



Hon Reece Whitby MLA
Minister for Environment; Climate Action

Your Reference: A997777 Petition No. 067
Our Reference: 79-07140

Hon Peter Foster MLC
Chair
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Legislative Council Committee Office
18 – 32 Parliament Place
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Mr Foster

Thank you for your letter of 1 December 2022 seeking further information to assist with preliminary enquiries into the issues raised in Petition No. 067 – Sustainable forest management, tabled by Hon Steve Thomas MLC.

I am pleased to provide the attached information and additional context that addresses the concerns of the petition and Mr Thomas.

Thank you for writing to me on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Reece Whitby'.

Reece Whitby MLA
MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT
21/12/2022

Att

Background

Western Australia's national parks, conservation parks, nature reserves, State forests and timber reserves are vested in the Conservation and Parks Commission and managed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) under 10-year statutory management plans (forest management plan) developed in consultation with the community.

A forest management plan, prepared in accordance with the *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* (CALM Act) provides the overall policy framework for protecting and managing forests on public lands in our south-west. These plans accommodate multiple values and uses and provide for a balanced delivery of biodiversity, conservation, and forest-based industry outcomes, including recreation, water, tourism and apiary.

The current plan supports native forest timber production on a sustained yield basis, enabling the commercial timber industry, as administered by the Forest Products Commission.

In September 2021, the McGowan Government announced a decision to end the large-scale commercial logging of native forests, to take effect from 2024. The timing of this policy decision relates to the *Forest Management Plan 2014-2023* (current FMP), ending on 31 December 2023. The *Forest Management Plan 2024-2033* (next FMP) is expected to commence on 1 January 2024. The next plan will no longer support timber harvesting as currently occurs, consistent with the Government policy.

The decision was based on ever-increasing impacts of climate change, the importance of maintaining biodiversity and forest health, the need for carbon capture and storage and declining timber yields. From 2024, timber taken from our native forests will be limited to forest management activities that improve forest health and clearing for approved mining operations. This includes a practice referred to as ecological thinning.

The *Mid-term review of performance of the Forest Management Plan 2014-2023* (Mid-term Review) provided an assessment of the implementation of management activities for the first five-year period of the current FMP (Conservation and Parks Commission 2019). The analysis against Key Performance Indicators (KPI) reported the extent to which established targets were met, reasons for the rating for achievement of targets and establishment of trends over time.

The rating for the KPI on whole of forest condition found a decline in vegetation density trends, indicative of reduced forest health. The changes observed in vegetation density was found to be consistent with lower rainfall and higher temperatures and the longer-term reduction in rainfall that has been occurring since the 1970s resulting in reduced streamflow, lower groundwater levels and altered forest hydrology. Climate change was considered the primary cause of the reductions in forest vegetation density, particularly in eastern jarrah and wandoo forest and woodland ecosystems.

The *End-of-term review of performance of the Forest Management Plan 2014 – 2023* (Conservation and Parks Commission 2022) found this trend continued with vegetation decline evident across the FMP area, particularly in the Jarrah North East and Wandoo forest and Woodland forest ecosystem types. In the Southern forest ecosystems, areas of both declining and increasing vegetation condition were evident, however, there had been no net loss of vegetation cover. Declining streamflow and groundwater levels were evident in the forest ecosystem areas (KPI 10). Ecological thinning trials are underway to investigate if this management activity can reduce moisture stress in the short and longer-term by reducing the number of smaller trees in an area of forest.

The Mid-term Review also found that future timber sustained yields would reduce if silvicultural outcomes were not achieved. The management response indicated that the low level of removal of marri and jarrah other bole volume had significant flow-on effects to the achievement of silvicultural objectives, future forest condition arising from harvest operations, capacity to access lower yielding areas, profitability of the forest products industry, and all other factors being equal would reduce future sustained yield.

Climate change and its impacts on rainfall in the south-west is well documented, and the decline in rainfall since the 1970s has been deemed greater in the south-west than anywhere else in Australia. Weather patterns in the south-west have led to a shift to markedly drier, warmer landscapes. Effects of this changing climate on forests include stress-induced mortality and stand-level dieback across the south-west region, reduction in growth rates and carrying capacity of forest, increased risk of regeneration failure after disturbance, increased risk of major pest and pathogen outbreaks, and increased frequency and intensity of bushfires. The future uses and management of the south-west forests, including undertaking ecological thinning, have been canvassed in the draft FMP 2024-2033, which was released for public comment between 18 October and 18 December 2022.

Response to elements of the submission from the principal petitioner

Australia's *National Forest Policy Statement 1992* (NFPS) sets out a nationally shared vision for the ecologically sustainable management of Australia's forests. The policy statement upholds the principle that Australia's forests should be managed for everyone. In the NFPS, Australian, State and Territory Governments accepted that:

“the public and private native forest estate will be managed for the broad range of commercial and non-commercial benefits and values it can provide for present and future generations. Efficiently and sustainably managed public and private forests will provide the basis for nature conservation and maintaining forest biological diversity, and for regional economic development and employment opportunities in a wide range of sectors, including wood production from native and plantation forests, tourism and recreation, water supply, grazing and the pharmaceutical industry” (NFPS 1992, page 6).

Regional Forest Agreements (RFA) are an outcome of the NFPS. RFAs are afforded a legislative context by the *Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002* (Cth) (RFA Act). The key objectives of the RFA Act, relevant to WA's forest management system, are:

- to give effect to certain obligations of the Commonwealth under RFAs; and
- to give effect to certain aspects of the NFPS.

The WA RFA is a long-term bilateral agreement between the WA and Australian Governments originally signed on 4 May 1999 and extended for a further 20 years, together with introducing a rolling life for the agreement. The process to extend the WA RFA was completed with the signing of the Deed of Variation in March 2019.

The RFA is a framework document that is underpinned by the Forest Management System (FMS) in WA. The RFA's key principles are:

- ecologically sustainable forest management (the management of forest on all land tenures to maintain the overall capacity of forests to provide goods, protect biodiversity, and protect the full suite of forest values at the regional level);
- certainty for conservation of the environment and heritage values (through the establishment and maintenance of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system); and
- certainty of resource access for the forestry industry.

The *Deed of Variation in Relation to the Regional Forest Agreement for the South-West Forest Region of Western Australia* (hereafter WA RFA) was agreed between the Commonwealth of Australia and the State of Western Australia. The WA RFA is divided into Parts. Part 1 applies to the whole agreement, Part 2 is not intended to create legally binding relations, while Part 3 is intended to create legally binding relations.

Clauses 71-73, 75, 76 and 80 occur within Part 2 of the WA RFA and relate to industry stability, including references to timber yield and ecologically sustainable forest management.

Also in Part 2, Clause 67D was introduced in 2019 to acknowledge that forests would be managed with regard to climate change, adaptation and carbon and in particular that changes may be required in forest management to build resilience and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Clause 67D includes acknowledgement of the need to manage forests so as to maintain or enhance the contribution of managed forests to the carbon cycle. This includes plantation forests within the RFA region, which will include some areas of new plantation pine being established under the Government's \$350 million program.

One of the forest management activities that can be undertaken in response to the drying climate, is ecological thinning, a practice to support forest health and resilience as the landscape continues to become drier and warmer in the future.

Thinning involves reducing the number of trees within an area to reduce the current and future moisture stress on a site for an extended period. The defining feature of 'ecological' thinning at the stand or patch scale is the primary objective to increase resilience of the forest to climate change impacts and maintain forest ecosystem health. This remains nested within the landscape-scale objective of maintaining biodiversity conservation outcomes over the long-term.

Ecological thinning in particular, and also increased reservation, are consistent with Clause 67D given the elevated climate impacts experienced and forecast in the south-west forests.

The practice of ecological thinning will also allow for salvage and sale of wood products and the draft FMP 2024-2033 continues to support forest-based industries.

The policy announcement also accommodates the continued generation of timber from clearing of native vegetation for approved mining operations, such as bauxite mining. Timber and forest products from this vegetation clearing will continue to be made available to various sectors, including for firewood. It is important to note, however, that the policy direction is to promote forest health and climate resilience, not to meet a specific commercial volume of wood products.

Noting the reference in the petition to different environmental standards applied to mining as compared to the timber industry, as described in the draft FMP 2024-2033, mining approvals are not governed by the CALM Act or an FMP, nor do these instruments set rehabilitation completion criteria for mining operations.

Clause 88 is also in Part 2 and relates to research. There is no current or anticipated future inconsistency with this clause of the WA RFA.

Clause 95(b) occurs within Part 3 and relates to forest management, requiring that Western Australia “Implement, and where necessary make improvements to its Forest Management System.”

A forest management plan is a key document in Western Australia’s FMS. The current FMP guides management of the CAR reserve system, and State forest and timber reserves for multiple purposes, including wood production. The WA FMS continues to be implemented in its current form as reflected in the current FMP. It is noted that the FMS will require amendment following finalisation of the next FMP.

The manner in which the WA RFA continues is a matter for the Commonwealth and State to determine.

The manner in which the Government develops and implements policy is a matter for the Government of the day to determine.

Further information on aspects of the petition relating to forest product requirements and the timber industry may be sought from the Minister for Forestry.

The economic impact of the policy decision is being addressed through the development of the Native Forestry Just Transition Plan. The Just Transition Plan is being managed by the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation and will provide support to affected workers and businesses, drive further diversification of local economies and assist in identifying and securing sustainable job opportunities. The Just Transition Plan and the Native Forestry Transition Group both involve consultation with industry, the workforce and the community.

Further information on these elements of the policy decision may be sought from the Minister for Forestry.

Response to elements of the submission by the tabling Member

In response to Hon Dr Steve Thomas MLC's Question on Notice No. 902 on 11 October 2022, 120 reports and research papers that informed preparation of the draft FMP 2024-2033 were tabled in the Western Australian Parliament.