



## NEED FOR FOCUS ON REGROWTH

*This 2002 letter to the local newspaper addresses the future of the local public forests and the timber industry following the massive reduction in sawlog allocation by the Victorian state government. In it, I attempt to draw together some very diverse contributions and perspectives presented in previous letters with my own views on this controversial issue.*



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To The Editor,

The recent forest policy and management changes by the Bracks government mark a sad but historic turning point for the Wombat Forest and our community. The radical revision downwards of the projected "sustainable annual yield" of sawlogs from the early nineties peak of 79,000 tonnes to the announced 8,600 tonnes is a massive indictment of the deception and/or incompetence of a string of professional foresters who presided over this second rape of the Wombat in the short history of European settlement. Whether those responsible will be brought to book by the government remains to be seen but I think history will highlight Tim Anderson and Loris Duclos (of the Wombat Forest Society) for their tireless and complex work in extracting and analysing the numbers which allowed politicians to move against the professional foresters responsible for this rape.

The proposals from both DNRE and many conservation groups to fast track the development of sawlog plantations on farmland shows all the signs of being an environmental, economic and social disaster for our region. Pete O'Mara (Advocate 13/3/02) pointed out some unrealistic production figures and ignored environmental hazards of large scale monocultural plantations in the CAWFAG Forest Transition Plan.

Norman Endacot (Advocate 13/3/02) has pointed to the conservative principles the forestry profession generally apply to any large scale establishment of new forest resources, especially where they require public money.

As someone who has promoted a more sustainable model of farm forestry, I applaud the idea of establishing a greater and more diverse sawlog resource in our region, but to do so as a knee jerk response to the state of our public forests, will create more problems than it prevents.

Of course, the support of some conservation groups for gung-ho chemical plantation monocultures is the flip side of their plan to see the Wombat and other state forests, turned into national parks at exactly the time in their history when they most need sensitive and sensible forestry.

The Wombat Forest Society's call for more scrutiny of wood chipping (Advocate 13/3/02) in the Wombat under the new regime is timely, especially when it has been repeatedly shown that small sawmills can recover useful sawn timber from these so called "residual logs".

Gary McIntosh (also Advocate 13/3/02) shows that the local knowledge and evidence does exist of forest management alternatives to the, euphoristically titled, "Shelterwood System", which involves intense and damaging regeneration burns. We can learn from both the limitations of "individual tree selection" of earlier times which Norman Endacot recalls (Advocate 20/2/02) and the mistakes of the last three decades.

While the relatively smaller areas of more mature forest will remain a touchstone of debate and measure of forest management, it is the dense regrowth stands, created by heavy logging and intense regeneration burning, which desperately need our attention.

What is required is a new regime of regrowth thinning to give the best young trees the space to grow. Thinning in the Wombat Forest can create mature forest with high amenity, environmental and sawlog values in less than a lifetime. We know this because it was done 100 years ago in the post gold rush regrowth. Back then, the predominant use for the thinnings was firewood, today it would be pulpwood although opportunities exist to develop the post and pole market using new low toxicity preservatives. These opportunities have never been properly considered for our forests in the past because DNRE used to have a conflict of interest as a grower of pine plantations which supplied the treated pine pole market. That is no longer the case.

Gary McIntosh, in his letter, referred to the delegation to Minister Coleman eight years ago in which we both gave presentations. Another member of that delegation, Vernon Howell was at the time somewhat provocatively pointing out that there was plenty of pulpwood available from the Wombat forest in the form of thinnings and that the state should pay (if necessary ) to have it removed in a way which did not damage the retained trees.

This transformation of the pulpwood industry is urgently needed. The skills and equipment needed for the thinning task are the same ones required for sensible management of farm forestry plantations but very different from those currently used to harvest mature trees from devastated shelterwood coupes or clear felled Blue Gum pulpwood plantations.

Thinning of regrowth for multiple, current and future values is one of the cornerstones of sustainable forest management around the world. One hundred years ago we used these methods to create the Wombat forest we have been fighting over for the last thirty.

The Bracks government's actions in recognising the state of our forests is a good first step. What is now required is the vision and strength to reform the management of our native forests from resource destruction and regrowth to resource husbandry. For our community, the careful and sensitive thinning of the Wombat Forest regrowth is a task that has the potential to draw together the best of our forest heritage and culture, provide employment and forest products, improve amenity while creating another wonderful and productive forest to pass on to the next generation. There is a practical and positive alternative to a modern wilderness of abandoned dense and fire prone regrowth surrounded by vast farm monocultures of short rotation chemically sustained eucalypts.

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