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* * * MEDIA RELEASE * * *

Tuesday 26th of August 1997.

WALK OUT BY ENVIRONMENT GROUPS OVER GOVERNMENT FAILURE ON FORESTS.

Victorian and National Environment Groups have today announced their intention to withdraw from talks aimed at producing the State's second RFA covering the Central Highlands forest region, north east of Melbourne. As a consequence of their withdrawal, the groups are returning to the government a \$10 000 participation grant.

Despite the protests at Goolengook and attempts to engage the Victorian Government in discussions aimed at improving the process for the Central Highlands, it is clear that these efforts have fallen on deaf ears. As a consequence, the Central Highlands RFA is set to repeat the problems in East Gippsland, namely;

- Fixed contracts to supply industry with unsustainable volumes of timber have predetermined the options for forest conservation. The Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act 1996 legislatively guarantees a prescribed level of timber to the AMCOR company until 2030.
- Highly productive commercial wet forests (also of extremely high conservation value) have been assessed in a way which will minimise the area protected.
- The area of rainforest has been underestimated and will continue to be damaged and ultimately destroyed through deliberate attempts to disguise them by calling them something else. The RFA process also ignores the role that surrounding wet forests play in rainforest protection.
- The needs of many 'old growth' dependant animals have been ignored. For example, the habitat requirements of the Greater Glider have not been taken into consideration.
- World Heritage assessment has been delayed by a lengthy process designed to minimise the area protected.

Note:
RFA = Regional Forest Agreement.

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Requests to improve the openness and accountability of the work being done (along the lines of NSW and QLD) have been rejected. Instead, the Victorian RFA's are produced behind closed doors, with only token consultation out in the corridors.

It is clear that the Victorian government regards the RFA process as a means of justifying the status quo, using poor science to bolster logging interests and by underestimating genuine conservation needs.

On this basis environment groups are rejecting the Central Highlands RFA process and will go back to community education and other forms of grass roots campaigning. In particular we will aim to encourage people to use their consumer power to support those companies that don't log high conservation value forests.

In 1994, Victorian environment groups put forward a comprehensive proposal for a world class National Park in the Central Highlands. On the basis of the direction of the Central Highlands RFA, this vision will fade into obscurity.

The Victorian National Parks Association supports the actions taken by the groups in their rejection and withdrawal from the Central Highlands RFA.

The Federal and State governments have let Victorians down badly through their approach to forest protection. Future generations will ultimately be the judges of these acts of folly by our political leaders.

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For further information contact :

Dr. Rod Anderson : Environment Victoria (0414) 489 044, Virginia Young : The Wilderness Society (0417) 223 280, Jim Downey : Australian Conservation Foundation (039) 926 6701 or (018) 360 423, Cam Walker : Friends of the Earth (039) 419 8700 .

Please find attached a fact sheet developed by Environment Victoria outlining our concerns regarding the Regional Forest Agreement process in Victoria,

The Press Conference will be held at the base of the 'Shot Tower' in Clifton Hill where Goolengook protester, Bear Glasson, maintains a vigil for the forest.

When : 11.00 am Tuesday 26th of August 1997.

Where : The Shot Tower (cnr Alexandra Parade and Copper Lane, Clifton Hill - Melways Ref. 2C G4)

Attachment

What's wrong with the Victorian Regional Forest Agreement process.

Biological Criteria :

- Are based upon the 'JANIS' reserve criteria developed for the RFA process. These criteria permit the continued logging of irreplaceable Old Growth and Wilderness forests. Environment groups do not accept that logging these irreplaceable resources is in accordance with the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development

- Are based upon poor national reserve criteria which suggest that the protection of 15% of pre European vegetation levels is a fair minimum standard for each class of native vegetation. It therefore follows that government can point to a globally unique region such as East Gippsland and say that there is plenty in reserves, log the rest.

- Are based on poor science and inadequate knowledge of threatened species. The decision by the present State Government to abolish the requirement for pre logging flora and fauna surveys undermines the credibility of statements that logging is ecologically sustainable. As an example, the East Gippsland RFA confirmed that -

1. "knowledge of the detailed impacts of forest operations on flora and fauna is generally uncertain."

2. There is "a lack of detailed knowledge on distribution of species and on impacts of land management."

- In regard to the Central Highlands, the needs of only a few possum species have been considered. The Greater Glider appears to be heading down the same path as the Leadbeater's in the Central Highlands, through the logging of habitat; however no mention is made of the needs of gliders. In relation to Leadbeater's, it is interesting to note that no mention is made of the work and recommendations of the world's leading expert on Leadbeater's - Dr. David Lindenmeyer.

- In regard to the Central Highlands, previous fauna survey work has not been subject to spatial modeling to determine species needs. This effectively has meant that the survey results have been ignored.

- The use of abstract statistical modelling such as the 'stratification model' are used to cover an appalling lack of recent flora and fauna survey work. This approach produces glossy, well packaged documents which on closer inspection reveal errors in map scaling, nonsensical classifications and vast areas that have never been surveyed. The overall impression is that these glossy documents are more of a PR exercise than a serious analysis, hastily thrown together as part of an elaborate snow job on the community.

Resource Criteria :

- Unrealistically high volumes of timber to be extracted from the Central Highlands were locked into place prior to the RFA process - if a new reserve is created, another must be discarded.
- The passage of the Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act 1996 further entrenched the Timber Industry in the Central Highlands prior to the development of the RFA. The Forest Act is an Agreement between the State Government and the Amcor company. The Amcor Forest Area covers approximately half of the Central Highlands RFA State Forests. The Agreement permits the company to continue to extract timber from this area until 2030. This pre-empted the findings of a review of the conservation requirements for the area.
- Although timber extraction volumes are fixed in the medium term through contractually binding agreements, protection for threatened species are not. Instead, critical habitat for threatened species are protected through 'Special Protection Zones', these zones can be returned to logging at any time.
- Independent scientists have stated that the Government's 'sustainable yield' figures were wrong when they were last reviewed in the 1980's. Within the East Gippsland RFA, the method for determining 'sustainable yield' was described as "unreliable", as having "a lack of basic resource data", and concluded that "the principal concern is that of an overestimate of volume, leading to a possible inability to sustain production."
- Forest Management under the RFA is meant to be consistent with the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM). Unfortunately, there will be no monitoring of ESFM for a further 5 years. In the reports provided to date on the Central Highlands, the sections covering ESFM do not even consider alternatives to clear fell logging. This is despite years of research having been devoted to seeking alternatives to this ecologically destructive practice.

Participation and outcomes :

- The conservation outcome in East Gippsland was very poor. As a result of the RFA, an additional 0.2% of East Gippsland's forests were placed in secure reserves. Of the 13 000 hectares of forest claimed to be in new reserves, approximately 5000 hectares are in transitory reserves and the 5700 hectares at Martin's Creek can have the Very Fast Train (VFT) routed through it. In 1995, 30 000 hectares of forest were deferred from logging under the Deferred Forest areas moratorium in East Gippsland, of that only 2300 hectares were granted secure protection.
- A transparent and accountable process for peer review of the science underpinning the RFA process has been absent. For example, the 'independent peer review' of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management in East Gippsland was conducted by Ian Ferguson. Interestingly, Mr Ferguson also wrote the report.

- Public and community group consultation has been a mere formality. There has been no consultation on the content or methodology of any of the reports produced as part of the Central Highlands reports produced as part of the RFA process.
- There has been a total failure to properly protect World Heritage and National Estate values outside existing reserves. The East Gippsland RFA was rushed through before the completion of the World Heritage Assessment.
- The opportunity for the Amcor company to transfer their forestry operations to utilise existing public and private plantations in the region and to increase recycling to take pressure off native flora and fauna will be lost if the RFA entrenches native forest logging in the Central Highlands.

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