

Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria

Further Questions on Notice taken from Ms Melina Bath

Following the 2019/20 bushfires, what is VicForests approach to managing risks to threatened species?

Immediately following the 2019-2020 bushfires, VicForests paused all harvesting fire affected areas to allow the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) to assess the impact of the fires and implement thorough threatened species surveys.

Following the bushfires, VicForests' approach considered the fire severity, likely biodiversity impacts and consideration of key species of concern, inclusive of arboreal species such as gliders and owls, as well as aquatic species.

The approach included assessment of planned harvesting operations and associated habitat protection within a 3.5 km area, pre-harvest surveys of habitat and for individual species, implementation of tailored protection and retention measures for key habitat elements to provide for recolonisation as species populations recover, and modified soil and water protection measures.

Each planned harvesting operation undergoes a comprehensive risk assessment for a range of key environmental and operational factors that inform the application of the tailored adaptive management and harvesting methods applied to the coupe to reduce the risk of any detrimental impacts to biodiversity outcomes. A key feature of this approach is the much higher level of habitat and hollow bearing tree retention, thereby providing for recolonisation by those species which depend on hollows.

This approach included the deferral of harvesting in lightly burnt and unburnt areas within the fire footprint in calendar year 2020 to allow the forest time to recover from the fire impacts.

Good rainfall and seasonal conditions have meant that in many instances there has been good recovery of the understory, with the vegetation cover providing a filter to slow down water run-off and reduce soil movement and sedimentation, as compared with immediately after the fires.

VicForests has identified lightly burnt and unburnt areas within the fire footprint that will be sustainably harvested in 2021 while minimising risk to biodiversity outcomes by applying the similar adaptive harvesting and habitat protection measures to these areas as those applied to more heavily burnt areas.

VicForests undertakes comprehensive field assessments both pre and post harvesting to inform the effectiveness of protection measures applied in these harvesting operations, and uses information available from DELWP, Arthur Rylah Institute and scientists to continuously improve the methods applied.

All harvesting will be followed by a comprehensive regeneration program.

What do you think is the single most important thing you do to protect Victoria's ecosystem?

VicForests' adaptive harvesting approach focuses on applying the most appropriate silvicultural systems to match the forest species and characteristics to management objectives. This is achieved by assessing coupes for forest values and developing an appropriate plan, tailored for each coupe.

Since mid-2019 VicForests has focused on variable retention – that is, retaining a significant number of trees in each coupe for current and future habitat for native species – across most of the coupes it harvests.

This is achieved by assessing all coupes for habitat values, (that is, native species and in particular threatened species). We then plan for retention, building in threatened species observations.

All areas that VicForests' harvests are regenerated. It is a requirement by law to ensure it is regenerated to the quality that occurred when we harvested it or better to ensure resilience of forests.

All VicForests' coupes are harvested in compliance with the requirements outlined within the State's primary regulatory document the Code and the associated Management Standards and Procedures for timber harvesting operations in Victoria's State forests 2014 in addition to VicForests' own adaptive management procedures.