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VicForests passes surveillance audit under Australian Standard for Sustainable Forest Management

VicForests has successfully passed its certification surveillance audit under the revised nationally endorsed Australian Standard for Sustainable Forest Management (AFS).

AFS has been specifically developed for Australia's forests and is internationally recognised by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) – the world's largest forest certification scheme.

The AFS surveillance audit is a way of tracking VicForests' compliance to the Standard.

VicForests' CEO, Robert Green, said: "Surveillance audits are like a health check for compliance. It flags up any areas of concern and notes what we're doing well. It ensures that we can rectify any issues that may arise between certification audits.

"Certification under AFS confirms that our operations are sustainable and our forests are managed with respect for ecological, social and ethical standards and highlights that these operations are in line with independently assessed, global benchmarks for sustainable management," he said.

The audit report states that, "As with all system changes that are made by VicForests, there has been a thorough and professional review process utilising the full extent of the internal databases and business initiatives available.

"Whilst the forest management system has been in place for some time, it is now evolving as a complete business system drawing in other sections that have been operating independently. This is now leading to a stronger, consolidated and consistent approach," the report said.

Another area that the audit highlighted as positive and working well was VicForests' complaints and non-compliance handling procedures, "There is a very thorough root cause analysis process in place to deal with any complaints, non-conformities or potential issues that are identified through the various reporting and inspection processes.

"All complaints are well documented and all are fully investigated utilising regional and central office specialists as required," the report stated.

In terms of biodiversity management, in particular VicForests' pre-harvest surveying, the audit found that, "VicForests Pre-logging Fauna Surveys for 2014 provides a clear summary of all results obtained from the wildlife surveys that have been undertaken in twelve coupes of special interest.

"There has been a significant increase in the quality and quantity of data now gathered in relation to special values in the region and the additional prescriptions and operation adjustments required."

The surveillance audit also identified six areas that are to be improved before the next surveillance audit in June this year, mostly relating to paperwork documentation and monitoring of training for staff and contractors.

Mr Green said VicForests is highly scrutinised with extensive internal, external and regulatory audits taking place each year. In addition to the AFS re-certification audit that occurs every three years, VicForests is also subject to AFS surveillance audits every six months.

“Regulatory Forest Audit Program audits, managed by the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning, are also performed each year as well as VicForests’ own internal auditing.

“Regular auditing ensures procedures and staff are up-to-date and relevant, and it encourages innovation and fresh approaches to ongoing system improvements and practices,” said Mr Green.