

A new era for science in forest policy

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Australian forest policy is prime for an overhaul, and integrating research with decision making is a crucial piece of that puzzle, Rod Keenan writes.

Australian forests are an important global asset. They are extensive, varied and complex and provide many different values, often generating conflict between those with different views on forest management.

Forest governance is complex. Different processes have been used to bring science into decision-making with varying success.

Forests are facing new challenges, but also new opportunities, with growing global demand for wood products and recognition of the role of forests in addressing climate change.

It is time for a new era of forest policy and better integration of science into policy to inform debate over the future management of our forests.

Australia has over 134 million hectares of forests, about 3.5 per cent of the global area. Forests continue to be cleared for agriculture or urban areas, or are lost due to fire or drought. From 1990 to 2008 there was a net loss of forests. Since then, however, there has been a net gain.

The forest products sector generates considerable benefits. For the last few years, timber harvest has been increasing. Australian forests produce about 33 million cubic metres of wood per year, 88 per cent coming from 2 million hectares of forest plantations.

The contribution of forestry and logging to the economy has doubled in the last 10 years, while the value of wood and paper manufacturing has dropped. In short, we are exporting more woodchips and raw logs and importing more manufactured timber products.

Clearly, forests and their management are important, but they face various challenges. Forests generate strong emotional responses, linked to identity, place and our relationship with nature, and conflict over forests has existed from the early days of European settlement.

From the 1970s, conflict has been between environmental interests and timber industries and communities over-harvesting in native forests, expanding in the 1980s to concerns about the expansion of plantation forests on farmland.

Historically, forests have primarily been a state responsibility. The federal government became more involved after 1945, initially providing loans to the states for softwood plantations, and later using foreign affairs and export control powers to achieve

conservation outcomes in Queensland rainforests and in Tasmania, often clashing with the states in the process.

The Hawke Government's Resource Assessment Commission Inquiry was a model for the use of science for national policy, with a report in 1992 informing the National Forest Policy Statement agreed by all states and the Commonwealth in 1995.

This set out objectives for the future of all Australian forests, including provision for Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs).

Following a major blockade of Parliament by timber industry workers in 1995, the Keating Government accelerated Comprehensive Regional Assessments to improve the evidence base and to develop RFAs for key regions.

Despite these extensive assessments, knowledge of biodiversity values across forest landscapes remains limited, making planning approaches like land-use zoning problematic. Climate change and complex species dynamics further increase this challenge.

RFA decisions generally involved political trade-offs. They were meant to provide stability, end debates over conservation, and give the timber industry resource security, but arrangements quickly unravelled. State governments unilaterally expanded conservation reserves and further reduced native forest wood supply.

Forests also became a critical part of climate policy. Reduced forest clearing and increased plantations meant Australia met its Kyoto Protocol emissions reduction targets.

Most of the Emissions Reduction Fund, now the world's largest forest carbon market, has gone to projects to protect or regenerate private native forests in Queensland and NSW or to change burning practices in savannah forests in northern Australia.

With more public forests in conservation reserves, and state plantations privatised, forest agencies were downsized and forest policy capacity in state and federal governments declined. Policy responsibilities are now fragmented and unclear.

Few policymakers these days understand the sector, often seeing forests in terms of conflict, either with environmental interests, or with agriculture.

Industry and governments have slashed research, with only about 20 per cent of scientists now working in this field compared to 15 years ago. More forest research is happening in universities but it is often knowledge-driven, or focused on personal research agendas, and not designed to inform policy.

Since the signing of RFAs, science advice has been ad-hoc: using temporary expert advisory panels or task forces, or contracted consultants or researchers. This has not provided a consistent, well-designed knowledge base.

The Federal Government is now, however, providing funds for regional forest industry hubs. Working with states, this investment could support new organisations to better link research and policy.

These long-term, regional 'boundary organisations', involving government, industry, researchers, and the community, could be a forum for dialogue on landscape-scale solutions to future challenges, such as climate change impacts or wood supply options.

One example in Colorado brings together researchers and land managers to design forest landscape restoration.

Policymakers and practitioners can set the research agenda and ensure research outputs meet policy and practice needs. These regional partnerships could support more resilient, productive and ecologically functional forests, and a forest products sector, in meeting the future needs of Australian society.

The past 15 years has essentially been a period of 'benign neglect' for forest policy. We can do better. Forests are facing new challenges, but also new opportunities. It is time for a new era, with better science-policy processes to inform forest policy decisions.

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