

Heyfield timber mill: Time to face forest facts

NICK LEGGE, The Weekly Times

April 3, 2017 12:05pm

THE people of the Latrobe Valley are right to be dismayed by the looming fate of the Australian Sustainable Hardwoods mill at Heyfield.

Gippsland has long been the centre of the hardwood timber industry in Victoria, and the hardwood timber industry has long played a major part in Gippsland's development and in its prosperity.

The jobs that the ASH mill and the value-added downstream industries provide are a huge asset in farming communities subject to the vagaries of world markets and of the weather.

The closure of Hazelwood makes such jobs even more valuable.

So every avenue must be explored to save jobs as the State Government has clearly been endeavouring to do. However as Matt Ruchel of the Forest Industry Taskforce has said, Victoria's ash forests — the predominant source of timber for sawmilling — are no magic pudding. Ravaged by huge fires in 2003, 2006-07 and 2009 and by past overcutting, there is much less harvestable timber left than is commonly understood.

So what do the official statistics say?

In 2004, when VicForests was created, and again in 2007, the allocation order granting it access to the forests indicated that over the 15-year period from 2004 to 2019 there would be 80,400 hectares of harvestable ash forest available.

The 2007 allocation order shows that of this harvestable area, 19,600ha had been killed in the 2006-07 fires and 1,200ha killed in the 2003 fires. A further 7000ha of harvestable stands was killed in the 2009 fires, reducing the total area of harvestable living ash forest to 52,600ha.

Figures provided to the Rubicon Forest Protection Group by VicForests show that 20,800 ha of ash forest has been logged between June 2004 and June last year. Salvage logging of fire-killed stands accounts for about 4000ha of this, but adding a further 1400ha for the current logging season leaves just 34,400ha of harvestable ash stands remaining. Some 3,000ha has been reserved to protect colonies of Leadbeater's possum, but this is barely two years logging at current rates. Importantly, the recent new Leadbeater's possum sightings were already included in estimates based on available habitat within its known range and don't necessarily reflect an increase in population.

The numbers suggest that the remaining area — 31,400 ha — could allow current harvesting rates to be maintained — assuming no further major fires — until the mid-2040s when stands regenerated since the 1970s begin to come on stream. But this is not so. Much of the remaining 31,400 ha is now uneconomic since it falls within retained buffers in coupes logged since 2004.

The rules governing the use of these forests require that while timber production is a high priority use, the need to conserve biodiversity, safeguard streams, preserve scenic values, protect rainforest patches, threatened species, old growth stands and giant trees, and provide for other economic opportunities (eg. nature-based tourism) must all be taken into account. If logging were to continue at the present rate these other values would be lost.

This is already being seen in the Rubicon State Forest near where I live. Here, rampant blackberries are smothering native understorey species, habitat trees are mostly killed in regeneration burns, small watercourses and springs are logged and scenic values ignored. Harvesting has increased despite about a third of the forest being killed on Black Saturday, creating vast logged areas far larger than permitted by the Code of Forest Practice. Another major fire in the next 20 years — a distinct likelihood given the impact of global warming — would see the very future of these forests gravely threatened.

Structural change in the timber industry — like structural change throughout the economy — is inevitable. Indeed, not long ago the Central Forest Management Area, of which the Rubicon State Forest is part, supported a large timber mill at Alexandra, but it was closed in 2010 by its owners, Gunns, with the loss of 40 jobs to allow its timber allocation to be transferred to their mill at Heyfield, now owned by Hermal.

It is to be hoped that as many jobs as possible can be saved at Heyfield, but this must not come at the expense of the multitude of other values Victoria's magnificent ash forests offer.

• Nick Legge is a former forestry lecturer and Victorian Government policy adviser. He is also member of the Rubicon Forest Protection Group.