

South-West Forests Defence Foundation Inc. Newsletter December 2023

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SOUTH-WEST FORESTS DEFENCE FOUNDATION INC.

PO BOX 203, NEDLANDS WA 6009

www.southwestforestsdefence.org

NEWSLETTER – December 2023

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Opinion

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) is a rogue department.

It is answerable and accountable to no one. It has ministers and governments in its pocket.

It says it just implements government policy, but governments get their policies from it!

It is entrusted with the protection and management of WA's biodiversity and it has comprehensibly betrayed that trust.

It has invariably sided with the logging industry.

It has allowed overcutting of our forests for decades, in full knowledge that this has been happening.

It has strenuously opposed community attempts to protect forest from logging, which could be achieved by putting it into national parks.

It halved the width of road, river and stream reserves in order to maintain the supply of logs to industry and told its scientists to go out and justify the decision.

It censored the reports of its own scientists when they criticised logging and prescribed burning.

It suppressed a 1992 report of its own scientists that warned of the adverse impacts of climate change on our forests.

It consistently breaches forest policies and practices that could save something of forest biodiversity.

It oversees the destructive and unsustainable sandalwood industry, which is over-exploiting sandalwood in the wild to such an extent that it is now internationally listed as a threatened species.

Its prescribed burning is incinerating WA's biodiversity while exacerbating the risk of wildfires.

It is making people sick and even killing some with its prescribed burn smoke.

It could be in breach of five or more Acts of Parliament.

And it has been getting away with this since 1985, when CALM was imposed on us by the Burke Labor Government, which ill-advisedly combined the Forests Department with the National Parks Authority.

The creation of the Forest Products Commission, which the Barnett Liberal Government hived off in 2000 to run the

commercial exploitation of native forests, plantations and sandalwood, didn't help. It should be terminated and its remaining functions transferred to the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development..

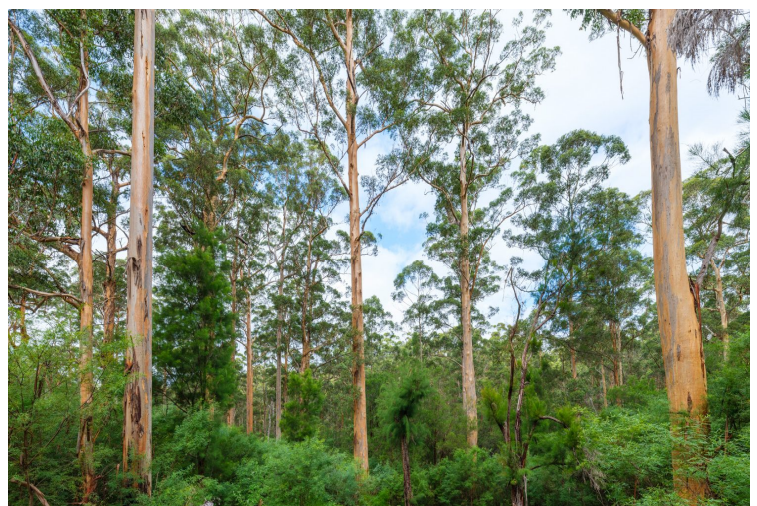
Our problem is what to do about DBCA. How can it be called to account?

No good news on Forest Management Plan 2024-2033 here

On 30 November 2023, Environment Minister Whitby released the statement that a proposal, the Forest Management Plan 2024-2033 (FMP), may be implemented (Statement No. 1214, the Ministerial Statement). Here is some of what the FMP will and will not give us:

- No annual 200,000 hectare limit on prescribed burns.
- No Independent scientific review of prescribed burning - just a scientific research program involving DBCA scientists and experts in the field.
- No independent audit.
- No public availability of data – just a biennial report that summarises activities and implementation of the forest health monitoring program.
- No assessment of Greenhouse Gas emissions of logging or burning.
- No firm deadlines for implementing the proposals for additional conservation reserves.
- Limited Stakeholder Consultation – just on the proposed boundaries of the newly created 400,000 ha reserves.

We had hoped for something better.



Karri forest near Shannon

Native forest logging continues as 'ecological thinning'

As far as ecological thinning is concerned, public consultation was a scam. Despite the Government's promise to end native forest logging, the decision by CPC, DBCA and the Government to entrench this form of logging was set in concrete from the outset. No submissions about the lack of evidence of its alleged benefits and the hard evidence of the environmental harm it will cause had the slightest effect.

The Ministerial Statement has a lot to say about ecological thinning.

It sets an annual limit of 8,000 hectares in State forest and timber reserves. Would that allow an additional area to be thinned in informal and formal reserves?

It sets conditions for ecological thinning:

Condition B1 says the FMP is to be implemented in a manner that:

- (1) seeks to maintain biological diversity and ecological integrity with respect to forest health in mature ecosystems;
- (2) seeks to improve biological diversity and ecological integrity with respect to forest health in degraded ecosystems and rehabilitated areas; and
- (3) maintains the quality of land, soils and water.

Note that (1) and (2) just say 'seeks' while (3) is prescriptive and says 'maintains'.

The Ministerial Statement then says:

... an evaluation report must be prepared for the endorsement of the CPC on whether ecological thinning is likely to meet the requirements in condition B1 prior to it being implemented in areas identified as:

- (1) disturbance avoidance zones;
- (2) formal conservation reserves; and
- (3) proposed conservation reserves.

... the silvicultural guidelines for ecological thinning and any future iterations of these guidelines shall be made publicly available as soon as practicable once finalised.

Note that there is no public consultation. The guidelines are only made public after they are finalised.

The Ministerial Statement goes on to say:

Annual ecological thinning plans

... annual ecological thinning plans must be published annually and include:

- (1) identification of candidate areas;

(2) criteria used to identify candidate areas;

(3) an evaluation of how the planned ecological thinning is likely to be consistent with achievement of condition B1;

(4) outcomes of consultation with the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation and Water Corporation (where ecological thinning occurs in drinking water catchment areas), Noongar regional corporations, mining companies, conservation groups, and forest-based industries and businesses; and

(5) evidence of adaptive management and incorporation of learnings from the implementation of previous annual ecological thinning plans to demonstrate continuous improvement.

DBCA's track record for consultation is not good. Its 'consulting' is more like informing than taking on board any outside input.

The Ministerial Statement requires only two assessments:

Periodic Performance Assessment

The CPC must arrange for an independent review of the performance of ecological thinning in achieving condition B1, to be included in its 5 and 10- year periodic assessments of the implementation of the FMP.

The periodic performance assessments of the implementation of the proposal are to include:

- (2) an assessment of the effect of ecological thinning and prescribed burning activities in achieving the proposal's strategic goals;
- (8) a description of any changes to ecological thinning prescriptions and guidelines as evidence of adaptive management

It is clear that ecological thinning under the FMP is a landscape-scale experiment with potentially disastrous consequences. And a lot of work for NGOs.



Regrowth jarrah forest after thinning and burning

Thinning trials inspection gives no joy

From Wafa Newsletter August 2023

Representatives of Wafa staff went on a tour of the thinning trial in Munro forest off the Kirup Grimwade road. It was useful to see the different methodologies that have been applied, and speak to the scientists involved about the pros and cons of each approach, and how they saw the program developing.

The Munro trial was carried out in a largely even-aged, dense regrowth jarrah forest that was intensively logged in the 1980s. Four different methods have been applied:

- trees cut and everything, including tops, removed;
- trees cut and the bole removed but tops left on the ground;
- trees cut and everything left; and
- trees poisoned or ring-barked and left standing.

In all cases a minimum of 15m²/ha basal area* was left standing. This means that the forest has been thinned back to a more or less natural density, and the canopy remains largely continuous - a very different situation to some of the thinning for water or timber that goes as low as 10m²/ha basal area and looks like a classic destructive logging operation.

Editor's note: They were not shown thinning plus burning of various intensities. A post-logging burn always happens after logging by any name.

The Wafa people were left with a number of unanswered questions and ongoing concerns.

While they could see that light, cautious, strictly controlled thinning in minesite rehabilitation and dense immature regrowth could have benefits, these strict controls are not in place, there are no limitations to where the program can be applied with no assurance that it will only be in immature regrowth and rehab; what basal area will be retained; what size machinery will be used; how habitat will be protected etc. This is totally unacceptable and will easily become logging by stealth.

There was a solution to this. The Minister for Environment could have imposed binding and prescriptive Ministerial Conditions on the Forest Management Plan 2024-2033 to limit any thinning to unnaturally dense, young regrowth forests and minesite rehabilitation under strict trial conditions with no fixed contracts.

Minister Whitby totally and completely failed to impose any conditions. Now it's the usual unsupervised, unmonitored and unassessed free-for-all in our forests for another 10 years.

* Basal area is the area of the cross section of a tree trunk 1.3m above ground. In forest management, it refers to the merchantable timber per hectare.

End forest mining!

The End Forest Mining campaign is gathering momentum.

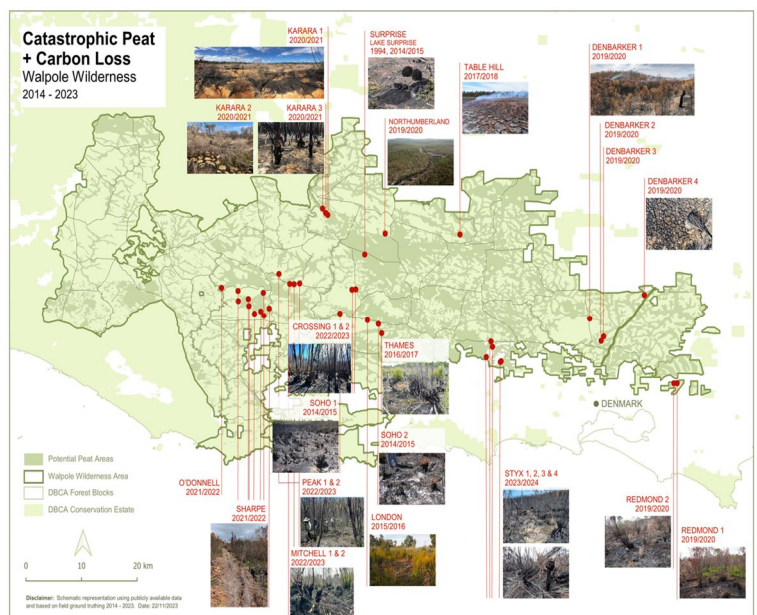
Three of the largest bauxite mines in the world are located in the world's only jarrah forest.

Entrenched with the help of State Agreement Acts since 1961, Alcoa (the Alumina Company of America of Australia) has been trashing the northern jarrah forest ever since. It has mined some 28,000 hectares of forest and fragmented even more.

Not only is Alcoa irreversibly destroying forest; besides using large volumes of water, it is threatening Perth's water supply.

An alliance of nine environment groups has launched the End Forest Mining campaign. It has placed billboards on Murray Street and Mitchell Freeway and is running information nights and encouraging people to put pressure on the Government to protect our irreplaceable forests in their decision-making.

In November 154 of Australia's most distinguished scientists took the extraordinary step of publishing a joint letter in The West Australian, voicing their concern about Alcoa destroying Western Australian Jarrah forests.



DBCA burning out of control

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) is fixated on burning.

Every year, it draws up a list of areas to be burnt and come hell or highwater, it will burn them, if not this year, next year or the year after. The current list has 453 burn options state wide.

<https://tinyurl.com/burns2324> to see the list.

This year it will burn one-third of them.

No one and nothing can deter it.

In the South West it has an annual prescribed burn target of 200,000 hectares and an overall goal of 45 per cent of the area with a 'fuel age' of less than six years.

DBCA's obsession with burning is not logical or scientific. It knows there is voluminous evidence to show that what it is doing is counter-productive (much of the landscape is more flammable after burns than before); costly (\$50 million in direct costs and untold millions in costs to the health budget and losses to tourism and honey and wine production); and environmentally disastrous (most biota needs more than six years to recover from fire and survive in the environment).

Yet DBCA persists.

Its incineration of peatlands is a classic case of its blatant disregard for endangered species.

For the past 10 years, it had been burning peatlands throughout the Walpole Wilderness.

On 7 September 2023 the *Empodisma* peatlands of southwestern Australia were listed in the Endangered category of the threatened ecological communities list under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cwlth) (EPBC Act).

Within weeks, DBCA had burnt Styx block, with devastating results for the peatlands there.



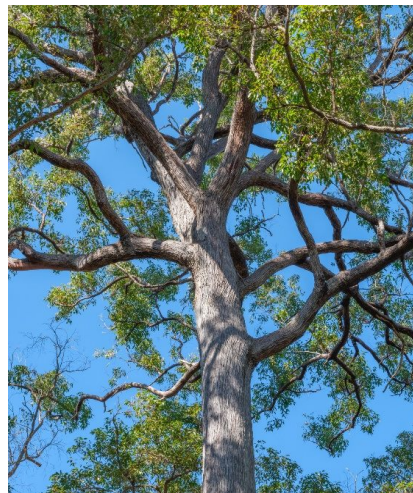
Styx block peatland after the devastating prescribed burn

The Foundation, like several other groups, is looking for any avenue to challenge what has become an environmental disaster. We cannot give up.

Welcome increase in national parks

The State Government has passed legislation to increase the area of the conservation estate.

The *Reserves Act 2023* upgraded more than 3,000 hectares of land within the Lane Poole Reserve, near Dwellingup, from conservation park to national park status.



Jarrah near Lane Pole Reserve

Most of the area had been designated proposed national park for decades.

The Helena and Aurora Ranges National Park, with an initial size of 149,157 hectares, would see 147,292 hectares of the Mount Manning Conservation Park added to the national park, giving it the highest level of environmental protection.

The Helena and Aurora Ranges, also known as the Bungalbin, are about 440 kilometres east of Perth and 100 kilometres north of Southern Cross,

First an Indigenous Land Use Agreement must be negotiated with native title claimants

The Reserves Bill 2023 was introduced in October and given Royal Assent in November.

In August 2023, Bunuba National Park of more than 220,000 hectares was created in the Fitzroy Valley, 80 kilometres north-east of Fitzroy Crossing.

We welcome these increases to the conservation estate and congratulate the Government on these positive actions.

Forest Products Commission still losing money

Prepared by Peter Lane

The native forestry division of the FPC recorded an operating loss of \$11.4 million and an accounting loss of \$13.5 million for the 2022-23 financial year. These results do not include its share of policy and industry development costs, estimated to be about \$0.7 million.

Although cash flow (operating profit/loss) projections have claimed that native forestry is profitable, the reality is that native forestry has consistently operated at a loss. Over the past ten years, the cumulative operating loss, allowing for the native forestry share of policy and industry development, is \$40.7 million.

The loss-making and damaging process of thinning the forests is a legacy of past bad forestry and will add cost to the above results.

It is extraordinary that the Auditor General has never expressed doubts about FPC results, and successive Ministers have apparently accepted them without question.

Good news for Dwellingup forest

In June Rio Tinto withdrew 10 applications for exploration licences to mine lithium and nickel near the town of Dwellingup.

The exploration licences had been fiercely opposed by local shires and community groups making it one of the most highly contested matters to appear before the Warden's Court.

The court heard there were 1,500 separate objections to the 10 tenements.

The company said that concerns raised by local communities were a factor in making its decision.

The local shire hailed it as a good outcome and stressed that the area needed to be protected.

WA Forest Alliance's Jess Beckerling said there is no social licence for new mines in the forests, and Rio Tinto had made the right decision in withdrawing its applications.

Save Julimar!

As long ago as 1977, the Forests Department recognised the high ecological importance of Julimar forest block of 27,798 hectares and made it a Management Priority Area (MPA) for the conservation of flora and fauna.

MPAs were the Forests Department response to the campaign to make the Shannon River basin a national park.

It hoped that by creating some 70 MPAs across State forest, it could defeat that campaign and retain the Shannon Basin for wood production.

The bias towards wood production was evident



Wandoo forest near Julimar

in its cynical choice of forest to be placed in MPAs and their short-term protection.

They would be on steep slopes difficult to extract for commercial use or areas where the vegetation types were mixed and a headache for commercial extraction. And they would not be permanent.

Protection of Julimar as a conservation park, not a national park, was confirmed in the 1987 Regional Management Plan for the Northern Forest Region and the Forest Management Plans 2004-2013 and 2014-2023. But it still hasn't happened.

Julimar forest is highly 'prospective' and the mining lobby is even more powerful than the logging lobby.

In December, Chalice Mining was given the go-ahead to launch the next stage of drilling across its potentially lucrative Julimar metals discovery on Perth's doorstep.

Over the decades, the Toodyay Naturalists Club has recorded 110 species of birds, 35 mammals and at least 350 invertebrate species. Endangered species include black cockatoos, woylies and chuditch.

With the Avon National Park close by, there is an opportunity to improve forest connectivity and provide a lifeline for biodiversity into the future.

It's time for Julimar forest to be given the highest possible level of protection as a national park.

The Julimar Forest Alliance has created a petition to Parliament, which you can sign via their website here: www.julimarcafa.org.au