

THE GREAT FOREST SELL-OFF

Rumours are spreading that the Victorian cabinet has agreed to the privatisation of Victorian Plantation Corporation (VPC) in the very near future. It is also feared that this will lead the way for complete state forest privatisation, perhaps as soon as mid 1998.

The VPC was created by the state government in 1993 to manage state owned plantations. It was formed as an off-shoot of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) and corporatised. Corporatisation involves Government Trading Enterprises becoming government owned corporations with ownership and control of the business and infrastructure assets with the government who receive a dividend. Governments believe that the benefits of corporatisation are a movement toward forests being market driven and enhancing accountability of Government Trading Enterprises. Privatisation takes corporatisation one step further with the sale of the corporation to private companies.

Already in Western Australia the big timber firm Whittakers has been brought out by Malaysian interests and Malaysian, Taiwanese and Japanese companies are looking at Tasmania in a big way. Friends of the Earth has also heard rumours that Midway, the export woodchippers based in Geelong have now joined with Nippon paper and Mitsui Industries to grow plantations in Victoria. While some people may say that as long as these companies keep to their plantations and out of native forests everything will be OK, however this point of view does not take into account a number of disturbing underlying issues.

In regards to the creation of VPC, the state government vested hundreds of thousands of hectares of public forests throughout the state with the VPC. Much of this land is existing pine plantations and hardwood plantations, but a large proportion of the land that was granted to VPC is native bush, road reserves, rainforest gullies, old growth and re-growth forest.

As a corporation, VPC is under much less public scrutiny than the DNRE. It will now be permissible for VPC to clear native bush on private land in order to establish plantations by obtaining a permit from a local shire, whereas on public land this is not permissible. On public land, the cleared forest would have to be regenerated with the species already existing there. This stipulation is now being side-stepped by VPC. Also under planta-

tion forestry rotation rates, logging will take place every 20-25 years, instead of the supposed 80 years for existing native forests (although in many areas this is much less), putting massive stress on soil, biodiversity and water quality. Increased rotations also mean more applications of chemicals in the form of pesticides and herbicides.

Who's managing the forests?

The 1996 redraft of the Code of Forest Practices defines VPC land as private land. This means that the supervising authority is not the state government, but the local council. FoE has had bad experiences with local councils being the management authority of forest operations. For instance in our prosecution of STY Afforestation in 1995 who were logging a water catchment that supplied 7 towns with water, we were informed that the local council hadn't been on the site for 8 years!

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Councils are ill equipped and under resourced to watch over small logging companies, let alone logging corporations. This is especially the case with recent council amalgamations. How will local councils be able to enforce proper forestry on additional hundreds of hectares of land now supposedly under VPC 'control'? Will local ratepayers be required to fund this huge task? Will councils be responsible to monitor private logging interests in the future or will these companies be totally out of bounds to all concerned eyes, even the governments? Locals in the Strezleckis' already claim that logging roads are being closed to everyone except VPC staff. It has also been said that VPC recently pulled out of a water quality panel in Gippsland consisting of the EPA, Australian Paper, DNRE, West Gippsland Catchment Authority and Lake Wellington and Rivers Management Authority. Apparently VPC don't think that water quality issues are worth their consideration in the Strezleckis at the current time, probably because there's no money it for them. Is this a sign of the future? Will this soon be a state wide phenomenon? In Canada some private security firms are now monitoring private forests with infra red night glasses and guns to keep out unwanted intruders. Will this be the Australian scenario in the near future?

Local residents in the Strezlecki ranges have recently found that VPC have been logging cool temperate rainforest in the Gonyah area. The area was then replanted with Shining Gum, a species not indigenous to the area. Numerous breaches to the Code of Forestry Practices were found at the site and local residents believe that the local shires were unaware of the activity at the site, effectively meaning that VPC were regulating themselves. It has also been rumoured that the VPC is putting land vested to them under a great deal of stress by growing as many trees as possible on a given site, once again putting a lot of stress on the soils etc.

It has also been rumoured that in order to make the sale of the Corporation more interesting in potential buyers eyes, basic land management techniques are not being carried out in order to keep the profitability as high as possible.

Plantations in Victoria

If this is starting to sound like something out of a science fiction novel, then the state governments' new plans in regard to private forestry in Victoria are truly horrendous. Under plans being drawn up by the state government the existing plantation base in the state is set to treble by the year 2020 to 750 000 ha. It is estimated that up to 1.7 million hectares of land is suitable for contribution, located in the following municipalities. South Grampians (270 000 ha), Glenelg (220 000 ha), Corangamite (190 000 ha), Delatite (180 000 ha), Strathbogie (150 000 ha), Ararat (140 000 ha), Moyne (120 000 ha), Wangaratta (120 000 ha), Indigo (110 000 ha), Wellington (100 000 ha), East Gippsland (80 000 ha), Mitchell (50 000 ha). Whether much of this land is to be controlled by the VPC is unsure but forestry legislation granted in 1996 under the Forestry Rights Legislation which separates the owner of the tree from the owner of the land, will allow large interests to establish plantations without having responsibility to the possible long term damage to soils and effect on water quality and quantity. There is also some confusion as to whether tree owners are responsible for the maintenance of logging roads etc. Once again, will ratepayers have to foot the bill to subsidise massive logging infrastructure?

Many conservation groups have supported plantation forestry as a way of enticing forest operations out of native forests entirely. This naive perception doesn't take into account the fact that the state government and logging interests never had any intention of getting out of native forests. Industry and government power brokers are concerned solely about profits. If that profit comes from trashing the last of our old growth or from establishing plantations in environmentally sensitive areas or cleared farmland it's all the same to them. Environmental considerations are not considered.

Friends of the Earth has resisted pressure from most conservation groups to support a no native logging stance. We believe that there are a number of environmental issues in regard to plantation management that need to be looked at before endorsing a logging regime based solely on consumption of plantation based fibre. The work of Greenpeace New Zealand in publishing *'The Plantation Effect'* in August 1994, summarises most of Friends of the Earth's concerns with plantation forestry.

A Summary of Key Unsustainable Aspects of Tree Plantations:

1. Biodiversity Loss through:
 - a) clearance of native vegetation for establishment;
 - b) degradation of riparian areas and waterways;

- c) invasion of planted species into adjacent natural areas;
- d) creation of a monoculture landscape;
- e) damage and loss of soil organic matter;
- f) poor diversity inside plantations.

2. Soil and Fertility Loss through;

- a) damaging methods of clearance for planting and logging;
- b) slope instability following clearfelling;
- c) the unsustainable use of inorganic fertilisers;
- d) degradation of soil structure due to compaction by heavy machinery;
- e) excessive biomass removal;

3. Toxic Pollution of Soil, Ground Water, Waterways and the sea, through:

- a) the use of toxic timber treatment chemicals;
- b) the use of toxic herbicides, pesticides and fungicides;
- c) the use of toxic chlorine chemical processes in pulp and paper factories;
- d) the dumping and leaching of resin acids;
- e) the emission of toxic gases from processing plants.

4. Excessive Natural Resource Use, through:

- a) lowered river flows;
- b) use of large quantities of water in wood processing;
- c) unsustainable use of fossil fuels;

5. Increased Risk and Uncertainty:

- a) from disease and pests and catastrophic loss;
- b) from climate change and increased UV-B concentrations;
- c) from greater fire risks.

FoE would also add to this list use of genetically engineered trees in the plantation industry. Some of the problems concerning genetically engineered trees are summed up in the *Good Wood Guide*. "Fast growing trees, herbicide resistant trees and trees that soak up more carbon dioxide are all technological fixes to problems that have a much more complex basis. These fixes are developed to allow a 'business as usual attitude' for companies. Herbicide tolerant crops of any type will mean that more herbicide by volume can be produced and used during growing. Surrounding environments will therefore be exposed to more herbicide. This means drift from aerial spraying into water catchments and over surrounding forests. Fast growing trees, apart from duplicating many of the problems present in other plantation systems, also put greater stress on soils... Reducing all biological factors to a genetically driven paradigm is the opposite of the ecological approach, that sees the environment as a wholistic system".

The current approach to plantation forestry by the state government does not take into account the environment. If it did then the first thing the government would do would be to cease woodchipping in all high conservation forests and approach plantation forestry alternatives based on ecological criteria. It is no surprise that the Kennett government is doing the complete opposite.