|  |
| --- |
| Forest Audit Program |
| The Conservation Regulator’s Response to 2021 (FY 2019/20) Recommendations Timber Harvesting Compliance Unit |

Each year, the Office of the Conservation Regulator (Conservation Regulator) commissions an independent environmental audit, known as the Forest Audit Program, to assess the compliance of VicForests’ timber harvesting operations against the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 (the Code) and the incorporated Management Standards and Procedures for Timber Harvesting Operations in Victoria’s State Forests 2014 (MSP). These audits are conducted under section 47 of the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004*, where the Minister (for Energy, Environment and Climate Change) may ask an appropriately qualified person to audit the compliance of timber harvesting operations on public land with any relevant code of practice relating to timber harvesting. The Forest Audit Program (FAP) is an integral tool for ensuring continuous improvement of both on-ground timber harvesting practices and the systems, processes and regulatory instruments which govern it. Such a process is integral for minimising the future risk of environmental harm.

The FAP is a risk-based, intelligence-lead program, with the selection of forestry coupes stratified upon the presence of important environmental values and high-risk features or activities (including steep slopes, erosive soils, waterway crossings and significant soil disturbance) within Victoria’s State forests.

The 2021 (2019/20) FAP focused on five important compliance themes:

* Environmental Compliance
* Roading Compliance
* Infrastructure Compliance
* Coupe Planning Compliance
* Forest Regeneration Compliance

The 2021 audit made recommendations for improvement to both VicForests and DELWP. Two recommendations were provided to DELWP, which highlight potential improvements to the regulatory framework for timber harvesting and opportunities to collaborate with VicForests to ensure improved environmental outcomes. DELWP’s response to these recommendations is provided below.

For further information please visit our [Conservation Regulator website](https://www.vic.gov.au/conservation-regulator) or contact us on 136 186.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Auditor’s** **Recommendation** | **Rationale** | **DELWP’s response** |
| **D-01** **Medium priority**: That DELWP review and reconsider limits on slash piles (currently 10 m3 MSP 7.2.4.2), particularly for rough heaping operations. | Rough heaping is the pushing by machinery of logging slash (predominantly) into heaps or windrows. The heaps may or may not be subsequently burnt. The burning of forest debris from timber harvesting operations can result in very high temperatures on the soil surface for prolonged periods. In addition to other mechanical disturbances this has the potential increase the mineralisation of nutrients in the soil.  While the limits on the size of bark and slash piles (MSP 7.2.4.2) may be appropriate in the context of landings, they are not necessarily feasible for rough heaping operations. The latter typically form windrows with much greater volume than allowed by MSP 7.2.4.2. Limiting piles to 10 m3/4 m2 would be difficult for operations with large volumes of unmerchantable wood for which regeneration burns are not practicable.  Under different circumstances, disturbance and burning can increase the mineralisation of nutrients. One of the short-term effects of slash burning is to increase the availability of plant nutrients. However, on sites of inherently low fertility there are some concerns about the potential long-term effects of slash burning. | The Victorian Government has committed to modernising the management of Victoria’s Forests. Victoria’s via several initiatives. This includes a comprehensive review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 (amended 2021).  **Completion Date:** DELWP will lead a comprehensive review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 (amended 2021) which will conclude by December 2023. Audit recommendations will be considered as part of this review. |
| **D-02 Medium priority**:That during its forthcoming major review of the Code and MSPs, DELWP: Clarify the wording of revised MSP clauses 4.3.9.1 and 4.3.9.2 to explicitly address rainforest stands >0.4 ha in area located in Central Highlands and Gippsland FMAs that are not Rainforest Sites of Significance. Include a table linked to MSP clauses 7.2.2.1 and 7.2.3.3 that specifies maximum distances between snig track and boundary track drainage structures, based on slope and soil erosion hazard. | Although DELWP’s recent minor review of the Code (2021) and MSPs addressed some issues previously identified in FAP reports, issues relating to these specific clauses were not included. The proposed major review of the Code and MSPs provides an opportunity to address these two important shortcomings:   * MSP4.3.9.1 and 4.3.9.2: recent modifications to these clauses do not address one of the deficiencies in their original wording, namely that they do not directly address buffer requirements for the particular class of rainforest stand referenced in our recommendation. * Snig and boundary track drainage spacing: the MSPs do not currently specify drainage structure spacing on rehabilitated snig and boundary tracks in the way they do for drainage on in-coupe roads (i.e., via MSP Table 21). Given the relatively high frequency of non-conformance with VicForests standards for drainage structure spacing observed over several audits and the potential for this to lead to soil movement and (less commonly) sediment deposition into waterways, it is suggested that these standards be elevated as mandatory compliance elements during the current process of amending the Code and MSPs. | The Victorian Government has committed to modernising the management of Victoria’s Forests. Victoria’s via several initiatives. This includes a comprehensive review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 (amended 2021) by December 2023.  **Completion Date:** DELWP will lead a comprehensive review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 (amended 2021) which will conclude by December 2023. Audit recommendations will be considered as part of this review. |