

Monday, April 14th 2014

VicForests moves away from clearfelling

VicForests will transition away from widespread clearfell harvesting in forests which are home to the Leadbeater's Possum, Victoria's faunal emblem.

The change was announced by the Minister for Agriculture and Food Security and the Minister for Environment and Climate Change following recommendations provided by the Leadbeater's Possum Advisory Group, and will come into effect from July 1st.

"Transitioning away from clearfell harvesting in the possum's home range is the biggest change to harvesting practices ever implemented by VicForests," Robert Green, VicForests' CEO, said.

"Retention harvesting will replace traditional clearfell methods in 50% of the area harvested across the Leadbeater's Possum's range beginning from July 1st 2014.

"Retention harvesting will mean additional areas are reserved, such as 'islands' of unharvested trees, to provide habitat and better connectivity for animals as well as assisting to establish older forest across the landscape.

"Adding retention harvesting to the suite of practices used in Victoria's forests will require a significant shift in the way we undertake our operations but will lead to better ecological outcomes.

"The use of clearfell harvesting has re-examined following the impact of recent landscape scale fires and retention techniques will now be employed to help protect and promote habitat for the Leadbeater's Possum.

"The success of retention harvesting will be assessed with a view to increasing its use right across the Possum's range in the future.

"Victoria has a world class system of National Parks and reserves which contain the majority of suitable habitat for the Leadbeater's Possum. No timber harvesting takes place in these reserves which cover almost 70% of the species' home range.

"The changes to harvesting practices announced today will protect even more of the area found in Victoria's working forests. Once set aside, these areas will never again be harvested.

"The new initiatives will work in conjunction with the extensive set of measures already in place to protect habitat found outside our world class national park and reserve system.

"These actions will have a direct, positive impact on the habitat available for the Leadbeater's Possum and are in addition to a 25% reduction in harvest levels in Victoria's ash forests announced by VicForests last year in response the impact of recent bushfires," Mr Green said.

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Mr Green said moving away from clearfelling is one of 13 recommendations made by the Leadbeater's Possum Advisory Group to help secure the future of the Possum.

"The Advisory Group has consulted with a diverse range of stakeholders during this process, a key step in developing a vision that creates a brighter future for our State faunal emblem," he said.

"Leadbeater's Possum detection sites will now be given four times more protection with a reserved area of 12 hectares to be placed around the site of all detections in the last 15 years, providing greater protection for individual possums and their colonies.

"A change to the definition of habitat zones will exclude additional areas from timber harvesting operations and there will be an expansion to the nest box program to provide further habitat options for the species.

"The recommendations put forward by the group also include a suite of actions to improve the quality of current and future habitat for the Possum including investigating ways to speed up the creation of tree hollows to developing future habitat more quickly.

"This process has been important in ensuring maintenance of our current Australian Forestry Standard certification and the outcomes will help us to formulate our next steps as we consider seeking Forest Stewardship Council certification.

"There remain challenges ahead but the recommendations developed by the group and endorsed by the Ministers provide a strong foundation to build for the future, both for biodiversity outcomes and a vibrant timber industry," Mr Green said.

A full list of the recommendations and a Technical Report can be found on the Department of Environment and Primary Industries website - <http://www.depi.vic.gov.au/environment-and-wildlife/wildlife/leadbeaters-possum>

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