

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT OF TIMBER PRODUCTION ON PUBLIC LAND 2003

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BACKGROUND

EPA Victoria is responsible for appointing independent environmental auditors to undertake environmental audits of forestry on public land. The audits are undertaken to ensure compliance of timber harvesting operations with the Code of Forest Practices for Timber Production – Revision No. 2, 1996 (code).

The code lays down Statewide goals and guidelines that apply to timber harvesting operations. It aims to ensure that timber harvesting is undertaken efficiently, with care, and that the environmental, social and cultural values are protected. The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) administers the application of the code on public land.

FOREST AUDIT 2003

This is the first audit of forestry operations conducted by an independent auditor using Victoria's environmental audit system. It is also the first time a comprehensive assessment of forestry operations has been undertaken against all the guidelines contained within the code.

The audit assessed 30 coupes, in four forest management areas (FMAs) in Victoria, harvested during the 2002-03 operational year. The audited FMA's were Central Gippsland, East Gippsland, Central (near Alexandra) and Portland. The audit

was undertaken during June and July 2003 and assessed approximately 7 per cent of the 455 coupes harvested on public land in Victoria during 2002-03.

VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT SYSTEM

An environmental audit system has operated in Victoria since 1989, and has led a national movement for auditing environmental performance and the condition of the environment.

The *Environment Protection Act 1970* provides for the statutory appointment of environmental auditors and their responsibilities, to ensure that high quality, rigorous environmental audits are conducted by appropriately qualified professionals.

Many organisations are now using environmental audit to assist in assessing the condition of the environment they manage (or can influence), prioritise actions to reduce risks to the environment as a result of their activities or to demonstrate accountability to third parties.

An environmental audit must be able to deliver authoritative advice, upon which individuals and organisations are able to rely in making decisions which affect the future of our community. The audit system has traditionally been applied in the management of industrial facilities and contaminated land but is being used increasingly in natural resource management.

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AUDIT TEAM

Appointed environmental auditors are highly qualified and skilled individuals with extensive experience in environmental science and or engineering as well as environmental auditing. They are supported by a team of experts who provide assistance in areas outside the auditor's main field of expertise. Dr David Telford undertook the 2003 forest audit and was assisted by a team with expertise in ecology, soils and forestry.

AUDIT REPORT

The report provides information on and recommendations from the audit including the selection of coupes for audit, the assessment methodology applied, details compliance on each coupe, identifies particular issues found on coupes and provides an assessment of compliance across the range of code focus areas. In addition, the report contains the measurements used to determine compliance of features such as roads, snig tracks and streamside reserves.

Copies of the report and background information are available at the EPA website www.epa.vic.gov.au or by contacting the email address forestry.audit@epa.vic.gov.au.

REPORT SUMMARY

The average coupe compliance against relevant code guidelines was determined to be 87 per cent. The highest coupe score was 96 per cent and the lowest was 51 per cent. The code guidelines were also grouped into 16 focus areas representing the various components of the harvesting operation

(such as wood utilisation planning, roading and reserved area protection).

A high level of code compliance was achieved in the areas of wood utilisation planning, water yield protection, snig and forwarding tracks and roading.

There were areas where more consistent issues of non-compliance with the code were found including aspects of coupe planning, log landing and dump rehabilitation, habitat tree marking and reserved area protection.

Additional non-compliance was found concerning the identification and protection of rainforest and in the East Gippsland FMA in relation to boundary tracks, roading and snig and forwarding tracks.

The auditor also found two areas where current practices had developed beyond the code. The first was the use of cording (logs) and matting (bark) on landings and snig tracks within a coupe with the aim of reducing compaction and soil disturbance. The second was the use of private forest operations managers (FOMs) in East Gippsland, employed by the harvesting companies, to supervise harvesting operations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 15 recommendations identified in the audit report are shown below.

Audit Recommendations
1. Improve the method and control of boundary track installation by DSE operators, in particular with the crossing of protected areas and filter strips and the quality of cross-drain construction.
2. Amend the management prescriptions to clearly specify the appropriate reference point for measurement of rainforest extent viz, the canopy or bole of the trees and gaps between sections of canopy.

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Audit Recommendations
3. Promulgate a consistent approach to and provide further training in rainforest identification.
4. Ensure that all buffer and filter strips are clearly marked at the correct width on the coupe using tape colours consistent with the coupe plan.
5. Fully complete coupe plans and include the maximum slope on which harvesting operations may be conducted
6. Mark all roads on the coupe maps and identify as being either temporary or permanent to facilitate planning and identification of road rehabilitation requirements.
7 Mark the location of landings and roads on all coupe maps using a legend that is consistent for all FMAs.
8. Provide allowance in coupe plans for consideration of prevailing soil types in setting buffer widths.
9. Forest operations managers should be made accountable for code compliance through appropriate mechanisms.
10. Finalise and promulgate guidelines for use of cording and matting. Incorporate allowance for this process in snig track cross-draining requirements of the code.
11. Better implement the selection, marking and protection of habitat trees.
12. Provide consistent understanding of requirements for temporary road closure rehabilitation requirements.
13. Bring cull trees to the ground in a manner that minimises soil disturbance.
14. Provide for rehabilitation of convergent snig tracks to the same standard as required for log landings. This should be undertaken where areas of soil compaction have resulted from machinery traffic
15. Develop a guideline for slash minimisation to assist Forest Officers with determining acceptable levels of slash in filter strips.

CONSULTATION

EPA met with relevant statewide stakeholders at the start of and during the conduct of the audit, including representatives from conservation groups and the timber industry. Also, EPA and the auditor met with interested regional stakeholders and held field days to explain the process of audit.

In addition, EPA is maintaining a website and an electronic mailbox where people can find out more about the audit process, register their interest or ask questions about the audit.

As the report is based on assessments undertaken by the auditor of timber of a sample of harvesting operations on public land, there is not the need to take submissions on the report. However, there is the opportunity for people to comment on the report to assist the development of next year's program.

Comments can be sent to

forestry.audit@epa.vic.gov.au or the Environmental Audit Unit at EPA Victoria.

FOREST AUDIT 2004

The forest audit program will continue in 2004. EPA Victoria will meet with stakeholders and interested community groups to discuss the outcomes of the audit and help establish the directions for the next audit program.