

12 July 2017

More Leadbeater's Possums should prompt rethink of 200m exclusion zones

A report by the Victorian Government has recognised that the Leadbeater's Possum population is likely bigger than previously thought, strengthening the case for the Government to ease its 200m Timber Harvesting Exclusion Zones and conduct a comprehensive population study of the possum.

The Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA) welcomes some of the recommendations in the report that could ease some of the restrictions on timber harvesting imposed by the 200m buffer zones, but the report missed an opportunity to provide meaningful relief by proposing no change to the 200m requirement, which takes out 12.5Ha of forest with each new Leadbeater's Possum sighting.

AFPA CEO Mr Ross Hampton said the report echoed AFPA's position on the urgent need for a study to determine the Leadbeater's Possum population and habitat range, and to review the possum's critically endangered status. As at [29 June 2017](#), there are 649 known colonies identified, 496 of which have been identified since 2014. This is significant given that, as the report notes, only 6-10 per cent of the possum's potential habitat range has been surveyed.

"While AFPA strongly supports the ongoing actions seeking to secure the long-term survival of the Leadbeater's Possum, and that every attempt is made to ensure the ongoing viability of our sustainable forestry practices, it is important that all decisions are informed by the best available conservation advice," Mr Hampton said.

"When the 200m buffer zones were introduced, it was considered highly unlikely that any more than 200 new colonies would be found, and thus the impact on the timber industry would be manageable. But with almost 500 new colonies detected in three years, we now [know](#) that these exclusion zones have resulted in an annual reduction of 65,000m³ of ash sawlog, and will cost Victorian taxpayers more than \$20 million in foregone revenue and additional infrastructure costs. This doesn't take into account the flow-on economic impact on industry resulting from the significant reduction in timber."

The report notes that "the recent increased number of located colonies, while only a small proportion of the potential habitat has been surveyed, casts doubt over the accuracy of earlier population estimates, and further work is required to provide more robust estimates."

Mr Hampton urged the Victorian Government to implement the report's recommendations aimed at reducing the impact of the exclusion zones on timber operations, especially the proposal to move towards a "strategic landscape-scale planning and management approach" and away from the ad-hoc detection-driven exclusion zones currently in place.

Further background:

AFPA [announced](#) last month it had submitted a nomination under the Commonwealth statutory process for a review of the Federal Government's listing of the Leadbeater's Possum as 'critically endangered' in 2015, following the 2009 Victorian bushfires, which were thought to have destroyed around one third of the possum's suitable habitat. This submission argues that a full population study is vital. The nomination is currently being considered by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee which provides advice the Federal Environment Minister.

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

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Graph from the report (p14) showing the dramatic increase in Leadbeater's Possum sightings

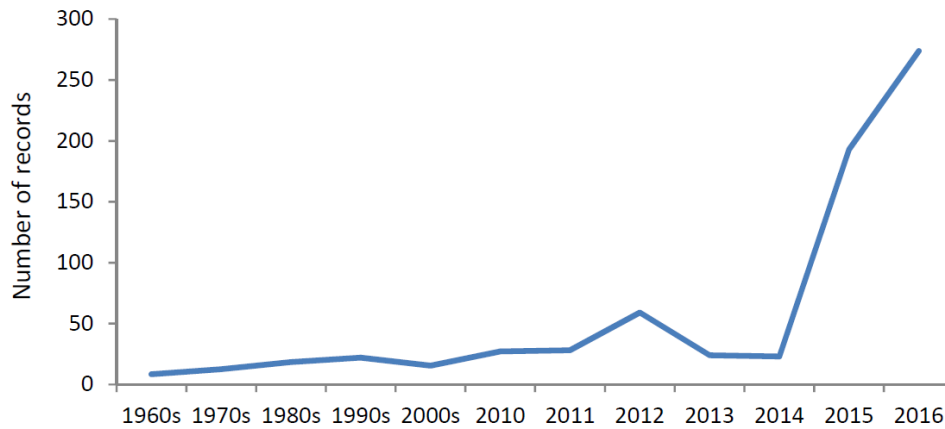


Figure 3. The number of Leadbeater's Possum records submitted to the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas since the 1960s, with the average shown per year for the decades up until the 2000s, and then each year since 2010. Peaks in numbers correspond to increased survey effort.