

Fact Sheet 4

Regional Forest Agreements

The operation of Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) is a highly contentious issue and opinion about the outcomes and successes of these agreements is polarised.

RFAs are intended as a means of managing forest resources to deliver environmental outcomes as well as economic and resource security to the forest sector.

Environmental protection under the RFAs relies on the implementation of a commitment to establish a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) resources system together with ecologically sustainable forest management systems that deliver continuous improvement.

Notwithstanding arguments about the benefits of RFAs which provide certainty for forest industries through reduced Commonwealth regulation and the establishment of a long-term framework for forest management, there is significant community concern that the environmental outcomes from RFAs are not being delivered. This is evident in the failure of most RFA States to complete the required reviews.

The Report recommends that the existing approval granted by s.38 of the EPBC Act continue, subject to improvements in Commonwealth oversight, public input mechanisms and performance assessment, to ensure that the precise terms of the RFAs are being followed and best practice outcomes are being achieved as envisaged. The Report also recommends that the Commonwealth and States should agree on sustainability indicators by the end of 2010 which it is envisaged would provide the basis for performance auditing.

Dr Hawke proposes that interaction between the EPBC Act and RFA forestry operations also be clarified – the approval, which has been issued on certain terms (as outlined in the RFAs themselves) allows forestry operations to occur without being subject to Part 3 of the Act, however, if the terms of the approval are not complied with, or if there is insufficient reporting information to verify that compliance, Dr Hawke recommends that the approval should be terminated.

The Review notes that a number of RFA reviews are outstanding and recommends a transitional period for the conduct of these reviews of 2 years. Section 38 will continue to apply to RFA forestry operations if the Environmental Minister certifies that the review process has been satisfactorily conducted within this timeframe.

Where there is compliance with the RFA and demonstration of good forest outcomes, forest management will continue to benefit from the provisions of s.38.