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FAP audit records 93 per cent compliance rate and welcomes recommendations on areas for improvement for VicForests

VicForests has undergone an audit commissioned by the Department of Environment and Primary Industries, of timber harvesting and coupe closure, as part of its Forest Audit Program (FAP) activities for the 2012-13 financial year.

VicForests General Manager, Stakeholder and Planning, Nathan Trushell, said "VicForests welcomes the final report and is pleased that this audit found that harvesting in VicForests coupes complied with 93% of applicable audit criteria".

The audit - Harvesting and Closure, was specifically focussed on Pre-harvest coupe planning and coupe marking; harvesting operations, roading that is directly related to harvesting operations, rehabilitation of coupe infrastructure and closure of coupes following the completion of harvesting.

The report included several positive observations in regards to VicForests planning and operations, including: "*Protection of sensitive environments*: many of the coupes contained sensitive environments, including temporary and permanent streams and rainforest patches. Many were also located adjacent to SPZs [Special Protection Zones] and SMZs [Special Management Zones] that were created to protect particular environmental or cultural values.

"With very few exceptions, coupe marking was undertaken conservatively and ensured: that protected areas were correctly identified; the required buffers (or filters) were provided; and that these areas were not inappropriately affected by harvesting operations.

"Buffer widths were commonly significantly greater than the minima specified by the Code and/or SPZ definitions.

Mr Trushell said: "We are very pleased that our conservative approach to buffering and our overall diligence in protecting special environmental and cultural values during harvesting operations has been acknowledged by the auditor."

The audit report also handed down recommendations on areas of non-compliance. An example of the recommendations is related to two coupes "where almost the entire gross coupe area was harvested. Disturbance from harvesting, regeneration burning and rough heaping meant that no long-lived understory elements were retained within the harvestable area as required by the Code," the report stated.

Mr Trushell said, "This is an unusual occurrence. In most coupes the net harvested area is much smaller than the planned gross area and long lived understory elements and habitat trees are protected within excluded areas.

"We did meet the habitat requirements; however the retention of long-lived understory elements

was an issue due to the areas needing mechanical disruption after failed regeneration attempts. We are currently reviewing our planning process and will ensure biodiversity conservation measures are met in all areas we operate in,” said Mr Trushell.

Mr Trushell said, “I would like to thank the auditors for their openness and willingness to engage with our staff. VicForests operates in an environment of continual improvement, evolving with the ever changing landscape and the challenges and opportunities it brings.”