

Another log on the ire won't help

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Protesters rally against the mill closure. Photo: Justin McManus



Panicking over job losses in the timber industry is not a sustainable strategy.

How ironic that the timber industry chose March 21, International Forest Day, to barricade Parliament with logging trucks and demand accelerated logging of the dwindling mature forests of the Central Highlands. When the rest of the world was reflecting on the benefits of forest wilderness for people, for economies and for the planet itself, we were confronted with a macho display calling for conservation regulations to be weakened.

Both industry and union are pushing for increased clearfelling of alpine and mountain ash forests, already devastated by decades of intensive logging and catastrophic bushfires, to keep the Heyfield timber mill profitable.

Australian Sustainable Hardwoods (ASH) and the CFMEU, backed by PR strategists, won centre-stage media coverage for their pro-logging protests, while spokespeople for community-based groups concerned about issues of long-term sustainability, biodiversity, habitat protection and lost tourism opportunities were largely ignored. CFMEU union leader John Setka declared that there would be no adverse effects if more forest was freed up for logging.

VicForests' advice that the sustainability of the timber industry itself is on the line was disregarded. Industry spokespeople were projected as representing a just, mainstream cause while environmental NGOs were labelled as "extremists" in the pages of *The Age*.

Despite the complexity of the issues, the media has overwhelmingly presented them in simplistic, adversarial terms. The mature ash forests of the Central Highlands north-east of Melbourne contain the most valuable sawlogs and are a key source of supply for the ASH timber mill at Heyfield. They are also widely recognised as being of very high conservation value.

The state forests being logged in this area fall mainly within the Central Forest Management Area (FMA), including the Toolangi, Marysville, Black Range and Rubicon State Forests. So, just how much mature forest remains, and how much longer can it last?

Inadequate public reporting by VicForests and the state government departments responsible means this is not an easy question to answer. The best estimate that can be made from official data is that in 2004 the Central FMA contained about a quarter of the 80,440 hectares of statewide ash forest available for logging and suitable for harvesting over the ensuing 15 years.

Figures obtained by the Rubicon Forest Protection Group under freedom-of-information laws show that since 2004 more than 12,000 hectares have been either logged or killed by fire, leaving fewer than 8000 hectares of harvestable forest remaining. The high conservation values of these forests – which are comprehensively documented in a recent report by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council – will certainly be lost if logging continues at anything like the present rate.

How has this come about?

In 2010, the state government changed the allocation rules to permit larger areas to be harvested from any given forest management area. The ash forests in the Central FMA came out badly and are now providing almost double the harvest area envisaged when VicForests was created in 2004.

At that time, and again in 2007, the maximum harvestable area for the Central FMA's ash forests for the present period (2014 to 2019) was set by the state government at about 2000 ha, or an average of 400 ha a year. But 758 ha was clearfelled in 2014-15 and 778 ha in 2015-16, with a similar amount estimated to be under way in the current season. Alarming, this accelerated logging has occurred despite 13,500 ha being lost in the 2009 fires. It has also resulted in the creation of huge contiguous logging coupes, much larger than are permitted in Victoria's Code of Forest Practice.

Now let's do the sums.

The total area of ash forest harvested by VicForests in the Central FMA from June 2004 to June 2016 was 8564 ha; add 750 ha for the current logging season; add 5000 ha of harvestable stands lost in the 2009 fire; then deduct salvage logging of fire-killed forests (to avoid double counting) of about 2000 ha.

So over 12,000 ha have now gone from the initial 20,000 ha, leaving less than 8000 ha of remaining mature ash forest outside parks and reserves. At the current harvesting rate of about 750 ha a year, the Central FMA's harvestable ash forests will be totally exhausted in about 10 years – without factoring in the likelihood of further catastrophic fires.

The picture for the rest of the state is little better given the extensive forest areas that were killed in the 2006-07 fires, including about 20,000 ha of harvestable ash. Under these circumstances the harvestable resources of the state's ash forests, and their high conservation values, will be exhausted long before post 1960s regrowth forests begin to come on stream in the mid 2040s.

Rural unemployment is an issue that must be solved by statewide regional economic development policies. Being panicked in a piecemeal fashion by unions and private industry into further sacrificing fastdwindling natural resources to solve the latest crisis is not the way to go.

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