

# Protesters rally as WA agency plans native forest logging increase

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The state's logging agency has moved to increase logging of jarrah, marri and karri forest by up to 50 per cent, even as black cockatoo species relying on these trees are upgraded to "endangered" status.

Meanwhile, the state government has backed away from commitments to protect high conservation value forest, made by former environment spokesman Chris Tallentire in the weeks leading up to Labor's 2017 election victory.

More than 100 people rallied at Parliament on Wednesday as Greens Forests spokeswoman Diane Evers presented Environment Minister Stephen Dawson with a 15,000-signature petition calling for increased native forest protections. With signatures hand-collected by a team of 200 volunteers, the petition will be the biggest tabled in WA parliament in 18 years.

The state's Forest Products Commission wants to sell more native forest timbers via a new timber yard in the South West, and has sought expressions of interest "to enhance long term industry viability".

The facility would take both native forest and plantation logs and produce mainly low-end products including wood chips, firewood and charcoal, with the potential of biomass burning on the table.

The timber agency is currently authorised to cut jarrah, karri and marri in accordance with the lower limit set out in the state's Forest Management Plan 2014-2023.

But if it can find the market for a substantial volume of low-grade logs not suitable for sawlogs, and the new facility proceeds, it will need Environment Minister Stephen Dawson's approval to increase the cut within the plan's upper limit.

It would mean a potential increase of 100,000 cubic metres of jarrah a year on what is currently being logged, an increase of up to 50 per cent. It would also mean the potential logging of up to 30,000 cubic metres of marri currently left standing, and potential increases in karri volume as well, depending on contracts.

Baudin's black cockatoos can only nest in older jarrah and marri specimens of 200-500 years old, and the seeds and flowers of marri, and also jarrah, are their main food source.

The federal government last month upgraded the species' conservation status from vulnerable to endangered, with the primary threat identified as land clearing and tree harvesting for agriculture, forestry and mining.

Chris Tallentire, Labor's former shadow environment minister, and Labor's Great Southern spokesman Peter Watson both told public forums in Perth and Margaret River shortly before the election that Labor would "immediately conserve high conservation value forests to provide protection for some of WA's most threatened wildlife".

High conservation value forests refer to those that, while they did not qualify as "old growth" under the former Gallop government's end to old-growth logging, still have old growth qualities and provide habitat for threatened species, protect watercourses and connect national parks.

Just over 100 blocks were subject to a rushed review in 2002 and were classified as high conservation value but no protection was ever finalised. In the intervening years some have been logged and others, including Barrabup, Lewin and Warrup forests, are scheduled for logging this year.

Mr Dawson denied the McGowan government made pre-election commitments around high conservation value forests.

"Like Labor governments of the past, the McGowan government is committed to balancing the preservation of our environment and a sustainable forest industry," he said.

"Currently 62 per cent of native forest is protected in national parks and designated conservation areas and is not available to harvest. This includes more than 334,000 hectares of old-growth forest.

"I am scheduled to meet with the WA Forest Alliance tomorrow and I recognise the group's dedication, passion and energy towards the conservation of Western Australia's forests."

Labor's election policy document said native forests were a national treasure and needed better protections, naming the South West particularly.

It promised to facilitate an official agreement on forest management to move to "a more environmentally and economically sustainable approach to meeting timber demands."

It promised to investigate incentives to support "a plantation industry and secure the jobs of those workers supported by the forestry industry".

The WA Forest Alliance said the FPC moving to increase logging, even within the bounds of the FMP, defied Labor's election promises.

"The old guard within the FPC is hell-bent on continued native forest logging," Alliance spokeswoman Jess Beckerling said.

"The FPC is making a mockery of government policy and undermining Labor's credibility on forests.

"The commitments were made loud and clear at public forums and through the media by the shadow minister and the Member for Great Southern, and the community had every confidence that they were going to be delivered.

"They need to do an independent review to update that 2002 assessment of high conservation value blocks.

"South West forests and wildlife cannot wait any longer for the Government to act on its forest promises."

The Forest Products Commission issued a statement emphasising that any increase would be within the upper limit set by the Forest Management Plan, with the agency having last year only logged around 40 per cent of what was currently permitted.

"The FMP, prepared by the Conservation and Parks Commission and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, is underpinned by robust science to ensure the conservation and ecological values of West Australian forests are protected for future generations," it said.

"The McGowan Government is committed to balancing the preservation of our environment and a strong sustainable forest industry. The proposed [facility] is also consistent with the Government's commitment to create jobs.

It cited an industry-funded study showing that 70 per cent of jobs in the forest industry were generated in the processing sector and said this facility would create more jobs in the South West.

"Increasing the use of the forest resources already available for harvest under the FMP, would help to ensure a strong sustainable forest industry, as well as preserving our environment," the statement said.

"The FPC will seek to demonstrate to the Minister for Environment that it will meet the specific requirements of the FMP. In addition, the FPC will continue to undertake detailed assessments of each harvest area to ensure biodiversity outcomes are met."

Forestry Minister Dave Kelly said in Parliament that the Forest Products Commission had received 24 expressions of interest in the document, with nine concerning potential sites (Nannup, Kemerton, Dardanup, Manjimup, Diamond Mill and Neerabup).

Four were concerning supply of privately grown timber, nine the design, build and operation and five the operations and purchasing of timber products.

This story was found at: <http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/protesters-rally-as-wa-agency-plans-native-forest-logging-increase-20180320-p4z5ci.html>

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