

Nick's article

Recent court cases won by community environmental organisations against VicForests have raised hopes that remnant areas of unburned, habitat-rich ash forest in the Central Highlands and East Gippsland might now be saved. But Monday's state government media release foreshadows legislative changes to the Code of Forest Practice for Timber Production that would give the go-ahead to VicForests by effectively blocking future legal actions and injunctions.

In short, the Code of Forest Practice is to be revised so as to "minimise the risk to short-term supply obligations arising from third-party litigation". The proposed changes will be based on last year's review conducted by the Environment Department under Minister Lily D'Ambrosio. Aimed ostensibly at "clarifying roles and responsibilities" and "removing administrative errors", the 2019 proposed revision would have removed requirements specifying how logging must be planned to protect biodiversity, including threatened species and other non-wood values such as scenic landscapes and ecotourism.

After an outcry from the conservation movement, the Government withdrew the changes. Then, in November, it announced its Forestry Plan, which would see 90,000 hectares of native forest reserved from logging, ahead of winding down native forest logging from 2024 before ending it altogether in 2030. However, large parts of the 'protected' areas were already effectively reserved, and at the current rate of logging, complex ash forest ecologies will be all but gone by 2030.

Victoria's ash forests are already devastated by this century's four megafires. Climate change is killing forests all over the world; science predicts, and we are already watching in horror, the growing frequency and intensity of wildfires, including in the Arctic Circle. VicForests' operations target what little montaine forest remains after the disastrous 2009 and 2019 – 2020 fires. Native forest logging must be wound down immediately if we are to avoid an irreversible loss of wildlife and biodiversity in the future.

The existing regulations are already weak: the regulation protecting old-growth forest from logging stipulates that if as little as 10 per cent of an area is occupied by trees in the 'regrowth stage', the forest is not deemed 'old-growth' and can be logged. The regulation defining 'rainforest', which also must not be logged, is equally narrow. If eucalypts make up as little as 10 per cent of trees in an area otherwise comprising rainforest species, the forest is not deemed rainforest and can be logged.

If logging is to continue for another 10 years as the Government intends, our forests need stronger protections, not weakened ones.

Most people would congratulate the Andrews Government for accepting the best available scientific information in its efforts to protect all Victorians from Covid-19. Regrettably, its plans to weaken protections of Victoria's forests disregard the best available and published scientific data on forest ecology.