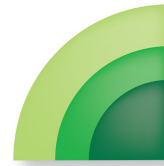




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Greens fail to see wood for the trees

PHILIP DALIDAKIS

The Victorian forest industry provides significant benefits.

AS THE timber harvesting season gets under way for another year, already one week has been lost to protesters chaining themselves to industry equipment in the hope of saving "what is left" of our native forests. Often such protest action is greeted with a mixture of silent and open consent from those of us who are concerned by climate change but who don't fully appreciate the environmental or scientific ramifications of simply locking up our forests. After all, how can an industry that cuts down trees claim to be both environmentally sensitive and sustainable?

Victoria has more than 3.5 million hectares of forest in protected reserves while on average only 0.19 per cent of our 3.2 million hectares of state forest is harvested each year. Victoria's state forests are well managed and a range of concerns, including conservation of flora and fauna, protection of landscape and indigenous and historic values, recreation and education, are considered before any timber production.

Victoria is a global leader in the regulation and oversight of forestry activities. Planning, harvesting, regeneration and other forest management activities are required to meet a code of practice for timber production. They are regulated by the Department of Sustain-

ability and Environment and independently audited annually by EPA Victoria. VicForests, the state-owned organisation responsible for the sustainable harvest and sale of timber from state forests, is also independently certified to the Australian Forestry Standard, an internationally recognised standard for responsible forest management.

An example of propaganda outstripping the pace of truth is the issue of timber production in Melbourne's water catchments. Annual timber production in the 157,000-hectare catchment area averages only 306 hectares, or 0.19 per cent. Yet numerous environmental groups continue to claim that timber harvesting is directly responsible for Melbourne's low water yield. Independent reports commissioned by the DSE demonstrate that the impact of timber production on Melbourne's water yield is minor in comparison with the real threats of climate change and bush fire.

Recent history supports these studies and provides a level of perspective when you compare this small amount of timber production with the 1 million hectares of forest burnt in 59 days during the 2003 alpine bushfires. One of the many benefits of the timber industry is that it provides vital support in defending our forests against the effects of bushfire through the maintenance of fire tracks, reduction of fuel loads and the provision of fire-fighting machinery and personnel.

Despite accusations to the contrary, the principal objectives of any native forest harvesting operations are to maximise the value obtained

from the timber, maintain the health of the forest and ensure good regrowth for future generations.

Saw logs from native forests remain the priority of timber harvesting and are a high-value resource processed domestically to produce flooring, furniture, decking and other value-added products. Harvested timber that is unsuitable for processing into high-value sawn timber is used to produce essential secondary forest products such as paper, cardboard, firewood, garden products and energy. This makes the forest industry very efficient and a generator of little waste.

Current timber plantations are largely being managed for the production of paper products and not furniture or flooring. Even if this were to change overnight, it would require a substantial area of eucalypt plantations grown on good land and need at least 25-30 years to replace what is being sourced from native forests.

All sustainably managed plantation and native forests also store carbon, which is important as we enter a carbon constrained world. Australia's forestry industry is carbon-positive, helping to offset our national greenhouse gas

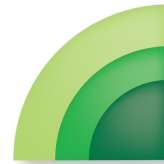
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emissions. Growing trees absorb carbon from the atmosphere and store carbon; about half the dry weight of a tree is carbon. This carbon remains "locked" in the wood for the



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life of the product, until it decomposes or is burnt. For example, a 50 kilogram wooden table contains about 20 kilograms of carbon.

Wood products have amazing environmental credentials. They are renewable, recyclable and biodegradable. The production and processing of wood products is energy efficient. They offer a climate and environment-friendly alternative to many other products and building materials.

Although green groups and activists accuse the timber industry of no longer being relevant in today's world, the opposite is true. The forestry industry directly employs 25,000 people in Victoria and contributes \$6 billion in output. It provides significant social and economic benefits to regional communities and Victoria as a whole. It is also environmentally sustainable, and is based on responsible and accountable forest management.

Rather than disrupting forestry workers and shutting down timber production in pursuit of an outdated ideology, environmentalists would be better off ending this futile debate and working constructively with industry to ensure ongoing balanced management of our forests.

Philip Dalidakis is chief executive for the Victorian Association of Forest Industries