1 Background to the study

1.1 Introduction
Two Social Impact Assessment (SIA) scoping studies were conducted as part of the development of a social impact assessment methodology and capability within VicForests. Mirboo North was selected as one of these ‘learning by doing’ studies. Each study included both desk-based research and fieldwork, and, as well as providing a training experience, aimed to identify the range of potential social impacts arising from forest operations each community.

This type of study is referred to as a social impacts scoping study because it is typically carried out as a preliminary exercise to determine what the key social impacts might be.

In this case, the field studies were preceded by workshop-based training for VicForests staff in SIA theory, practice, and methods, and was tailored to the certification requirements of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

This report outlines the outcomes of the scoping/training study in the town of Mirboo North carried out over the week of 21-25 August 2017, and outlines the potential social issues based on coupe planning as of mid-2017.

1.2 Social Impact Assessment
SIA is the process and practice of analysing and managing social changes and impacts on people and communities that are likely to occur as a result of a development, plan, programme, or policy. SIA can also be applied to regular or ongoing operations such as those undertaken as part of forest management. SIA typically includes stakeholder and community involvement in identifying, evaluating and managing the impacts. The aim is to avoid, minimize or manage the negative impacts on local people while maximizing the benefits.

“Social impacts” refers to changes in any aspect of peoples’ lives that they consider valuable or important (IAIA, 2003). This includes actual or perceived potential changes in peoples’

- Biophysical living environment;
- Way of life (living patterns, recreation, work, rest, social interaction, etc);
- Livelihoods;
- Community relations, cohesion, character, services, facilities & infrastructure;
- Health and wellbeing;
- Culture and cultural expression;
- Participation in decision making;
- Rights, both personal and property;
- Fears and aspirations.

Systematic assessment of “social risks” to local people and communities of forest management activities is part of the Forest Stewardship Council’s (FSC) requirements for FSC forest management
certification. Hence VicForests has initiated a programme of SIA capability development and implementation in support of its achievement of FSC certification.

1.3 The Field Training Aspect
The purpose of the SIA field studies was threefold:
- to demonstrate and practise the learnings from the workshop training (learn by doing),
- to scope the potential impacts of “typical” coupe operations on local communities,
- to proactively and directly engage with local community members over VicForests plans and their potential impacts.

Immediately following the fieldwork in the two communities, the study teams come together for a debriefing, a formal evaluation of the social impacts, and formulation of options for impacts management.

The rest of the report presents the Mirboo North scoping study in more detail.

1.4 The SIA pilot study
Potential pilot study sites and criteria for their selection were identified by staff during the workshop training. Criteria for inclusion were:
- the sites should be associated with a coupe/s that are on the current Timber Release Plan (TRP)
- the area had to be accessible for the team members involved;
- the particular coupes and haulage route/s should be relatively close to a settlement with a potentially-affected population.

Nominated sites included Noojee, Mirboo North, Alexandra, Bairnsdale, and Mansfield. Following several rounds of discussion within the team and with management, Mirboo North (with 3 coupes on the TRP) was selected as fitting with the criteria for an SIA scoping study. Eight VicForest staff were assigned to one of two teams – one for each of the field studies.

Figure 1: Location of Mirboo North in South Gippsland
Prior to the fieldwork, social information about each area and the relevant coupes was assembled from online and in-house sources, including ABS census community profiles, local and state government websites, listings of community organisations and groups, and VicForests stakeholder database. Maps and satellite imagery identifying the particular coupes in each area were prepared in hard and soft copy.

1.5 The study timetable

Monday 21 August

- Finalise plan for the week
- Review of preparatory work (profiling, mapping, and stakeholder lists) and available data.
- Briefing on fieldwork methods
- Making appointments for interviews
- Travel to sites
- Local VicForests staff briefing (or Tues am)

Tuesday 22 August – Thursday 24 August

- Orientation and site visit - location of the local coupes, settlements, neighbours and other potentially affected persons and places (Tuesday)
- Making contact with neighbours, APs etc, and key community informants
- Conducting interviews and meetings, local observing
- Evenings - review the day's work and planning for the following day.

Thursday 24th August

- Review information in hand, gap-filling, follow-ups, and assembly of notes.
- Return travel to base or near to Woori Yallock
- Follow-up phone calls as necessary.

Friday 25th August

- Sharing of fieldwork experience and general observations
- Structured impact evaluation for each site
- Recommendations for impacts avoidance, mitigation or management
- Recommendations for follow-up SIA work.
2. Social profile of Mirboo North

2.1 Basic socio-economic profile
Mirboo North is a town\(^1\) of just under 2,200 residents located 155 kilometres east of Melbourne and 36 km SE of Morwell and the Latrobe Valley. This places the town “in the heart of the Strzelecki Ranges” and within South Gippsland Shire. It lies at the start of the Grand Ridge Rail Trail which travels for 13 km through forests of the Strzelecki ranges to Boolarra and is midway along the Grand Ridge Road, considered to be one of the great tourist drives of Victoria.

Which not officially named until 1929, Mirboo North began life in the 1870s as a forestry town and grew rapidly with the establishment in 1885 of the railway connecting to Morwell. Farming, especially dairying, succeeded forestry as the main industry, and for 80 years the town had a butter factory until it was acquired and closed by the Murray Goulburn group round the same time as the railway closed in 1974. The former factory now houses the Grand Ridge Brewery which makes craft beers. Today Mirboo North is a service town for farming and tourism.

2.2 Current population

The population of Mirboo North appears to be declining - from 2,688 at the time of the 2006 census, to 2,296 in the 2011 census, and then 2,197 in 2016. Within the overall pattern, the population of the urban part of the Mirboo North appears to be increasing, while that of the adjacent rural area is declining. The reasons for this are not immediately evident.

Mirboo North’s population is noticeably older than the state as a whole, but typical for South Gippsland Shire - the median age of the residents being 45 years compared with 37 years for the State and 47 for the Shire. 23% of Mirboo North’s residents are seniors (aged 65 and over) compared with 16% for the State. The proportion of older people has increased since 2006, as has the median age, suggesting that Mirboo North is increasingly a retirement town. The last census recorded over 500 senior residents. The number of children aged 0-14 to 14 has declined from 560 in 2006 (i.e., 21% of the population) to 415 in 2016 (i.e. 19% of the population). In 2016, 201 local resident children were attending primary school and 142 were attending secondary school, though not necessarily local schools.

The registered and social marital status of Mirboo North’s residents are very similar to the Victoria population.

Educational achievement among local residents is below average for the State by typical for South Gippsland Shire: in 2016, 24% of locals had a degree or advanced diploma compared with 21% for South Gippsland and 34% for Victoria, while 22% had achieved no more than Year 10 schooling compared with 18% for the State’s population.

Census data on cultural heritage indicates that

- less than 1% of the town’s residents are Indigenous Australians.
- 79% of the residents were born in Australia,
- 88% speak English at home as their first language.

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\(^1\) ABS State Suburb (SSC21692)
2.3 Dwellings & Households

In 2016 at the time of the census there were 786 occupied dwellings and 95 unoccupied dwellings (i.e., 11% of the total) in the Mirboo North area. This level of occupancy is high for South Gippsland Shire, but typical for the State as a whole, suggesting that the town has a high proportion of permanent rather than semi-permanent residents as elsewhere in the Shire. 95% of occupied dwellings are separate houses - compared with only 73% for the whole State.

With an average of 2.5 persons, local households are typical for Victoria. Household composition is also typical for Victoria. Importantly, the home level of ownership is high (81% compared with 68% for the State), though typical for South Gippsland. The levels of ownership of motor vehicles and access to the internet are typical for Victorian households.

Satellite imagery indicates that there are several areas of well-established rural residential development (including small farms and lifestyle properties) north of the town along the Strzelecki Highway and Darlimurla Road, approximately 0.5km from Vic Forest’s “Oscine” Coupe to the north, and 1 km from the “Doug” coup to the west.

2.4 Livelihoods & Economy

The 2016 census data on local livelihoods shows that among those aged 15 and over, 54% (936 people) were in the labour force. Of them 48% were in full time employment, 40% were part time, and 6% were unemployed, i.e., there is a below average proportion of fulltime and a higher proportion of part time employed compared with the rest of the State.

Census data indicate that the local population has a fairly typical labour and employment profile for a service town of its size, with social services (e.g., education, health and aged care etc) being the biggest employer, followed by agriculture forestry & fishing, retail and wholesale trade, and then manufacturing and construction. In 2016 the accommodation and food services sector, and retail trade, both closely associated with tourism, employed 7% of the local workforce, down from 16% in 2011. According to the South Gippsland Shire Council, there are 1.1 million visitors to the region annually, three quarters of whom originate from Melbourne. Many travel through the district and the ranges on the Strzelecki Highway.

There is an active plantation forestry industry in the district, and large areas in district have been harvested and replanted in recent years by Hancock’s Victoria Plantations (HVP).

With respect to occupations, Mirboo North had higher than average proportions of technicians and trades people, and managers, and lower than average proportions of professionals and clerical & administrative workers.

Average personal and household weekly incomes of Mirboo North residents are below average. In 2016 the median personal weekly income was $504 – both being approximately 78% of the median for Victoria State. Median family and household weekly incomes were 77% of the State average.

2.5 Services & facilities

Mirboo North has the range of health, community, social and emergency services and facilities typical of a town of its size, including a medical centre, nursing home, aged care, pharmacy, fire brigade/CFA, ambulance, police station, Centrelink, post office, senior citizens centre, community bus, and regional bus service. It also has a primary school with over 300 pupils, secondary school, and preschool. Community facilities and services include community hall/s, swimming pool, library, a rubbish transfer station, a substantial showgrounds and recreation /scenic reserve, and several churches.
In addition to the Grand Ridge Rail Trail, which attracts mountain bike riders from throughout the State, there are a number of bush tracks and named roads in the State forests and conservation reserves and parks in the district, including the Lyrebird Forest Walk, Doug’s Track, Joes Track and Allan’s Track. These are used by visitors and locals alike for various activities.

Commercial services in Mirboo North include a supermarket, community bank & ATM, several accommodation houses and retreats, service station, cafes, restaurants, shops and various service and trades businesses. The town is the home of the Grand Ridge Brewery, which has state-wide reputation for its high-quality products.

The South Gippsland Shire database indicates there is also a wide range of locally-based community organisations, churches, sports clubs, and interest groups. Some are groups that are likely to visit and use the nearby forests and tracks, such as scouts, walking and nature study groups (e.g. Friends of the Lyre Bird Forest Walk/Grand Ridge trail), Landcare, men’s shed, etc. Some of these were contacted during the fieldwork in Mirboo North.

### 3 The Potential Social Impacts of Proposed Operations on Mirboo North

#### 3.1 Proposed VicForest operations

There are three coupes near Mirboo North on the TRP – “Doug”, “Samson”, and “Oscine”. These can be seen on Figure 2. Doug coupe is closest to Mirboo North town centre – a distance of 2.3km. It has a gross area of 30.6 ha and a net harvest area of 21.1 ha of mixed species. Immediately adjacent to Doug, Samson coupe has a gross area of 26.0 ha and net harvest are of 22.0 ha. Oscine coupe, which lies to the north east, and not of immediate focus in this study, has a gross area of 55ha. The net harvest area for Oscine is not yet known, though harvest planning will have to take into account the Special Protection Zone (SPZ) intended to protect the landscape values adjacent to the Strzelecki Highway (B460), and VicForests’ Timber Harvesting Safety Zone requirements (typically 150m out from the coupe boundary), and damage from a past forest fire.

Each of the coupes will be clear felled though seed-trees would be retained. Doug coupe is considered to have a harvest season of spring/autumn (shoulder season), and Samson and Oscine are classified as winter harvest coupes. Preliminary planning for Doug and Samson indicates harvesting would take place in 2018. Regeneration burning prior to reseeding is expected to occur in 2019 to coincide with fuel reduction burns by DELWP.

Doug coupe mostly borders on private property: there are 5-6 dwellings within 1km of the centre of the coupe - the closest being about 200m north-east of the boundary. All the nearby dwellings appear to be residential/farming property. The ‘Birchwood Retreat” lies approximately 500m from the coupe boundary.

Samson coupe is bordered on the north by a SPZ providing protection to landscape values /vistas etc from the Strzelecki Highway special forest types, and habitat for avifauna. Samson coupe borders private property to the east and west, with the closest private dwelling being 180m from the eastern boundary.

Oscine coupe borders the east side of the Strzelecki Highway and the SPZ. The closet dwelling is approximately 500m to the south adjacent to the Darlimurla Road. It is also bordered by, and appears to partially intersect with, the Lyrebird Forest Walk. Ricardo Road passes through the coupe and connects with the Strzelecki Highway.
VicForests’ proposed access and haulage route for Doug and Samson coupes is to the north along Doug’s Track which passes through the coupe, onto Samson Road and out onto the Strzelecki Highway. The planned haulage route passes within 180m and 360m of two dwellings as it heads north. The second dwelling is a commercial property – Birchwood Retreat.

Figure 2: The VicForest coupes at Mirboo North (boundaries in red.)

In-coupe access tracks will be rehabilitated as part of the regeneration activity. Roads on the existing road network will be handed back at least at the same quality as they were received by VicForests – although are likely to require improvement prior to harvesting.

VicForests’ records indicate no previous harvesting of native forest in the immediate area, although over the past 10 years Hancocks have been harvesting and replanting their plantations adjacent to the Old Darlimurla Road. The proposed VicForest activities in the area could there add to impacts already being experienced by people of the district and by users of the Strzelecki Highway and the various tracks, including the Grand Ridge.

3.2 Previous consultations
The communications register contained 1 record of contact (in mid-2012) with local residents over proposed VF activities. This was a request for information on VF’s plans and intentions for the state forests near the town. No further consultation was recorded.

3.3 Fieldwork research in Mirboo North
The Mirboo North field study team conducted 22 interviews in the local area including those who had been recruited by telephone earlier, through snowballing (on referring), and chance encounter. Priority coverage was with neighbours (6 interviews) and key stakeholder groups (8 interviews and group consultations).
The interviews covered background information, awareness of the VicForest planning (and provision of a briefing if necessary), perceived potential negative impacts and benefits, and measures to avoid or mitigate the impacts. Notes were made of the key points arising. The interview/consultation notes were subsequently entered into a database and analysis consisted of identification and classification of the key concerns.

Site visits were also made to the key locations in the forests and elsewhere as mentioned by interviewees, and some sites were photographed.

3.4 Impacts
Among the interviewees there was considerable consistency about the potential social impacts of the proposed operations on Mirboo North and its residents. These are summarised below in order of concern and perceived potential seriousness.

3.4.1 Ecological & Physical
The most common concern was for the potential negative impact on the forest environment and ecology of disturbing and especially clear-felling the nominated coupes. These native forest areas have been in existence for the whole of most local people’s lives and are therefore regarded as permanent natural forests rather than production areas. Particular concerns include

- loss of remaining/surviving areas of particular kinds of native forest, such as Messmate;
- loss of wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors, leading to a long-term reduction of biodiversity;
- damage to or loss of possibly rare and/or protected species, including: Messmate (eucalypt sp.) (last remaining stands untouched by fire), big trees, rare orchids, lyrebirds, sugar-gliders, koalas (released in the area from Kangaroo Island and elsewhere), wombats, goanna, and quoll;
- Increased risk of erosion;
- Damage to water catchments.

The forest areas in question are of particular and direct interest of the conservation-focused Friends of the Lyrebird Forest Walk. Talk of harvesting caused alarm among these stakeholders because the Lyrebird Forest Walk (Track) abuts, and in part, traverses forest that lies within the Oscine coupe (figure 3). It is clear from the interviews that the Lyrebird walk is very highly valued by local people and the environmental, social, and economic impacts of the potential harvesting of this coupe are of the greatest concern. A description of the Lyrebird Forest Walk and the species encountered, is available on the Parks Victoria website. This walk rates very highly on TripAdvisor.

Some interviewees noted that wildlife displaced from Doug and other coupes would probably move into adjacent forest areas and may successfully reestablish there if conditions are suitable.

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3.4.2 Visual amenity, landscape and natural space
Doug and Samson coupes are closest accessible areas of State forest/bushland within easy reach of Mirboo North township. The physical changes that would occur due clear-felling operations on these coupes, and possibly Oscine, were seen as having a significant negative impact on the aesthetic appeal of the district. In particular

- degradation of landscape vistas, including for tourists and others using the Strzelecki Highway, and the in-forest environment. This would be a long-term impact. The degree of effect would depend on the buffering provided by the SPZ.
- Doug coupe neighbours would suffer a major loss of visual amenity in the long term.
- noise and harvesting activities would mean a loss of peace and quiet for neighbours and visitors in the short term.
- the district as a whole would lose an area of natural secluded space for retreat and relaxation in the long term.

3.4.3 Recreation
According to those interviewed during the fieldwork the forest areas near Mirboo North are regularly used for recreation and have been used in this way for many years. Several websites also refer to the reactional use and value of the Lyrebird Walk. Access to the Doug and Samson coupes is provided via Doug’s Track. Access to Oscine coupe is via Ricardo Road and the Lyrebird Walk. Regular users include residents of all ages, part-time residents, visitors/tourists, and school groups.

The activities that would be displaced in the short-medium term include
- bush running and bush walking - to see wildlife and lyrebirds - which are considered by locals to be the ‘highlights of the area’, and associated activities (e.g. photography, art, etc.) - see above regarding the Lyrebird Forest Walk;
- horse riding and bike riding, especially the use of Doug’s Track;
- off road motor biking and 4WD motoring.

Some interviewees noted that the affected users would most likely shift their recreation to other areas, providing they were as easily accessible and there was suitable infrastructure (such as tracks, parking areas etc.). Other forested recreational areas in the vicinity include the Mirboo North Regional Park, and within the town, the Grand Ridge Rail Trail and the associated reserve. While the Lyrebird Walk may not be physically displaced or damaged, its users are likely to be highly discouraged by forest activities and/or excluded for safety purposes.

Figure 4: The view from Strzelecki Highway adjacent to Oscine Coupe (Google Street view).

3.4.4 Economics and Tourism
Several interviewees expressed concerns about the flow-on effects of VicForests activities on tourism, which is of increasing local economic importance. Of particular concern were the likely negative impacts on nearby B&B businesses where people come for the peace and quiet of the bush and seclusion. Others felt that tourism is preferable to logging because it has a lesser negative impact and greater local economic benefit. Some also noted the loss of access to areas for firewood collecting.

Some felt that there may be economic opportunities for locals from forestry, especially for harvesting and selling locally (rather than off-shore) and selling privately-owned timber to VicForests.
3.4.5 Health and Safety
Local people expressed concerns about increased risks to peoples’ health and wellbeing from a variety of direct and indirect sources. Specific concerns include increased dangers from

- log trucks emerging from the forest roads onto the Strzelecki Highway, and moving through the town’s streets;
- log trucks travelling on school bus routes: e.g. Dickies Hill;
- large log trucks on tourist scenic routes, especially the Strzelecki Highway;
- dust and noise from the coupe operations and trucks on unsealed roads;
- damage to water catchments
- risk of forest fires from harvest machinery etc.;
- illicit use of forest areas and increased trespass onto adjacent private land.

Some interviewees felt that the clearing of the VicForests’ coupes would reduce the risk of wild fire in the district (with reference being made to previous fires on the eastern side of the Highway).

3.4.6 Other matters:
There is no indication from native title claim documents and associated maps that the interests of the Aboriginal traditional owners would be affected by planned forestry operations at Mirboo North.

4. Recommendations for impacts management
As noted earlier, SIA study participants in Mirboo North were asked what action they thought VicForests should take to avoid, mitigate or manage the potential impacts and to enhance any benefits that might be possible. The following were specifically noted:

No harvesting
A number of those interviewed felt that the negative impacts on Mirboo North’s residents and visitors (and on the region as a whole) would be best avoided by VicForests choosing not to harvest the three coupes in question. Some especially opposed harvesting of Oscine coupe. It was also noted that by not harvesting these forest areas VicForests would positively contribute to the development of tourism.

Harvesting Procedures and Priorities
Others suggested, if there were to be harvesting of these coupe, that VicForests

- have only partial or selective logging to protect big trees and Messmate, to reduce the visual and landscape impacts;
- have buffer strips to protect the visual amenity and landscape values and to separate out logging from the Lyrebird Forest Walk, wildlife areas, and bushwalking tracks;
- be mindful of the risk of fire and water contamination;
- establish clean firebreaks;
- support the development of recreational (and other) alternatives/replacement areas, such as clearing older overgrown tracks for bushwalking, and bike and horse-riding.
Health and wellbeing and general loss of amenity
To avoid or mitigate potential negative impacts on people’s wellbeing, some suggested VicForests

- limit operation hours and make adjustments to support the health and safety of residents in particular;
- find log truck transport routes that avoid the town and avoid log haulage and travel at busy time.

Participation in the planning and decision-making process
Various individuals and groups commented on VicForests’ planning and decision process and made various recommendations. Suggestions for improvement included

- conduct additional consultations and a more extensive impact assessment
- the need for the community to be proactively informed, consulted, invited to express their views, and to make practical suggestions – as part of a genuine and meaningful process;
- establish a Facebook page for communicating with stakeholders, and provide notices etc. in local paper;
- involve DELWP, the Mirboo North Community Association, and the Shire Council in any further impact assessment;
- seek input from experts in regards to the protection of wildlife and biodiversity in the particular coupes and in the Morwell River catchment.