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“One Stop Chop” Regional Forest Agreements’ failure has broad lessons

State Governments have failed to manage precious forests and wildlife to the standard that would have been required if they had remained under Commonwealth control; Regional Forest Agreements should be scrapped; and moves to hand Commonwealth environmental protection powers to States should be abandoned once and for all.

These are the lessons from *“One Stop Chop: How Regional Forest Agreements Streamline Environmental Destruction”* a detailed legal review of the 15 year history of Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) conducted by Environmental Defenders Offices on behalf of a coalition of environmental groups and released today.

“We have today written to the Prime Minister and the Premiers of the RFA states informing them that we are looking into legal options if they fail to fulfil their international environmental obligations, abandon the RFAs now as legally void agreements and never allow this to happen with our other environmental treasures,” said Sarah Rees, Director of My Environment.

“RFAs were supposedly about protecting the environment while supporting forestry workers, but this review shows that they’ve been used to prop up unprofitable logging companies at the expense of our precious forests and the wildlife they nurture,” said Jess Beckerling, of WA Forest Alliance.

“The Regional Forest Agreements are a fifteen year failed experiment in putting state governments in charge of environmental management,” said Lauren Caulfield, of Lawyers for Forests. “This damning report shows how state governments have systematically and deliberately mismanaged native forests after being handed control.”

“We need stronger national environment laws and we need to fix the forest mess by scrapping the RFAs and creating a new model of protection and management,” said Pepe Clarke, CEO of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW.

The EDO review examines the legal management of forests under RFAs, including state frameworks and court battles since they were established 15 years ago. It concludes that, with few exceptions, the regulations, standards, monitoring and compliance, and enforcement by State governments have been weaker than they would have been if managed in accordance with Commonwealth environmental laws.

In particular:

To organise interviews, contact Tim Hollo on 0409 518 452

- State protections for threatened species are grossly inadequate;
- The ability to change forest management to account for new information or new conditions (such as global warming) is almost impossible;
- Reviews of the operation of the RFAs have been inadequate;
- Monitoring, compliance and enforcement by States are inadequate; and
- Public (third party) participation, often vital in environmental protection, is severely restricted.

“Our forests nurture iconic wildlife, like koalas and wedge-tailed eagles, as well as cleaning our water and air – but only as long as we take care of them. Tragically, it’s often left up to individuals to try to stop the damage being done and, under RFAs, our right to do so is often stripped away,” said Harriet Swift, of the South East Region Conservation Alliance.

“The evidence clearly shows that the states can’t be trusted to look after our nationally important forests, wildlife and precious places like national parks and the Great Barrier Reef” said Rob Fowler, President of Conservation South Australia.

“Mr Rudd and Mr Abbott need to commit to dropping all plans to turn our environment protection laws into the kind of One Stop Chop we’re seeing in our precious forests thanks to the RFAs,” said Susie Russell, of North Coast Environment Council.

“The Commonwealth has the power and responsibility for preserving our environmental wealth. It should use it,” concluded Felicity Millner, Principal Solicitor with the Environment Defenders Office, Victoria.

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