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## Accurate possum count vital for sustainable forestry industry

The Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA) welcomes the Federal Government's intervention in the timber supply crisis in Victoria, as reported in The Herald Sun today, which could provide a lifeline for Australia's largest hardwood sawmill, Australian Sustainable Hardwoods (ASH).

It's reported that Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce has written to Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews offering Commonwealth support to release more timber to ASH and enable the mill to stay open and save thousands of jobs in Gippsland. Minister Joyce has also called for an immediate population survey be undertaken of the Leadbeater's Possum, as numbers have proven to be much higher than believed in 2014 when the Victorian Government introduced strict environmental controls and restrictions on the forestry industry.

AFPA Chief Executive Officer Ross Hampton said, "The key data missing which would allow all governments to properly balance the conservation of the possum and support Victoria's sustainable forestry industry is a comprehensive population of the Leadbeater's Possum, because we know based on the latest records that numbers are much higher than first thought. AFPA is confident that a more accurate population study would support a review of the possum's critically endangered status under federal legislation.

"Industry acted quickly and in good faith when the 2009 bushfires destroyed much of the possum's habitat. The industry voluntarily created 12.5 hectare circles around every new possum sighting, based on expert advice at the time that sightings of new colonies would be rare – no more than 200 sightings within two years. However, population numbers have proven to be much healthier, with 445 new possum colonies found since these measures were introduced, and most of them in planned harvest areas, which has decimated VicForests' available timber supply."

Two-thirds of the possum's habitat is in adjacent National Park, yet there has been very little work done by the state government to ascertain how many colonies the National Parks system supports.

"At this rate, unless there is an immediate revision of this exclusion zone policy, and a comprehensive population study done to inform a revised conservation plan for the Leadbeater's Possum based on our improved understanding of the marsupial, then the crisis facing ASH and its 250 employees – as well as the thousands of flow-on jobs the mill supports – could be repeated across the Victorian forestry industry," Mr Hampton said.

AFPA represents forest growers, harvesters, and manufacturers of timber and paper products.

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