

# VicForests charged over alleged illegal logging in Gippsland forest

The Sydney Morning Herald, Adam Carey, 8 March 2018

Victoria's state-owned forestry corporation has been charged with illegal logging of a rainforest in East Gippsland after a near two-year investigation.

The Andrews government's Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning is pursuing VicForests over alleged destruction of a protected section of native forest near Cann River in the state's far east. VicForests will defend the charges in court next month.

**VicForests is alleged to have illegally logged within a rainforest buffer zone.**



If found guilty of breaching the Sustainable Forests Act it will face financial penalties of up to \$38,000. The state-owned company is sole supplier to the Heyfield timber mill in Gippsland, which the government purchased last year at a cost to taxpayers of more than \$62 million.

It is alleged to have illegally harvested native timber inside a rainforest buffer zone near the "Take Me Home" logging coupe in 2016. The department began its investigation after an environmental activist group in the area reported the alleged breach of state laws. The Goongerah Environment Centre submitted evidence of serious damage done to rainforest gullies near Serpentine Creek. Goongerah Environment Centre spokesman Ed Hill said he was pleased to see the department enforce the law to protect Victoria's rainforests.

"We hope this prosecution is the beginning of a new approach by the Andrews government and we expect them to lay charges against VicForests for dozens of other breaches currently under government investigation," Mr Hill said.



### **Logging activity at Serpentine Creek, near Cann River in East Gippsland.**

The Age revealed last month that the department has spent years investigating a long list of claims of illegal logging against VicForests, without ever laying charges.

The department has received more than 200 reports of alleged illegal activities in the past three years. All investigations completed in that time have found no breach by VicForests. The department is currently probing 27 alleged forest breaches reported by the community between January 2016 and December 2017, reports show, including illegal logging of rainforest, large old trees and Leadbeater's possum habitat.

"VicForests has shown systemic failure to adhere to environmental protections," Mr Hill said. "Victorians expect that if a rainforest is illegally logged, the perpetrators will be prosecuted."



**Rainforest in East Gippsland.**

A spokesman for the department said VicForests had been charged with a breach of the Sustainable Forests Act, related to the protection of rainforest in a timber harvesting coupe. VicForests' acting chief executive, Anne Geary, said the corporation would treat the charges with utmost seriousness.

"Our staff are highly trained professionals who apply comprehensive biodiversity assessments prior to harvest to protect the environment, animals and plants, and sustain industry security," Ms Geary said.

"We recognise that we are entrusted with a renewable resource that is highly valued by Victorians, and we undertake harvesting under strict Government regulations and our own stringent planning processes.

A directions hearing will be held in Orbost Magistrates Court on April 19. East Gippsland has become a flashpoint in the conflict between forestry workers and environmental activists, who have blockaded entry roads to old growth forest earmarked for harvesting. Lawyers also secured a Supreme Court injunction on logging in those areas.