

Forest Facts

South-East Queensland

No. 7.3

This information is mainly derived from Comprehensive Regional Assessments carried out for the SEQ Regional Forest Agreement.

prepared by

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for

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Woodchipping Comes to SEQ Forests?

The Queensland Department of Primary Industries Forestry (DPI Forestry) has proposed a scheme for managing wood production from the forests of South-East Queensland which they have termed the 'Enhanced Silvicultural and Utilisation Model'. The timber industry, through the Queensland Timber Board, has proposed a similar scheme.

The reason that DPI Forestry and the industry are turning to silvicultural treatment is that past logging has depleted the forests of trees that are able to provide sawlogs. Figure 1 shows the historical decline in sawlog harvests from publicly owned native forests over the past two and a half decades.

The reality of a declining resource

The actual yield has been falling progressively and the most recent review by DPI Forestry has determined that there needs to be an overall decrease of 23 per cent in the allowable harvest volume in order for that volume to be sustainable.

The required decrease in yield for sustainability varies across zones:

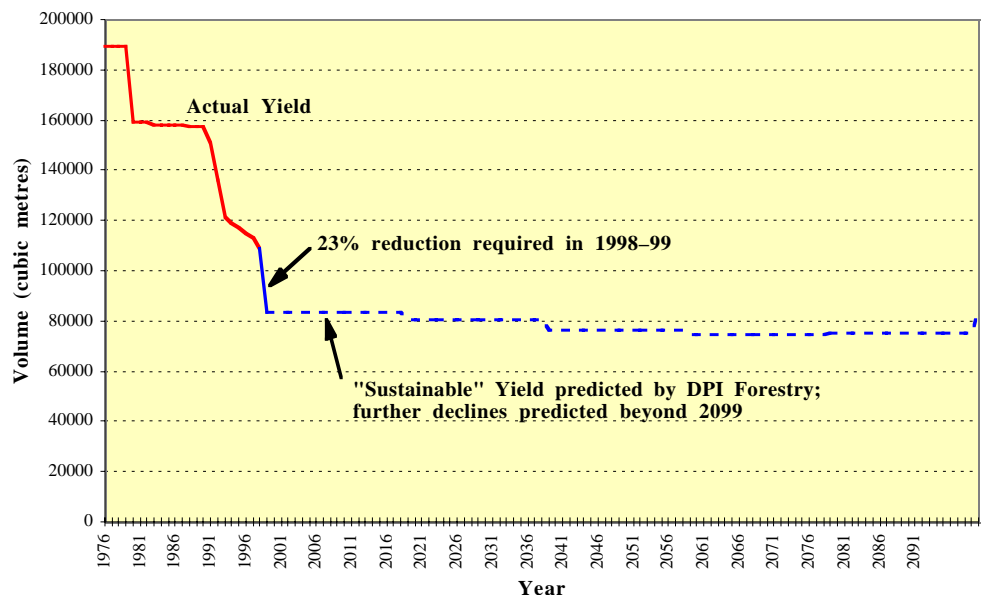
- 48 per cent decrease in Duaringa-Dingo,
- 44 per cent decrease in Kilcoy-Woodford,
- 43 per cent decrease in Eidsvold-Monto,
- 33 per cent decrease in Gympie.

Given the historical decline in 'sustainable' yield as shown by the graph, it is difficult to have confidence that it is not going to further decline. In 1992, DPI Forestry claimed that 103,000 cubic metres per year was the sustainable cut. Now, they find that the 'sustainable' yield is only 83,000 cubic metres per annum. In all recent allocation reviews, it has been argued that the reduction has been found to be necessary mainly because of better inventory data (standing timber volumes). But there is absolutely no basis for believing that the inventory data are now adequate. Inadequacy of the inventory data is recognised as a fundamental weakness in the yield predictions.

The Expert Panel set up to assess Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management in SEQ recommended that sustainable yields should not be determined for a period of more 5-10 years because of uncertainties in the data. The Panel also emphasised the need to develop appropriate sustainability indicators.

Standing timber volume is estimated

Figure 1. Sawlog Yields from SEQ Public Native Forests



Intensified Harvesting ('Enhanced Silviculture') involves —

- **an increase in the removal of trees from 20 per cent to 50 per cent (as measured by basal area);**
- **up to a *four-fold increase* in the volume of wood cut from the forest, with three-quarters being “non-sawlog” wood (so-called forest residues);**
- **creation of canopy gaps about the size of a football field in every hectare (up to a quarter of the area harvested);**
- **non-sawlog residues, amounting to up to 320,000 tonnes per year, proposed to be burnt as bio-fuels, burnt in a controlled process to produce charcoal, or woodchipped.**

from a system of inventory plots. The goal is to have a minimum of two inventory plots in each management subunit. However, the Comprehensive Regional Assessment (CRA) project that reviewed the yield prediction system found that “the database is still a long way from this goal”. Currently, more than half the subunits in SEQ have no plots. To estimate volumes, DPI Forestry ‘borrows’ plots from another subunit. Over the SEQ region, 60 per cent of plots are ‘borrowed’. A further issue is that of actual area of productive forest. The CRA project noted that “there are still serious concerns in estimating net harvestable areas”.

With such inadequacies in the information on standing volumes and actual areas of productive forest, there can be no confidence that DPI Forestry’s predictions of sustainability are reliable.

Intensifying logging

Rather than face the reality of a declining resource, DPI Forestry and the industry have turned to intensification of logging to try to get more sawlogs out of the forests — essentially a move from hunter-gathering to agricultural cropping of our native forests.

The proposed ‘enhanced silviculture’ management scheme is based on the concept that undesirable species, ‘defective’ trees and anything else in the forest that does not provide sawlogs need to be removed to encourage growth of the desired trees. It relates to opening up the canopy to let in more light to stimulate growth of those trees that will be felled in the future to provide timber.

Environmental Impacts

The environmental impacts of logging are well established. Intensifying logging will certainly increase those impacts.

The Comprehensive Regional Assessment (CRA) project Forest Resource Enhancement Opportunities for South-East Queensland (SE1.3) reviewed the ecological and other environmental impacts of

silvicultural treatment.

The project found that thinning and harvesting practices in SEQ forests —

- were detrimental to forest ecology,
- changed species composition, richness and abundance,
- alter the structure, age distribution and ratio of various tree species,
- alter the distribution, species composition and frequency of occurrence of understorey species (epiphytes, vines, shrubs and herbs),
- can significantly alter the diversity and abundance of forest-dwelling fauna by causing
 - a reduction in habitat trees,
 - a reduction in foraging trees,
 - changes in microclimate,
 - habitat fragmentation,
 - increased intensity of run-off and deterioration in stream water quality.

Of particular concern is loss of habitat trees (trees with hollows used by forest animals for denning, roosting and breeding). The Code of Practice for native forest harvesting specifies retention of habitat trees at levels which an independent scientific advisory group considered are unlikely to maintain animal populations at current densities. DPI Forestry notes that the ‘enhanced’ scenario is “incompatible with the spatial distribution of habitat trees specified in the current Code of Practice”. Under intensified harvesting, there would be areas where no habitat trees were retained.

The reality is that so-called enhanced silviculture will have dire consequences for forest flora and fauna, particularly for hollow-dependent species.

Note: *Forest Facts No. 4.4* deals with habitat trees.

Note: The outcomes of the SEQ Forests Agreement, September 1999, can be found on the ARCS Web site, www.rainforest.org.au.