

# Forest Audit Program 2017/18

## DELWP's Response to Audit Recommendations, Timber Harvesting Compliance Unit, Environmental Compliance Branch

Each year, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) commissions an independent environmental audit, known as the Forest Audit Program, to assess VicForests' timber harvesting operations against the *Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014* (the Code) and the incorporated *Management Standards and Procedures for Timber Harvesting Operations in Victoria's State Forests 2014* (MSPs). The Forest Audit Program is an integral tool for ensuring continuous improvement of both on-ground timber harvesting practices and the systems, processes and regulatory instruments which govern it. The process integral towards minimising the future risk of environmental harm.

In 2015, DELWP introduced its *Timber Harvesting on Public Land Risk-Based Compliance Strategy* to focus efforts in areas where the relative risks to the environment are greatest. This is the basis of the risk-based approach upon which the Forest Audit Program occurs, stratified upon the presence of important environmental values and high-risk features or activities (including steep slopes, erosive soils, waterway crossings and significant in-coupe roading activities) within forestry coupes in Victoria's State forests.

DELWP recently announced the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) and Victoria appointed its first Chief Conservation Regulator. OCR will provide oversight for DELWP's regulatory functions, including regulation of the natural environment, timber harvesting, public land use, fire prevention, wildlife and biodiversity. This will ensure that DELWP is a best-practice environmental regulation provide a central point of coordination for regulatory functions. OCR is also committed to working openly and transparently with the community and stakeholders to improve conservation regulation. To contact the OCR, please email [OCR@delwp.vic.gov.au](mailto:OCR@delwp.vic.gov.au).

Two audit themes were identified by DELWP for the 2017/18 Forest Audit Program:

1. Protection of soil, water and biodiversity values from adverse impacts associated with harvesting and in-coupe roading
2. Design, construction, maintenance and closure of in-coupe roads

The 2017/18 audit identified a number of issues and made recommendations for improvement to both VicForests and DELWP. Five recommendations were provided to DELWP. These highlight potential improvements to the regulatory framework for timber harvesting conducted on public land. DELWP's response to these recommendations is provided below.

For further information please visit our [DELWP website](http://delwp.vic.gov.au) or contact us on 136 186.

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Auditor's Recommendation	Rationale	DELWP's response
<p><b>D1: Moderate priority</b> DELWP should review the methodology for assessing water quality risk of soils in the MSPs to more reliably classify erodible soils with high permeability.</p>	<p>The current method for estimating water quality risk for soils appears to understate the risk posed by moderately dispersive, but highly permeable soils. The methodology should be reviewed to ensure that harvesting and roading activities appropriately manage the risks of erosion and sediment generation.</p>	<p>Given the significance of impacts on water quality and in-stream sedimentation, DELWP is committed to ensure that appropriate measures are implemented to sufficiently address any risks.</p> <p>As part of the review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014, broader soil and water management practices will be reviewed to ensure that both assessments and prescriptions adequately capture and address these risks.</p> <p>Estimated Completion Date: 30 June 2021</p>
<p><b>D2: High priority</b> DELWP should develop a process for reviewing and acting on key findings and recommendations from each years' forest audit program.</p>	<p>The FAP is a potentially important process in achieving continuous improvement in timber harvesting activities in State forests. The historical lack of a formal process for responding and acting upon findings and recommendations of the audits diminishes their value.</p> <p>This restates a recommendation from the 2016-17 audit report. It is understood that a process is being developed to support consider and, as appropriate, act on audit findings and recommendations.</p>	<p>DELWP and VicForests now meet quarterly as a minimum, where VicForests demonstrate action plans and progress towards addressing previous findings and improvements to practice.</p> <p>Several recommendations from previous years have been implemented for Forest Audit Program 2017/18, while other measures for improving the Management Standards &amp; Procedures and Planning Standards documents have been provided to inform the upcoming review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014</p> <p>Completion Date: Ongoing</p>
<p><b>D3: High priority</b> DELWP and VicForests should gather information on actual coupe attributes to support audit coupe selection rather than information only from the coupe planning stage.</p>	<p>Use of planning stage information means that audit targets may not have the values or risk factors for which they were selected. This potentially dilutes the value of the audit.</p> <p>This issue has been a feature of the audit coupe selection process for some time and has not adequately been addressed.</p>	<p>In-coupe attributes (where available) were selected to inform audit coupe selection for the 2018/19 Forest Audit Program. DELWP will always maximise the provision of actual in-coupe data, rather than modelled data or planned operations, to maximise the effectiveness of the auditing program.</p> <p>Completion Date: February 2019</p>
<p><b>D4: Moderate priority</b> DELWP should establish and maintain a register of coupes included in the FAP.</p>	<p>A register will help to avoid inadvertent re-auditing of coupes and also provide a basis for longitudinal studies assessing the environmental impacts of non-compliances with the regulatory framework.</p>	<p>DELWP are developing a coupe register and corresponding geodatabase to track coupes subjected to audits and the outcomes of such audits</p>

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	This restates a recommendation of the 2016-17 audit.	Estimated Completion Date: 31 December 2019
<p><b>D5: Moderate priority</b></p> <p>DELWP should review MSP 6.2.2.1 and consider rewording to constrain its application to trees that will be retained post-harvest and regeneration rather than all “live” trees and allow for modest levels of “unavoidable” spillage of materials across the base of such trees.</p>	<p>The prescription is presumably meant to apply only to trees that are to be retained long-term, following road construction and not to trees beside in-coupe roads that would be felled during harvesting or killed by regeneration burns. As written, the prescription does not provide for such circumstances.</p> <p>In some settings contractors constructing in-coupe roads may be faced with the choice of either removing a tree or placing embankment materials over at least part of its base, the latter (only) in contravention to the MSPs. While placement of excessive levels of embankment material over the base of trees may lead to their decline and subsequent death (hence the prescription), smaller amounts over part of the tree base may have minimal detrimental effect.</p> <p>MSP 6.2.2.1 is unnuanced and this recommendation also seeks a modification that avoids unnecessary removal of a tree that would otherwise survive in the coupe merely to comply with this requirement. The wording of the prescription would also need to limit the circumstances under which embankment materials would be permitted to be deposited over the base of a retained tree.</p>	<p>DELWP agrees with the auditor’s findings and supports the notion that tree removal in this instance, to satisfy requirements in MSP 6.2.2.1, is a greater environmental impact and therefore a less desirable outcome.</p> <p>DELWP will develop a common understanding (i.e. a guidance note/clarification statement) regarding our expectations under MSP 6.2.2.1 which will be communicated to VicForests. MSP 6.2.2.1 will also be considered as part of the upcoming review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014, commencing 1 July 2019. All stakeholders will be able to contribute to this review.</p> <p>Estimated Completion Date: 30 June 2020 (for development of common understanding)</p>
<p><b>D6: Moderate Priority</b></p> <p>DELWP should review MSP 3.4. Slope, to clarify if the exception for harvesting in slopes &gt;30° in 3.4.1.2 also applies to slopes &gt;25° on granite soils in East Gippsland FMA (3.4.1.3) and/or to the slope limits in Appendix 3 Table 11.</p>	<p>MSP 3.4.1.2 provides an exemption to the general requirement not to harvest areas greater than 30° slope, where only 10% or less of the net harvestable area is affected and harvesting is managed to minimise the risk of soil mass movement. However, the MSPs include specific slope limits: those applying to designated water supply catchment areas (MSP Table 11) and to areas of granite-derived soils in East Gippsland. It is unclear if the general exemption applies where in these situations; the recommendation seeks clarification on this matter.</p>	<p>DELWP agrees that a lack of clarity may exist as to which circumstances this exemption applies (i.e. in granite-based soils of East Gippsland, or in Water Supply Protection Areas).</p> <p>DELWP will develop a common understanding (i.e. a guidance note/clarification statement) regarding our expectations under MSP 3.4.1.2 which will be communicated to VicForests. MSP 3.4.1.2 will also be considered as part of the upcoming review of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014, commencing 1 July 2019. All stakeholders will be able to contribute to this review.</p>



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