

31st July 2018

VicForests responds to misleading claims

A media story has been prominent in the last two days alleging VicForests admitted a research project it is undertaking in East Gippsland may cause the death of Greater Gliders.

These claims are misleading. It's important to clearly state some facts:

The words in the email referred to in the story were written a year ago and had nothing to do with the current research project.

VicForests apologises to the many interested parties who found the story distressing.

VicForests will continue to operate in a safe, efficient and sustainable manner, balancing needs of the environment, our staff and rural communities whose livelihood depends on a successful forestry industry.

The information below may assist in providing some facts around the current story.

East Gippsland Greater Glider Project

VicForests is committed to using a scientific approach to our forest management activities. Our staff are expert ecologists and foresters and our highest priority is ecologically sustainable forest management. We work in collaboration with other scientists and research institutions to develop scientifically valid approaches to forest management.

VicForests recently developed a scientific trial, the East Gippsland Greater Glider Project, to be carried out in some existing approved timber harvest sites to build knowledge of the habitat requirements of Greater Gliders. No new forest or coupes are being used to conduct the research; additional surveys and measurements are being carried out in existing approved timber harvest sites.

VicForests fully cooperated and provided significant amounts of information to the journalist of which only a small amount was used.

We've created this Q&A below to provide more information to those interested in the recent media coverage.

Q&As

About VicForests

- VicForests harvests about 3000 ha of native timber forests per year, and adheres to strict guidelines to ensure biodiversity and other values are protected and managed.
- Modern timber harvest methods conserve retained habitat values.
- Native timber is a beautiful and renewable resource.
- VicForests regrows all harvested areas with the same type of forest that was already there.
- Many of the coupes VicForests harvests, have been harvested before.
- The native timber industry contributes hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of jobs to regional Victoria each year.



How many Greater Gliders in Australia

It is estimated there are greater than 100 000 Greater Gliders in Australia and their range is along the Eastern Seaboard from Queensland to Victoria (Woinarski et al 2012). The Arthur Rylah Institute constructed a model to identify areas of Victoria that are likely to contain suitable glider habitat. The model predicts that over 1.2 M ha of Victorian forests are highly likely to contain suitable habitat for Greater Gliders.

VicForests is committed to their protection and future survival. VicForests has gone above what is legally required by developing and implementing its Greater Glider Interim Protection Strategy in areas where there is currently no Action Statement. VicForests is also undertaking the 'East Gippsland Greater Glider Project' and completing extensive surveys using the latest technologies.

What are the research projects?

VicForests has developed several projects in East Gippsland which are using lower intensity harvesting, in some cases leaving between 40%-80% of the forest and retaining habitat trees important to Greater Gliders. We then survey and evaluate the Greater Gliders' usage and return to different areas and record and compare local population numbers and densities.

The research occurs in coupes that are already approved for harvesting and comply with Code of Practice for Timber Harvest. This is a VicForests research project, wholly funded by VicForests.

What are the ethical standards met by the research?

The Wildlife and Small Institutions Animal Ethics Committee of DEDJTR have approved VicForests' application for conducting surveys for threatened species for this research.

VicForests also obtained a Wildlife Research Permit from DELWP to undertake surveys.

This requires ethics approval.

The surveys that VicForests is conducting do not put Greater Gliders at any threat.

Why are we doing the research?

Not enough is known about how Greater Gliders' respond to differing intensities of harvesting.

VicForests wants to learn about how to create optimal conditions for Greater Gliders after timber harvesting.

The Greater Glider research projects, still in their infancy, are designed to produce evidence to support protection of Greater Glider populations during and after timber harvest.

VicForests is striving to inform and improve best practice through its research.



What protections are there for the Greater Glider?

In East Gippsland, if a threshold density of Greater Gliders is found in an intended coupe, VicForests identifies and preserves 100ha of the best habitat for the Greater Glider.

In other parts of Victoria, there is currently no prescription but a Government prescription is in development and soon to be released for public comment.

Until the Government finalises the prescription for Greater Gliders, VicForests has applied its own voluntary protections above and beyond the requirements of the Code of Practice for Timber Harvest, by protecting Greater Glider habitat in coupes (unless unsafe).

In the Strathbogies where there are substantial known populations, VicForests has voluntarily retained more than 60% of the forest in a coupe and 98% of the habitat trees.

Who was consulted regarding the research?

VicForests consulted about the research survey with biodiversity divisions of the Arthur Rylah Institute, DELWP and Greater Glider experts in NSW.

Methodological and sampling suggestions were incorporated into the research design as a result.

No objections were raised about the research survey beyond methodology and sampling.

Will the research cause the death of Greater Gliders?

No.

The research surveys that VicForests is conducting do not put Greater Gliders at any threat.

The core of the research is to undertake less-intensive harvesting, retaining 40%-80% of the forest, to evaluate Greater Gliders' response to varying harvesting levels.

This could help guide future harvest planning to optimise the retention of Greater Glider habitat, and usage and return of Greater Gliders post-harvest.

VicForests has always been aware and sensitive to the potential, or risk, of harming species during harvests or regeneration burns.

VicForests works expressly to overcome this by:

1. Identifying and excluding areas of high habitat value from harvest, after pre-harvest surveys to identify habitat or species
2. We retain and protect habitat trees from fires by removing fuels at the base of trees, and by protecting patches of habitat trees.



Anecdotally, Greater Gliders, which glide up to 100m have been observed returning to regrowth and retained habitat patches after harvest.

The research seeks to confirm scientifically that Greater Gliders use and return to retained habitats after harvest.

Further, an additional aspect of the research is to investigate added protections for species, including Greater Gliders, by trialling lower intensity burns that minimise canopy scorching.

What is the status of the Greater Glider?

Since 2016, the Greater Glider has been listed as vulnerable under Federal legislation and as threatened under State legislation since 2017.

This has led to a proposed action statement to protect the species in Victoria, beyond East Gippsland where there has been a long standing protective prescription.

The vulnerable status of the Greater Glider is not as high as some endangered species or critically endangered species, such as the Leadbeaters' Possum.

Nevertheless, VicForests has moved voluntarily to implement its own protections in areas where there is currently no Greater Glider prescription.

The Greater Glider population is spread from Queensland through the NSW and down to Victoria.

It is believed that the population on the east Coast exceeds 100,000 individuals.

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