

Bushfire protection focus to grow SA forestry industry

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Calls for a state-wide audit and upgrade of South Australia's fire tower network are among recommendations listed in a comprehensive forest industry report released yesterday.

The state's \$2.3 million forest and wood products sector also urged the government to boost community based fire services across outer metropolitan, regional and rural South Australia.

The suggestions, prompted by a devastating bushfire season, are among a raft of recommendations made by the peak Forest Industry Advisory Council of South Australia in its bid to strengthen and grow the sector.

Council chair Wendy Fennell said the industry report focused on ways to expand plantations and double the economic value of the South Australian domestic forest manufacturing industry by 2050.

"The South Australian forest and wood products industry is working to make the most of recent international competitiveness and strong domestic demand," she said.

Fennell pointed to investment in major processing facilities in the South East near Mount Gambier and a proposal for a new wharf to service timber plantations on Kangaroo Island.

"(However), even with the long term positive outlook for the industry, there are still challenges to overcome," she said.

“Increasing the availability of log will be essential to the ongoing investment in, and competitiveness of, timber processing. It increases economies of scale, which flows through to efficiencies in other parts of the value chain such as biomass, harvesting and haulage.”

The State Government established the advisory council in December 2018, to hear directly from forest owners, forest managers, harvest and haulage, small timber manufacturers, large timber manufacturers, timber biomass and farm forestry.

South’s Australia’s industry is plantation-based in two National Plantation Inventory regions: the Mount Lofty Ranges and Kangaroo Island (including the Mid North); and the Green Triangle in the state’s South East and into western Victoria.

According to figures from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, South Australia’s plantation estate is around 172,000 hectares.

It represents about 12 per cent of softwood (*Pinus radiata*) and five per cent of hardwood (mainly *Eucalyptus globulus*) plantations in Australia.

Fire is recognised in the report as a risk to plantations and the surrounding community, worsened by challenges with rubbish dumping, arson, adjacent land management and dry climatic conditions.

“Each year the plantation sector spends millions of dollars on fire management,” the report states.

This includes buying fire equipment, investing in firebreak construction, plantation design and fire infrastructure like water points, to minimise losses to both plantations and the community.

Forest Owners Conference (FOC) members in the state’s Green Triangle in the South East have a bushfire fleet with a total water carrying capacity of over 327 kilolitres and forestry staff trained to detect and fight fires.

On an extreme fire danger day, 250 trained personnel are required to fully utilise the industry’s fire equipment – out of a total pool of over 350 personnel, the report said.

“The FOC also invests in fire detection with four FOC members having fire towers for rapid detection, supported by an industry sponsored spotter aircraft deployed to detect fires and provide accurate fire locations across the region on bad fire days and after lightning storms.”

“While the Government no longer directly manages plantation assets in the Limestone Coast and the Mid North, it still has a crucial role to support community fire prevention and suppression,” the report said.

“The Government should maintain legislation that supports landholders upholding their fire risk mitigation responsibilities, well-managed prescribed burning programs in parks and

private land, and research to advance industry and community best practice in mitigation, detection and rapid response.”

Other recommendations include promoting the industry, looking at water usage and licensing, cross-border arrangements, biosecurity, infrastructure and transport, and research and training.

Minister for Primary Industries and Regional Development Tim Whetstone said the government would now consider the report.

“South Australia’s forest industry is an important economic driver for the state – this is particularly so in the Green Triangle region, one of Australia’s premier softwood timber producing regions,” Whetstone said.

“Given the unprecedented events this year, I believe this feedback is also timely as the sector and the regional communities that support it start to look to recover from last summer’s devastating bushfires and the effects of COVID-19 on markets.”

Regional Showcase is supporting South Australia’s rural communities by telling their stories and celebrating their successes. We will compile these stories and then later in the year we will celebrate the best of South Australia’s regions at a special showcase event.

Source: <https://indaily.com.au/events/regional-showcase/2020/05/28/bushfire-protection-focus-to-grow-sa-forestry-industry/>