

North East Victoria: Background to the RFA

What is the RFA?

Regional Forest Agreements are a key part of national forest policy as agreed by the Commonwealth, States and Territories in 1992 in the National Forest Policy Statement. The Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) for the North East will be the third of five RFAs between Victoria and the Commonwealth.

The RFA will last for up to 20 years, subject to five-yearly reviews, and aims to provide certainty for industry, conservation and local communities. It has three main objectives:

- to protect environmental values in a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System based on nationally agreed criteria;
- to encourage job creation and growth in forest-based industries, including wood products, tourism and minerals; and
- to manage all native forests in an ecologically sustainable way.

The RFA process has three stages - the Comprehensive Regional Assessment, the Directions Report, and development of the final Agreement.

The Comprehensive Regional Assessment

The Comprehensive Regional Assessment (CRA) provides the scientific information base for the RFA. The 24 CRA projects for the North East region assessed the range of forest uses and values, drawing on a wide range of studies conducted in recent years with research to provide new and up to date information. The CRA Report released in August 1998 provides an overview of the following assessments:

- biodiversity
- world heritage
- old-growth forest
- social
- wilderness
- resource
- economic

National Estate assessment is continuing and will be the subject of a separate report.

RFA Directions Report

The next phase will be the production of a Directions Report building upon information contained in the CRA report and the results of consultations with the community. It will be released later in 1998 and will:

- propose a reserve system for the North East addressing the national forest reserve criteria;
- consider the elements of ecologically sustainable forest management (ESFM) which are part of the RFA;
- identify industry development opportunities; and

- consider the links between the RFA process and other statutory processes, particularly environmental impact assessment, World Heritage, National Estate and endangered species.

The community and stakeholder groups will be consulted both during the development of the Directions Report and following its release through a series of workshops held in the North East and Melbourne over the next few months.

RFA finalisation

Following the release and public consultation on the Directions Report, the Commonwealth and State Governments will negotiate the final Regional Forest Agreement.

The RFA process in Victoria

Victoria has a land area of 22.7 million hectares, of which some 40 per cent is publicly owned. Of the public land, 42 per cent (3.8 million hectares) is reserved for conservation purposes, including 2.5 million hectares of forests. A further 3.5 million hectares of public land is also forested, of which about 1.2 million hectares is available for timber harvesting.

Victoria has five RFA regions.

- **East Gippsland**, signed on 3 February 1997.
- Central Highlands, signed on 27 March 1998.
- North East, expected to be finalised in late 1998.
- **Gippsland**. Work for the Comprehensive Regional Assessment started in May 1998, with the RFA scheduled for completion in mid 1999.
- **West**. The RFA for the West region is scheduled for completion in late 1999.