

# The Andrews government in Victoria has surrendered to environmental activists over native forest harvesting

Australians love their wood products, and rightly so. Wood is all around us, in our homes, in our commercial buildings, in our parliaments, museums and places of worship. It's the ultimate renewable product.

Wood sequesters carbon and stores it permanently in the built environment. If we are to rid ourselves of harmful plastics then paper and cardboard from our forest products sector are the only practical substitute.

Like many things, people tend not to think much about where their wood products come from. There are two answers, our forests and the forests of others. In Australia, we hold ourselves to world's best forestry practices. Many of the countries we import from do not.

Australia is a net importer of wood products. Indeed the value of our imported forest product is now north of \$5 billion. The problem is growing worse. Availability of both native and plantation timber in Australia is in decline.



[Timber and wood chips bound for export in Portland, Victoria. Aaron Francis/The Australian](#)

The federal government is responding to the reduction in the number of trees we plant by providing plantation grants and removing barriers to the carbon market, we applaud that. But there is little confidence any turnaround will be substantial or timely, mainly because of the price of land.

To understand the industry, it's necessary to know there are basically two types of trees in question, those which provide hardwoods and those that provide softwoods. Softwoods have

many uses. For example, they provide the timber we use for our housing frames, twenty-five per cent of which is now imported.

Hardwood trees provide structural timber and the products we use to produce quality furniture, our floorings and our back decks. They are also required to make white paper but due to the supply crisis, we now import 100 per cent of our white paper product, including the A4 paper which feeds our office printers.

With the research and development support of the federal government, our sophisticated forest products sector is discovering ways to secure more product from every tree and to create mass timber products from softwoods. Of course, the latter calls for more softwood product at a time the estate is contracting.

trees too, but in relatively small number and it takes at least 45 years for them to reach harvest maturity. The Victorian government's decision this week to accelerate the cessation of selective and sustainable native forest harvesting is an unnecessary surrender to environmental activists. It will result in even more hardwood being imported into Victoria from Tasmania and NSW. It will also add to imports much of which comes from the tropical forests of developing nations.

A quality, accessible, safe, and fire-resistant forest is a worked and managed one. Access to native hardwood resources provides the private sector and Government Business Enterprises involved in the sustainable management of native forestry with the incentive to manage our forest and there is a growing focus on better understanding the practices of First Nations people who managed the land for tens of thousands of years.

That's good for our economy, good for jobs, and good for the fauna that call our native forests home. Regional Forest Agreements are agreements between the commonwealth and the States that govern our sustainable native forestry operations, and the industry acknowledges that the federal government is committed to upholding the RFAs.

However, if the RFAs are falling short because of activist lawfare then the solution is to strengthen them rather than abandon them. On that basis, this is now a challenge for the federal government. It's time to elevate our growing import dependence and shrinking sovereign capability to the national cabinet. That's the only way to establish a national plan in a timely way.

Stopping native forestry in one state to import the product from another state is not a plan, it's a pathway to more extreme bushfires, greater import dependence, and more deforestation and fauna extinction in developing countries. In a state hospital or state school crisis the commonwealth wouldn't leave the matter to the states, it would engage.

With a decision of the federal court on an RFA challenge launched by activists in NSW pending, the federal government must also urgently engage with the states to secure the domestically produced hardwood supplies our economy needs. Australian and other investors are coming to realise the greater role forestry can play in addressing climate change and how much more we can do with carbon-storing-wood in the built environment. Meanwhile, some state governments seem intent on killing the sector and the jobs it creates.

If we are serious about reviving our manufacturing sector, protecting jobs, addressing climate change, and building more housing with sustainable and renewable timber, we need to put more trees in the ground and accept that industry needs ongoing access to Australia's native estate, managed sustainably to the strictest environmental standards.

*Joel Fitzgibbon is chief executive of the Australian Forest Products Association.*