

Next Tuesday 21st March is the United Nations International Day for Forests.¹ What's in it for us?

For this region, more than any other in Australia it matters.

We are home to Australia's first export woodchip mill. Since 1970, it has chipped and exported about 40 million tonnes of trees. Ours is the only region in NSW where trees are felled solely for the purpose of being turned into woodchips. A living, breathing tree in a local State Forest can be classified as "waste."

Ours is the most intensive logging in the State, with over 90 percent of trees classified as "waste" and destined for woodchipping.

In the 5 years since the UN decided to honour the world's forests with their own annual day, our region exported another 3 million tonnes of woodchips, 70,00 more hectares of native forest were destroyed and taxpayers have forked out over \$44 million to subsidise native forest losses by the Forestry Corporation which dodged \$5m in local government rates in the Bega Valley Shire alone.

Allied Natural Wood Exports recently took over the region's woodchipping operations with lofty statements about moving to plantations and higher value added products. What changes have we actually seen? None, in fact more secrecy than ever before and more calls on the taxpayer to keep it afloat.

Native forest logging is the only industry exempt from the federal law to protect threatened species, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

Federal and State governments defend the exemption saying that "equivalent protection" should be provided under Regional Forest Agreements, but neither government knows nor cares whether it is.

This lack of interest was confirmed again in Parliament less than a month ago in the Senate Estimates² process. Many species are doomed unless these laws change.

While protections for threatened species are questionable at best, for other forest dwelling animals there is nothing. We have seen well documented cases of wombats being buried alive when their burrows were damaged by logging machines. This happens routinely all over the region.

Even animal cruelty law don't protect them. In NSW breaches can only be prosecuted by a small number of designated organisations, but guess what? It's illegal for anyone other than a forestry worker to enter a compartment during logging.

So has anything good happened since International Day for Forests started?

Yes. After –literally – 100 years the Forestry Corporation has finally admitted that logging harms wildlife.

In creating the Murrumbidgee Flora Reserve it recognised that koalas faced almost certain regional extinction if logging planned and/ or approved for Tanja, Mumbulla, Murrumbidgee, and part of Bermagui State Forests unless logging stopped. It also acknowledged that other forest dwellers would benefit. That may be blindingly obvious to the rest of us: but was a big step forward and crucial if our forests are allowed to serve as bastions against climate change, carbon stores and refuges for wildlife under ever increasing threats.

¹ <http://www.un.org/esa/forests/events/international-day-of-forests-2017/index.html>

² Senate Estimates. Environment and Communications 27 Feb 2017: 106-7