineered timber.

"Current fire safety guidance was generally built around the assumption that structural materials don't burn," Madden said.

"Timber absolutely breaks that assumption. It's a load-bearing material that is also combustible, acting as a fuel source, creating significantly different fire behaviour to that of steel or concrete.

"Our research is about measuring how we might improve design methodologies in order for timber to play a larger role in the building and construction sector."

To read more from UQ, **click here**, and for more on the Timber Hub's fire safety research, **click here**.

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Forest scientists call for reassessment

Experts call for an investigation into the endangered listing of the alpine ash forests.

LAST week, 32 forestry experts signed an open letter to the Hon Murray Watt MP, Minister for the Environment, requesting an independent review of the decision to list the Alpine Ash Forests of Mainland Australia ecological community as Endangered under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

The letter, reproduced below, highlights the concerns of the forestry community following the listing earlier this year (effective 20 March, 2026). Forestry Australia wrote at the time: "The intent of the EPBC Act listing process is to safeguard ecosystems that are genuinely at risk of extinction. Listing such an extensive and predominantly intact ecosystem, most of it located on public land already managed for conservation, represents an unprecedented step in Australia.

"The listing will have significant implications for the management of alpine ash forests and surrounding landscapes, with the potential for unintended consequences if it constrains active forest management approaches to reduce risk and support forest recovery. Alpine ash forests are dynamic, disturbance-shaped systems that require thoughtful, evidence-based and practical management if they are to persist into the future."

Robert Onfray, retired professional forester, is one of the letter's signatories. In retirement he has forged a second career as an historian of land management practices in Australia, particularly in forest regions. For some time, he has been alerting the state and federal governments to his concerns regarding underlying assumptions that timber harvesting is a major threat to the alpine ash forests. Instead, he points the finger at significant fires, noting that some forests have been burnt two or three times within little more than a decade thanks to the 2003, 2006–07, 2009 and the 2013 Harrietville–Alpine fires, preventing young trees from reaching reproductive maturity and producing sufficient seed for natural regeneration after subsequent fires.

A peer-reviewed study published in *Forest Ecology and Management* in 2015 examined repeatedly burnt alpine ash forests in Victoria's Alpine National Park and demonstrated that aerial sowing prevented the loss of alpine ash where natural regeneration had failed, highlighting both the vulnerability of young alpine ash to repeated severe fires and the effectiveness of established forestry techniques in restoring damaged forests.



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1/ ***Alpine ash trees at the summit of Mount Donna Buang in Warburton, Victoria.*** Image: Shutterstock
2/ ***Retired forester Robert Onfray, one of the signatories to the open letter.*** Image: supplied

"These are precisely the kinds of problems Australian foresters have been dealing with for generations," Onfray said.

"We know how to collect and store seed, assess regeneration, undertake aerial sowing and re-establish alpine ash forests after severe fires. We also know that young regrowth must be protected from further destructive fires if those restoration efforts are to succeed.

"The experience of the Victorian Alps demonstrates why conservation assessments must examine the practical means of protecting and restoring these forests, as well as the threats they face."

EXPERT CONCERNS

Among the 32 signatories are former senior managers of forestry agencies in New South Wales and Victoria, including professionals with direct responsibility for alpine ash forests in the Snowy Mountains and Victorian high country.

They include Peter Rutherford, a former General Manager of Forestry in Victoria; Ross Smith, former District Forester at Tumbarumba and Assistant Commissioner of the NSW Rural Fire Service; and John Bywater, who managed alpine ash stands in Victoria's Heyfield, Dargo and Neerim South districts.

The signatories also include former CSIRO Chief Research Scientists Dr Sadanandan Nambiar AO and Dr John Raison, together with specialists in forest ecology, regeneration, fire management and silviculture.

Their collective experience spans decades of forest protection, timber stand improvement, prescribed burning, fire suppression, seed collection, aerial sowing and post-fire restoration.

"The people signing this letter have accumulated an extraordinary body of practical knowledge about Australian forests," said Onfray.

"Many have been directly responsible for managing alpine ash, protecting it from bushfires and restoring damaged stands. Their knowledge is supported by operational records, regeneration surveys and decades of field observation.

"We are concerned that the Conservation Advice does not adequately reflect this experience or the scientific and technical work developed through professional forest management."

The Conservation Advice acknowledges that alpine ash forests retain most of their historical distribution. The Endangered listing relies substantially on assessments

Cont P 11

From P 10

of declining ecological integrity, including the extensive areas of structurally immature forest created by recent severe fires.

The signatories challenge whether the assessment adequately accounts for the regeneration ecology of alpine ash, which commonly establishes extensive stands of similar age following severe fire and may remain structurally immature for decades before reaching maturity.

Their critique also challenges the treatment of historical fire regimes, Aboriginal fire management, fuel accumulation, operational access, forestry practices and successful restoration programs.

The submission argues that the Conservation Advice gives insufficient attention to the role of active management in reducing the likelihood of further severe fire damage and restoring forests where natural regeneration is inadequate. In the supporting documentation, the submission notes that the Conservation Advice draws on the 2024 silvicultural manual, *Alpine Ash in Victoria's Native Forests* (Bassett et al, 2024), for information regarding extent,



Aftermath of the 2003 Eastern Victorian alpine bushfires. Image: CC Wikimedia/John O'Neill

stand age and regeneration requirements for alpine ash, it ignores the manual's central conclusion that alpine ash forests require active management to remain healthy under current fire regimes. The deep and broad forestry expertise behind the production of the manual is ignored in favour of an evidence base derived from a relatively concentrated academic network, characterised by overlapping authorship, recurring datasets, similar methodological approaches, repeated reliance on observational studies and frequent use of mountain ash systems as proxies for alpine ash.

"The concern extends beyond this particular listing," Onfray said.

"When an assessment gives disproportionate weight to a narrow selection of research and fails to examine substantial bodies of operational evidence, there is a legitimate concern about the quality of the advice being provided to government.

"Scientific assessments should be capable of withstanding independent scrutiny. They should examine competing evidence, recognise uncertainty and draw on the full range of relevant expertise."

THE OPEN LETTER

Dear Minister,

We, the undersigned, respectfully request that you initiate an independent review of the decision to list the alpine ash Forests of Mainland Australia Ecological Community as Endangered under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

We do not make this request because we believe alpine ash forests face no challenges. Quite the opposite. These forests are among Australia's most distinctive and fire-sensitive ecosystems. They require careful stewardship, active management and ongoing restoration to persist under modern fire regimes.

Cont P 12

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From P 11

We are concerned that the Endangered listing does not accurately reflect either the condition of the ecological community or the nature of the threats it faces.

The Conservation Advice accompanying the listing records that alpine ash forests still occupy most of their historical distribution. The listing was therefore not driven by widespread loss of the ecological community. Instead, it was largely based on conclusions about "community integrity", including the finding that substantial areas are currently structurally immature following severe recent fires.

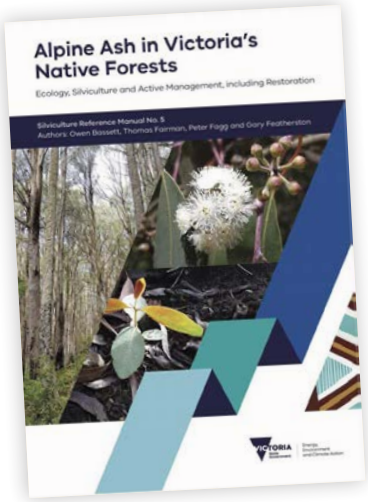
Alpine ash primarily regenerates from seed after severe fire, often producing extensive stands of similar age. Such forests can remain structurally immature for decades while progressing towards reproductive maturity. The presence of large areas of young post-fire regrowth therefore needs to be assessed in the context of the species' regeneration ecology and prospects for successful recovery.

Although large areas of alpine ash forest are currently structurally immature following recent severe fires, evidence shows that such forests have recovered to maturity in the past through natural regeneration and active management, including seed collection, aerial sowing and restoration programs.

The history of alpine ash management across south-eastern Australia offers numerous examples of recovery. Foresters, land managers and researchers have spent decades addressing regeneration challenges after major fires. Restoration programs at Toorongo Plateau, Connors Plains and numerous other locations demonstrate that regeneration failure is a recognised management problem with proven solutions. Seed collection, aerial sowing, reforestation, access maintenance, strategic fuel management and post-fire restoration have all been used successfully to recover ash forests after severe disturbance.

The central threat identified in the Conservation Advice is repeated high intensity fire before young stands reach seed-bearing age. We agree that this is a genuine concern. However, it is fundamentally a management challenge. The appropriate response is to strengthen our capacity to prevent, mitigate and restore fire-affected landscapes.

We are concerned that the Conservation Advice does not give sufficient weight to this practical experience. The evidence base relies heavily on a relatively narrow body of academic literature and gives less weight to operational forestry knowledge, long-term regeneration records, restoration programs, and the demonstrated success of active management.

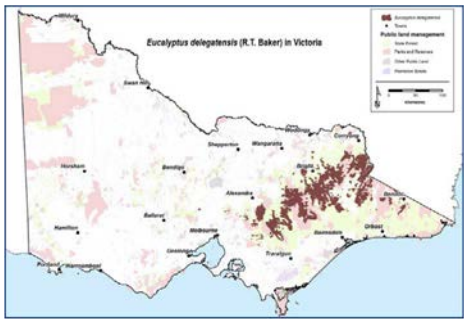


The 232-page Alpine Ash in Victoria's Native Forests manual has been largely ignored by the government when it comes to management recommendations. Image: courtesy State of Victoria

We are also concerned that the Advice gives insufficient attention to fuel management, landscape preparedness, access, post-fire restoration and other factors that directly affect whether alpine ash forests recover or decline.

The Conservation Advice also gives insufficient consideration to the long history of human management of these forests, including Aboriginal fire stewardship and the practical experience gained over more than a century of forestry and bushfire management.

An Endangered listing may add regulatory complexity, but it will not collect seed, conduct aerial sowing, maintain access, reduce fuel loads, or restore fire-affected forests. Those outcomes depend on skilled people, practical management



Distribution of alpine ash along the Great Dividing Range in eastern Victoria. Image: Map by Mick Hansby, image courtesy State of Victoria

and adequate resources.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that a panel with expertise in ecology, silviculture, bushfire science, restoration ecology and operational land management conduct an independent review of the Endangered listing.

Such a review should assess whether the current listing appropriately distinguishes between temporary post-fire structural conditions and genuine community-wide decline, and whether the available evidence demonstrates that the ecological community meets the statutory criteria for listing as Endangered.

Alpine ash forests deserve the best available science, balanced assessment and practical management. Conservation policy should address the principal threats to these forests and support the active management required to secure their long-term future.

We therefore respectfully request that you commission an independent review of the Conservation Advice and, unless that review shows that the statutory criteria for Endangered status are met, revoke the listing.

REAL CONSEQUENCES

Although the particulars are different, the shape of this discussion is familiar in Australia, where one set of academic voices seems to have been prioritised over forestry professionals on issues regarding forest policy. This has seen published evidence ignored (for example, the higher koala populations in working NSW state forests as opposed to national parks) in favour of a 'purist' approach to the environment that is popular with the media and public but ignores 65,000 years of forest management in this country.

"Another bushfire summer is approaching, and the forests damaged by successive severe fires remain vulnerable," Onfray said.

"The Commonwealth needs to be confident that its conservation decisions are based on a comprehensive assessment of the evidence and informed by the people who understand how these forests respond to fire and how they can be restored.

"That is why we are calling for an independent review. The future of alpine ash forests deserves a rigorous scientific assessment and practical management capable of addressing the threats identified."

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Four Corners complaints rejected

ACMA has decided to take no action against the ABC over 'Timber Turmoil'.

EARLIER this year, *Enews* extensively covered the 'Timber Turmoil' episode of *Four Corners* on the ABC (#904 and 905). We aired industry complaints, notably ones about the program's lack of impartiality, that it created an anti-timber industry narrative and that it falsely represented the facts of issues covered within the program, particularly concerning the penalties paid to Australian Sustainable Hardwoods (ASH) by the Victorian Government for failing to meet their supply contracts.



Timber Turmoil has lived up to its name, with its content heavily weighted in favour of anti-logging voices. Image: ABC

Subsequently, the ABC's Ombudsman put out a report that 'cleared' the program of impartiality or misleading the audience; a report that impressed none of the multiple complainants.

Steve Dobbyns, chair and director of Forest and Wood Communities Australia (FWCA), wrote to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to escalate his complaints and has shared the response he recently received with *Enews*.

Within the reply, the ACMA wrote:

"When we receive a complaint about a broadcast, we weigh up a number of factors to help us decide whether to investigate further. These include the specifics and merits of the matter, the nature and seriousness of the issue, the matter's potential to affect the community, and its priority in relation to other matters...

"You alleged the ABC did not provide fair and honest dealing to the other experts, Indigenous land managers and forestry practitioners it interviewed for the program, stating the evidence they provided was either omitted or not fairly represented. Fair and honest dealing relates to the treatment of participants in a broadcast. Your complaint alleges the identified people were interviewed but not included in the broadcast. These allegations are more appropriately assessed under impartiality."

Later in the response, the issue

Cont P 15

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From P 14

of impartiality was addressed with the following: "The ACMA notes that impartiality does not require that every perspective receives equal time, nor that every facet of every argument is presented. Assessing the impartiality due in given circumstances, requires consideration in context of all relevant factors including the type, subject and nature of the content; the likely audience expectations of the content, and the degree to which the content is contentious."

In response to Dobbyns' complaint that the program failed to represent timber workers and regional communities in sufficient depth, the ACMA reply noted that *Four Corners* had quoted ASH's Vince Hurley as talking about the importance of ASH's mill on three occasions and that the program included journalist Jessica Longbottom asking Gary, a former mill worker, "So the mill means a lot to the town?"

To which he replied: "Oh it does, a huge amount, yeah."

The ACMA response then says, "It appears the program included the perspectives of the local community about the importance of the timber mill."



Enews #904 was the first edition to cover the negative responses to the episode, but far from the last.

This was apparently adequate to balance the inclusion of multiple anti-logging activists including Professor David Lindenmayer being interviewed on a tree stump calling native harvesting a zombie industry. The fact that pro-logging voices made up a mere 11 minutes and 10 seconds of the program's 43-minute run time was not addressed.

The reply continues to reject Dobbyns' remaining complaints, with some unintentional humour along the way when it says: "When determining the accuracy of a material factual statement under the ABC Code, the ACMA considers relevant contextual factors including the type, subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectations and the circumstances in which the content was made and presented. An opinion, being a value judgement or conclusion, cannot be found to be inaccurate in the way that facts can.

"Much of the material presented in the program did not appear to be factual in nature."

The concerns around the payments to ASH were also not upheld and the overall ruling was for no further action, though the complaint has been added to the database "to help us identify potential recurring or systemic issues with legislation, codes of practice and standards."

Dobbyns has replied to the ACMA with his concerns about unaddressed issues within his complaint and is also able to escalate the complaint to the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman. *Enews* will continue to follow this story.



From farm forestry to Forestry Australia

What propels Leon Holt, the new Forestry Australia president?

LEON Holt wears a few hats. Forester, former regulator, farm forester, Scout leader and Army Reservist; the 2019 Prince of Wales Award for Sustainable Forest Management winner can now add President of Forestry Australia to the list.





1/ ***Forestry Australia's new president, Leon Holt, with one of his sons.***
2/ ***Having worked as a district forester, farm forester on his own property, regulator and more, Leon Holt is familiar with the gamut of issues facing the timber and forestry sector.*** All images: Forestry Australia

Holt studied forestry at the University of Melbourne's Creswick campus before working as a District Forester in western Victoria, then moved into forest policy and regulation, where he worked until earlier this year.

These days, he is also on the other side of the fence as a grower, establishing a family-run agroforestry enterprise on around 80 hectares on Djaara Country near Castlemaine in central Victoria, where he is planting a 20-hectare hardwood plantation alongside shelter belts and a growing mob of Dorper sheep.

His involvement with Forestry Australia stretches back more than a decade, from helping to set up the Future Foresters Initiative to contributing to the webinar program, mentoring and professional development, and serving as a Board Observer.

Holt is a second-generation forester: his father worked for the Forests Commission in Erica, West Gippsland, the site of some of his earliest memories. Despite forestry not being his first thought for his own career path, it is one he has wholeheartedly embraced.

Holt says, "After being impacted by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, I made my own way into forestry via a Master of Forest Ecosystem Science at the University of Melbourne in Creswick. My time studying at Creswick ignited my lifelong passion for forestry, and the highlight was being part of a research team working on silvicultural practices in Victoria's mountain ash forests.

"I stayed in western Victoria after finishing my forestry studies, working as a district forester before moving into the challenging world of forest policy and regulation, where I remained until earlier this year. Living in Ballarat, I was lucky to remain part of the forestry education community in nearby Creswick, and in 2019 my wife Freya and I celebrated our wedding in the historic grounds of the Victorian School of Forestry."

This hands-on background helped to immerse Holt in the interconnected expertise of forest communities. "Working as a district forester, I absorbed the knowledge and experience of career foresters, contractors, managers, researchers and everyone else involved in delivering sustainable forestry in Victoria's native forests," he says.

"It was also a privilege to regularly work with Traditional Owners, including with Wadawurrung Elders on the establishment of the Woowookarung Regional Park in Ballarat, and with Djaara on their regulatory priorities in the greater Bendigo area."

For their own property, the Holts embraced farm forestry as part of a desire to give their kids the same type of country upbringing they both enjoyed, but Leon acknowledges it's a practice that requires careful balance. "I think forestry of any stripe is always about managing multiple values," he says. "For me, that means incorporating land use change into an existing landscape in a thoughtful way, using adaptive management.

"I've made an effort to engage with our neighbours and the broader community to ensure we have as much support as possible for our project. For example, our local Landcare group has visited the property, and I plan to invite them back to have a look every few years.

"We have some wonderful native grasses which respond well when grazing pressure is reduced, and I'm trying to maintain that biodiversity while establishing our plantation, through careful use of herbicide and management of stock, weeds and pests."

Holt is also keenly aware the family lives on Country that is culturally significant to the Djaara people and works to preserve that continuous connection.

JOINING FORESTRY AUSTRALIA

Holt's relationship with Forestry Australia began 12 years ago when he helped to set up the Future Foresters Initiative. Later, he became one of the first Board Observers, the start of a path that has culminated in the presidency.

"I believe we're not just the peak body for those who manage, grow and study Australia's forests, but that we are the best professional association in the country," says Holt.

"I'm very proud of the way Forestry Australia has come to represent a much broader community of people who care for our forests. The contributions I've

Cont P 17

From P 16

made, through the Future Foresters Initiative, the webinar program, mentoring, professional development and as a Board Observer, would only be possible in an organisation that is committed to growing the next generation of foresters.

"I'm passionate about Forestry Australia's future, and I relish the opportunity to continue working with the Board to build on our achievements over the past decade."

Holt plans to carry on the responsible stewardship of past presidents. "Financial sustainability will be a key focus," he says. "We have made important investments over the last few years, bringing many functions such as event management and communications in-house, and our aim is to keep supporting the incredible team led by CEO Jacquie Martin. To do so, we will need to grow revenue by making some strategic investments in the immediate future.

"Forestry Australia members have consistently told us that advocacy should be our highest priority, and I plan to continue supporting our efforts to expand advocacy by building strategic partnerships in coming years. We will do everything we can to make sure our scientific expertise is heard at the decision-making table."

It's not the easiest time to be taking on the role. "Forestry faces many challenges in the immediate and long term, ranging from climate change to artificial intelligence and the erosion of global economic, political and social norms," Holt says. "International markets have become fragile and volatile, and public trust in institutions, including forest managers, is in decline.

"The silver lining is that forestry's innate advantages remain. We offer a sustainable and sought-after primary product, and we offer the tools to combat climate change and biodiversity loss while supporting economic opportunities for local communities.

"Emerging and growing markets for carbon and nature repair are compelling opportunities for forestry, but only if handled with great care, with sound science and professional integrity at the forefront."

It's not an easy job, but Holt is used to multitasking: "I have three energetic boys, Victor (6), Eric (3) and Alfred (1), who, along with my wonderful wife Freya, are the most important people in my life.

"In addition to being a dad, I am the Joey Scout leader at 1st Castlemaine Pioneers, one of the oldest Scout groups in Victoria. I am also heading back into the Army Reserve after a year working full time in the ADF, with almost 20 years of continuous service behind me."

It's hard to believe that any other career was ever an option for Holt, who insists every interested young person can find a successful career in forestry, and yet he says, "Before embarking on my career in forestry, I studied meteorology. Fortunately for me, my maths was not good enough to get a job at the Bureau, and the rest is history!"

Holt's own history has come together to create an ideal president for the organisation at a time when being able to convey the realities of Australian forestry to the general public is more important than ever.

"I've always enjoyed learning about the science of forestry, and I doubt that will ever change," Holt says. "However, in recent times the thing that has come to give me the most satisfaction is growing enduring relationships, particularly with those who have deep connections with their local community and forests."

This is an edited version of an interview supplied by Forestry Australia.



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2

1/ ***Back at the gates of the Victorian School of Forestry in Creswick, where Leon studied and, in 2019, celebrated his wedding.***
2/ ***Planting the woodlot on the family property.***

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HEAD OFFICE
Timber Media Australasia Pty Ltd
PO Box 3001
Maraylya NSW 2765

PUBLISHER
Timber Media Australasia Pty Ltd

EDITORS
Donyale Harrison
Jess Hockridge
Nicky Ainley
editors@timberandforestryenews.com.au

ADVERTISING
Campbell McInnes // +61 (0) 406 223 007
campbellm@ttnews.com.au

ACCOUNTS
Chris Parker // +61 (0) 413 710 203
cparker@ttnews.com.au

SUBSCRIBE
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