

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT OF TIMBER PRODUCTION ON PUBLIC LAND 2004

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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 and with care, and that the appropriate 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 2004

This second audit of code compliance using Victoria's environmental audit system assessed operations on 35 completed coupes, one active coupe and two sections of new or upgraded roads in five forest management areas in Victoria. This is the first time an active coupe has been assessed as part of this audit program against all the guidelines in the code. The audited forest management areas (FMAs) were Central Gippsland, Tambo, Central (near Alexandra), North East and Otway.

The audit was undertaken during May and June 2004 and assessed approximately eight per cent of the 418 coupes harvested on public land in Victoria during 2003–04.

The audit also included assessment of application of Section 2.3.7 of the code relating to the process of rainforest protection in the Central Highlands Forest Management Plan (FMP).

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 the setting of their responsibilities, to ensure that high-quality, rigorous environmental audits are conducted by appropriately qualified professionals.

Many organisations are now using environmental audits to assist in assessing the condition of the environment they manage (or can influence), to prioritise actions that 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

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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 resources.

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 and 2004 forest audits 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 and the assessment methodology applied. It 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, <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/>, or by contacting the email address forestry.audit@epa.vic.gov.au.

REPORT SUMMARY

The score achieved for code compliance was 90 per cent. An average score of 98 per cent was achieved for the two roadlines and a score of 97 per cent was achieved for the active coupe.

The highest coupe score was 99 per cent and the lowest was 70 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 coupe planning, wood utilisation planning, water yield protection, camp and maintenance sites, and litter removal.

Areas of the code in which there had been more persistent instances of non-compliance were elements of coupe planning, log landing and snig track rehabilitation, habitat tree protection and marking, and reserved area and rainforest protection.

The pattern of non-compliance was influenced by regional differences in coupe rehabilitation practices and code interpretation with respect to coupe map preparation, special protection zone (SPZ) and filter protection, coupe marking and habitat tree protection.

The audit identified examples of good application of code requirements, with instances of forest officers providing habitat islands, maintaining detailed coupe diaries and working closely with harvesting contractors to minimise general harvesting impacts within the coupe.

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The sections of road which were assessed demonstrated a high level of compliance with code requirements, with considerable care having been taken with the road alignment and waterway protection in the vicinity of a stream crossing.

The process of definition, management and protection of rainforest in Central Highlands FMA met the audit criteria.

Inclusion of an active coupe in the audit program provided an opportunity to assess compliance with code requirements at a time when the harvesting operations are under way at the coupe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The audit identified areas of the code for which there was a low rate of compliance and elements of the code that could be amended to facilitate compliance.

The audit report identified nine recommendations to improve compliance with the code and increase environmental performance of timber harvesting operations on public land.

DSE's written response to these recommendations are included in the full audit report.

Audit Recommendations
1. Ensure that all coupe plans contain coupe maps with annotation that complies with the code and are consistently applied across all FMAs.
2. Assess the efficacy of different log landing rehabilitation processes in the various forest and soil types to provide optimal regeneration conditions.
3. Develop and promulgate more specific requirements for boundary track and fire trail construction to confine impacts of construction to within the coupe boundary.
4. Examine fertilizer application practices during coupe regeneration with the aim of minimising the potential for fertilizer to be carried into waterways.
5. Provide field staff with further awareness of DSE procedures for identification and management of ecological vegetation communities identified for protection in legislation, FMPs or policy, such as Montane Riparian Thicket.
6. Provide field staff with further awareness of code and Utilisation Procedures restrictions on falling of trees into and across filter strips and the minimisation of soil disturbance during their removal.
7. Ensure, in areas where there are no existing habitat trees that retention of potential habitat trees occurs and that these are recorded on coupe plans.
8. Include a greater proportion of active coupes in future audit programs to enable assessment of operations with code compliance during different stages of the coupe harvesting process.
9. Develop a robust process for rezoning of SPZs to ensure that the attributes recorded in the zoning scheme register are, in fact, absent from that area.

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 audit process.

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 the auditor's assessment of a sample of public land timber harvesting operations there is no need to take submissions on the report. However, people can 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 2005

The forest audit program will continue in 2005. 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.