

Decision to renew Victorian logging agreements criticised after summer bushfires

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The Victorian government has extended five regional forest agreements, which exempt the logging industry from conservation laws. Photograph: Melanie Stetson Freeman/Getty Images

A federal and Victorian government decision to extend agreements that exempt the logging industry from conservation laws has sparked calls for the state to explain how it will boost wildlife protection in the wake of the summer's devastating bushfires.

The state government posted five updated regional forest agreements (RFAs), covering native forest logging in different parts of the state, online late on Wednesday.

In a [statement on its environment department website](#), the government said it had modernised the 20-year-old agreements to allow "sustainable management and use of Victoria's forests" until 2030. It said changes to the RFAs recognised a [commitment by the premier, Dan Andrews, in November](#) to immediately protect old-growth forests, and would allow "more timely interventions" to protect threatened species.

Conservationists and environmental lawyers said the changes did not go far enough, and risked being disastrous for both the environment and timber workers.

Legal organisation Environmental Justice Australia said the agreements had been renewed without properly considering what the fires meant for wildlife. EJA's chief executive, Brendan Sydes, said it was a "massive failure of leadership" by both tiers of government.

"They should have said the regional forestry agreement framework is no longer adequate to deal with the conflict between biodiversity values and logging," Sydes said. "If they were not going to phase out logging immediately, they should have moved to assessing it on a case-by-case basis under the EPBC [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation] Act."

A report released by EJA this week says the bushfires severely affected more than 3m hectares of parks and reserves set aside to protect the environment, and demands a shift in policy.

The fires followed the Andrews government announcing in November it would immediately protect 90,000 hectares of old-growth forest and set aside a further 96,000 hectares of native forest to save the threatened greater glider. Andrews said native forest supply agreements would be extended to 2024, when a \$120m package for businesses and workers would kick in ahead of a 2030 end to native forest logging.

At the time, the premier warned native timber supply was already down about 50% in a decade, and that a large bushfire might hasten the industry's end. He reiterated the point [on ABC radio](#) as bushfires burned in January.

Victoria's environment minister, Lily D'Ambrosio, this week said the updated RFAs would strengthen protection of wildlife and biodiversity, and meant the state was better able to respond to major events, such as the summer's bushfires.

"They recognise the pressures facing our forests right now and will enable us to adapt our management approach accordingly," she said.

Three forestry organisations – the Victorian Association of Forest Industries, the Australian Forest Products Association, and the Australian Forest Contractors Association – said they ["cautiously welcomed"](#) the RFAs extension as it provided some relief for the industry after it was hit by bushfires and the planned phase out.

The federal agriculture department, which is responsible for forestry, said the updated RFAs took into account the impact of the bushfires through a "major event" clause. "This provision triggers a review of the impacts of major events, including bushfires," a department spokesman said.

The Wilderness Society called on the state government to immediately invoke the major event clause and review logging practices in light of the fire damage.

Amelia Young, the society's national campaigns manager, said a [two-year review](#) of the RFAs had shown the public expected native forests to be managed in a way that reflected all their values, including water supply and carbon storage.

"Logging clearly cannot go on as before," Young said. "Now, given the bushfires, and the uncertainty for species and for the industry, a major event review is warranted, timely and critical for community, forests and industry to recover."

Janet Rice, forests spokeswoman for the Australian Greens, said none of the changes in the updated RFAs – including major event reviews, tighter timelines for assessing impact on threatened species and improved consultation with traditional owners – were strong enough.

She said their extension would fast-track extinctions and the climate emergency.

"We've seen this before," she said. "The original agreements said that they had provisions to protect our animals and conduct reviews, but logging has continued as business-as-usual in the 22 years since the agreements have been in force, bringing many forest animals closer and closer to extinction."

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/apr/03/decision-to-renew-victorian-logging-agreements-criticised-after-summer-bushfires>