

The Honorable Daniel Andrews
The Premier of Victoria
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne Vic 3002

By email: daniel.andrews@parliament.vic.gov.au

22 February 2023

Dear Premier

The future of Victoria's native forest ecosystems

We, being Veterinarians for Climate Action and the Group of Former Chief and Senior Veterinary Officers of the Commonwealth, States and Territories, have combined previously to make representations to our National and State Governments on the impacts that climate change and human activities are having on our native animals and plants in native ecosystems. A similar letter to this has been forwarded to the Prime Minister.

We are grateful that your new Government has recognised that the lists of endangered and threatened native species is ever increasing. The recent joint press release by the Commonwealth and State Ministers for the Environment to protect of native wildlife and fauna by putting 30 per cent of Australia's land and sea area under conservation by 2030¹ is commended. Unfortunately, evidence is accumulating that achieving this objective by 2030 will be too late to halt more extinctions, as well as threats and general harm to native species and Australia's forest ecosystems. We believe that ceasing native forest logging by 2025 would be more impactful.

The level and widespread occurrence of the logging and clearing of native forests is of particular concern to us. In particular, there are a number of current and on-going activities in Victoria that require action, and perhaps, active intervention in the management of Victoria's native forests.

Central Highlands and Gippsland

Firstly in Victoria, native forest areas in the Central Highlands and Gippsland that were to be gazetted as protected were clear-felled by VicForests just two weeks before their gazettal.² This is surely a planned strategy and we question what the Victorian Government is going to do about this. The areas to be gazetted were important for local survival of the greater glider, a species the Victorian government recognises as threatened and the Commonwealth as vulnerable.³

¹ States back wildlife protection push. *The Age* 22 October 2022 p13.

² Forests 'protected' after logging. Miki Perkins *The Age* 25 November 2022.

³ Greater Glider Action Statement No. 267, The State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning 2019

Secondly, there are other reports from the ABC that Victoria's native forests are not being logged in the manner outlined in the masterplan [presumably the Regional Forests Agreements (RFA)]. It was reported that whole swaths of forest have been clear felled contrary to the RFA. Decimating and fragmenting Victoria's native forests places the survival of greater gliders, flying foxes and many other species of flora and fauna at increased risk of extinction. Gliders and flying foxes are the major pollinators of Australia's native forests.

Third, it has been revealed in the Supreme Court of Victoria that VicForests did not follow the law and protect endangered greater gliders and yellow-bellied gliders when logging native forests in East Gippsland and the Central Highlands of Victoria.⁴ The Victorian Auditor General's Office Report to Parliament⁵ 'has found the Office of the Conservation Regulator has not yet sufficiently developed or integrated its timber harvesting compliance systems to support decision-making'. This is despite being in operation for 4 years and the current situation leaves no restraint on the operations of VicForests. The Regulator was intended to oversee VicForests activities and its impact on Victorian native forests, but to date it has been a total failure as a 'conservation regulator' and has not fulfilled any measure of protection to native animals and plants in Victoria's forests. The Victorian Auditor-General's Report made no reference to any impacts on native animals and plants which is indicative that VicForests and those overseeing it have little realisation that Victoria's native forests are the repository of a significant number of endangered and threatened natural ecosystems needing conservation.

Additionally, the biodiversity of Victoria's alpine regions was supposed to have been given a boost by the elimination of cattle grazing 18 years ago. This demonstrates the fraught environmental planning process. The Bracks Labor Government banned summer cattle grazing in the alpine region in 2004, then the Baillieu Coalition Government in 2010 allowed a trial of about 400 cattle to establish whether grazing reduced fire risk. In 2014, the Andrews Labor Government again banned cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park and the river red gum national parks.^{6,7}

This exclusion of summer grazing of cattle has been followed by an explosion in the numbers of feral horses, deer, dogs, cats and pigs that are there permanently, placing great pressure on the alpine habitat. We ask whether a plan has been finalised for undertaking a significant reduction of the feral animals in the alpine regions and when this will commence, recognising that eradication would be virtually impossible.

It is a shame that both Federal and Victorian Governments are allowing the decline of Victoria's, and that of Australia's other States and Territories, native forests and natural environment, while promising active protection of our national and regional biodiversity assets.

Eastern and South Eastern Australian Native Forests

Fourth, demonstrating that this issue is not restricted to Victoria, it was reported that 'An area the size of Timor Leste was deforested in South eastern Queensland for beef cattle pasture in the 5 years to 2019'.⁸ This follows reports that an area the size of Tasmania was deforested in Northern Queensland in the five years to 2019.

⁴ Loggers failed to protect possums. The Age 5 November 2022 p10.

⁵ Regulating Victoria's Native Forests. Victorian Auditor-General's Office Report to Parliament 2022-23.9.

⁶ Victoria bans Alpine National Park cattle grazing. Liam Mannix The Age Examiner 28 December 2014

⁷ Cattle banned from the Alpine National Park. Liam Mannix The Age Examiner 17 March 2014.

⁸ Aussie's are horrified. Qld beef farmers drive deforestation. M Silk SMH 6 Dec 2022.

Fifth, the large area of south eastern Australia devastated by fires and floods over the past 5 years is putting the natural habitat of native animals in danger of serious degradation and sending native animals and plants towards extinction in those areas, for example, koalas in south eastern New South Wales. The pressure on the animal and plant species facing extinction is expanding because native forests in central and western Victoria are being logged to compensate for logging not being undertaken where the 2019-20 fires occurred. These compensation areas were not meant to be logged and the biodiversity and health of the forests in these areas are being placed under threat.

Sixth, the seriousness of the situation has been demonstrated by research showing that Victorian native forests absorb about 3 million tonnes of carbon emissions each year. This has been assessed as equivalent to off-setting the pollution of 700 000 medium-sized cars or double that produced by Victoria's aviation sector.⁹ The above revelations confirm the harm that logging native forests is having on the natural environment, its biodiversity and contributing to climate change.

We fear that the commitment of the Commonwealth and State Ministers for the Environment, made just 8 weeks ago, for a 2030 deadline of ceasing the logging of native forests, is an issue that will give little benefit for the preservation of native habitat, and will lead to the continued extinction and threatening of flora and fauna species in the extended forest areas.

The revelations above suggest that there should be a review of the actions the Victorian Department of Environment and Energy will take to prevent the serious decline and plundering of Victoria's native environments and ecosystems, on both public and private land. There appears to be inadequate controls on land clearing in Victoria.

We look forward to your response to our concerns about what your State Government will do to curb the lack of restraint on the plundering of Australia's forest and natural flora and fauna ecosystems and actions to be taken to ensure they remain as viable ecosystems before it is too late. The events outlined above are placing great pressure on the survival of our native flora and fauna and even the forests themselves because ecosystems are being irrevocably disrupted and destroyed.

Yours faithfully



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⁹ Logging emissions double aviation. *The Age* 4 November 2022 p14.