



# Stakeholder Engagement Guidelines

**Version 1.2**

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# 1. Foreword from Chief Executive Officer

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VicForests recognises the community interest in timber harvesting in Victoria. While harvesting operations provide many socio-economic benefits, they can also directly impact communities and individuals.

Timber harvesting remains a complex and emotive subject which generates passionate opinions.

Engaging with the community is vital to improving the public's understanding of VicForests and how we operate. Engagement is also crucial to ensuring the community is given the chance to have input into the planning of timber harvesting and other associated operations.

VicForests' stakeholder engagement activities provide the community with opportunities to have input into planning and operational practices, help improve the public's understanding of VicForests and how we operate, and to allow us to better understand the important issues for our stakeholders.

VicForests Stakeholder Engagement Guidelines provides information regarding engagement with our stakeholders to ensure the community understands the purpose of this engagement and outlines the many ways in which we engage these stakeholders.

It is designed to ensure we maintain constructive relationships with our stakeholders and have a clear process in place to manage any concerns stakeholders may have about our operations.

We have developed a number of objectives to guide our stakeholder engagement:

- to make sure our activities are open and transparent
- to provide stakeholders with the opportunity to have input into our forest management practices
- to engage and communicate with neighbours and local communities who may be directly impacted by our operations
- to be responsive to stakeholder concerns
- to improve understanding of VicForests' management activities
- to provide support to regional communities where we operate
- to identify and establish collaborative partnerships with stakeholders who have an interest in contributing to sustainable forest management practices

VicForests' stakeholder engagement activities work in conjunction with engagement undertaken by other land management agencies including the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

We are also committed to ensuring any engagement with our stakeholders aligns with our organisational values – Professional, Safe, Sustainable, Customer Focussed and Respect.

Thank you for taking the time to read this document. We welcome your feedback at any time regarding VicForests' stakeholder engagement activities.

**Nathan Trushell**  
**Acting Chief Executive Officer, VicForests**

## 2. What we do

VicForests is a Victorian State-owned business responsible for the sustainable harvest, regrowing and commercial sale of timber from Victoria's public forests on behalf of the Victorian Government.

VicForests must comply with all laws and regulations relevant to our operations.

We are responsible for:

- the sustainable harvest of the forest in areas available for timber production
- the regrowing of all areas after harvesting
- the protection of specific environmental values found with areas planned for harvest
- the haulage of timber from the forest to local mills
- the setting of sustainable harvest levels based on the availability of timber resources
- the compliance of all our operations with the Victoria's regulatory framework
- the construction and maintenance of roads within areas planned for harvest
- contributing to the construction and maintenance of forest roads used by our contractors
- the long term economic returns to Victoria from our operations
- engaging with stakeholders regarding our management activities
- assisting in fighting bushfires alongside our Networked Emergency Organisation partners – the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water

## 3. What we don't do

There are a number of organisations who are responsible for managing Victoria's forest estate.

VicForests regularly works in conjunction with these organisations but does not manage the following responsibilities (responsible organisation listed in brackets):

- the setting of policies relating to the management of Victoria's forests (Victorian State Government)
- the management of Victoria's State forests (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)
- the setting of regulations which govern native timber harvesting in Victoria (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)
- the auditing of VicForests' operations to ensure they comply with the regulatory framework (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)
- the construction and maintenance of Victoria's State forest road network (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)
- fire and fuel management on Victorian Crown Land including State forests (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)
- the management of domestic firewood collection from State forests (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)
- the licencing of other forest produce including honey production (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)
- the management of Victoria's National Parks (Parks Victoria)
- the establishment or harvesting of privately owned plantations (private business)

## 4. Who are VicForests' stakeholders

VicForests defines stakeholders as any person, group or organisation that may be interested in or affected by our management activities.

These stakeholders have wide and varied interests in our operations and fall under a number of broad headings including local communities, government, industry, indigenous groups, environmental and community groups, individuals and neighbours.

Examples of VicForests' stakeholders include (but are not limited to):

- a) Neighbours and local communities
  - residents and property owners adjacent to timber harvesting operations
  - residents who live along roads that may be directly impacted by VicForests' harvest or haulage operations
- b) Timber industry
  - VicForests' customers
  - Contractors
  - Industry associations
- c) Government, agencies and Departments
  - Commonwealth, State and Local Governments
  - Land management agencies
  - Resource management agencies
  - Regulators (including Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, WorkSafe Victoria)
- d) Indigenous groups including Registered Aboriginal Parties and traditional owner groups
- e) Stakeholders who have rights or tenure within areas of State forest managed by VicForests including:
  - Legal rights
  - Traditional or customary use rights
  - Land use rights
- f) Environmental and Social Non-Government Organisations
- g) Other commercial forest users
  - Apiarists
  - Tourism operators
- h) Recreational and other forest users
- i) Scientists and Academics
- j) Other local community groups

## 5. What stakeholders can expect when engaging with VicForests

VicForests recognises the importance of engaging with the community to seek their input, understand their concerns and provide relevant information to improve public understanding of our operations.

We are committed to giving stakeholders the opportunity to have a say about our forestry practices and ensuring the community has access to information regarding our management activities.

VicForests has identified the following principles which outline our approach to engaging with stakeholders:

- We will engage in an positive, open and transparent manner
- We will treat all stakeholders with fairness and respect
- We will provide formal and informal avenues for the community to engage
- We will provide stakeholders with accurate and up to date information, presented in language which
- is accessible to the broader public
- We will consider all requests for information on their merits

Stakeholders who have concerns regarding the behaviour of VicForests' staff during any engagement are encouraged to contact VicForests via the Online Enquiries form at [www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us](http://www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us) and outline their concerns.

## 6. How we engage with our stakeholders

VicForests acknowledges that communications and stakeholder engagement remains a critical component of our operations. We also recognise that efforts to communicate and engage with stakeholders face a number of challenges including the complexity of the issues and the wide variety of stakeholder views.

In order to ensure we communicate effectively with our stakeholders, VicForests uses a number of different methods including (but not limited to):

- Phone
- Email
- Website
- Face to face meetings
- Attendance at various community events including Open House events
- Social media
- Community partnerships including VicForests' Community Support Program
- Newsletters
- Media releases (including letters)
- Advertising
- Publications (Annual Report, Sustainability Report, fact sheets, Forest Management Plan, High Conservation Value strategy)

## 7. Stakeholder database

VicForests maintains a stakeholder database to record the contact details of stakeholders who have expressed interest in our organisation and our management activities.

The information contained in the database is managed in line with the *Information Privacy Act 2000 (Vic)*. All stakeholder contact details are kept confidential and no information is made available to any third party.

This database is used to contact stakeholders regarding issues directly relevant to VicForests and stakeholders can request to be removed from the stakeholder database at any time.

## 8. Formal opportunities for stakeholders to engage with VicForests

VicForests welcomes stakeholder input into our operations and practices at any time. This input can relate to a range of topics including broader planning activities, timber harvesting operations, coupe planning, regeneration burns and monitoring.

VicForests also provides formal opportunities for stakeholders to have input into our forest management practices and operations. These opportunities include:

### a) Forest Management Plan review

VicForests Forest Management Plan outlines how we conduct our operations including our objectives and information regarding our Sustainable Forest Management System.

The Forest Management Plan can be found on our website and is reviewed at least every two years. VicForests consults a variety of targeted, expert stakeholders as well as seeking public input when reviewing this Plan with feedback incorporated into updated versions.

### b) High Conservation Value Strategy review

VicForests High Conservation Value Strategy outlines how we identify, manage and monitor high conservation values found in the forest we operate in.

This strategy is reviewed where new information becomes available about the presence or management of high conservation values in the forests in which VicForests operates. The strategy is available on our website and input on these important issues is encouraged from stakeholders at any time.

### c) Timber Release Plan amendments

VicForests Timber Release Plan provides information regarding the areas that have been selected for timber harvesting including the location of these areas and any associated access roads.

The Timber Release Plan is reviewed at least once each year. When VicForests seeks to make amendments to the Plan, a public consultation period is held to give stakeholders the opportunity to provide input into the proposed operations including the identification and protection of environmental values. The Timber Release Plan amendment process includes Native Title and

Cultural heritage checks to ensure Aboriginal rights and cultural heritage are protected. All feedback is considered and, where appropriate, incorporated into the final Timber Release Plan before harvesting commences.

### d) Resource Outlook announcement

VicForests produces a Resource Outlook to provide stakeholders with up to date information about Victoria's timber resources including projections regarding the medium and longterm availability of high quality sawlog from Victoria's State forests.

The latest version of the Resource Outlook is available to all stakeholders via our website.

## 9. How stakeholders can engage with VicForests

VicForests welcomes stakeholder input regarding our operations at any time.

Stakeholders are encouraged to contact their local VicForests' office or VicForests' Corporate Support Office in Melbourne to raise any queries they may have about our operations. A range of information regarding our organisation is also available via our website – [www.vicforests.com.au](http://www.vicforests.com.au)

Queries can also be submitted via the Online Enquiries form at [www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us](http://www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us) or mailed to GPO Box 191, Melbourne 3001.

VicForests is committed to providing stakeholders with a response to their query and community members can also make an appointment to meet face to face with one of our staff members as required.

## 10. How VicForests responds to stakeholder complaints

VicForests is committed to a clear process for addressing stakeholder complaints related to our operations.

Simple and straightforward concerns may be addressed at the time of engagement, more complex issues often require further follow up and consideration before a response can be provided.

We aim to provide an initial response acknowledging stakeholder complaints or concerns within five (5) working days with a more detailed response provided within twenty (20) working days of the initial correspondence being received. These response times should be referred to as a guide - more complex matters may require longer to resolve.

A key principle of VicForests' complaint handling process is that every effort should be made to resolve concerns at a local level without the need for the issue to be elevated to be addressed.

The following process will be used to resolve complaints which cannot be addressed at the time of initial engagement with the stakeholder:

- The stakeholder should write to VicForests outlining all details relevant to their concern including the specifics regarding the issues raised, the location, date and individuals/organisations involved
- This correspondence should be sent via the Online Enquiries form at [www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us](http://www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us) or mailed to GPO Box 191, Melbourne 3001
- Correspondence must include the stakeholder's details including name, address and phone number

VicForests process for responding to concerns or complaints is made up of five key steps:

- 1) Acknowledge receipt of the stakeholder's correspondence in writing
- 2) Assess the complaint and determine the appropriate staff to follow up on the matter
- 3) Investigate the issue in order to provide an accurate and detailed response to a stakeholder – this step may involve seeking further written information from the stakeholder, face to face meeting to discuss their concerns and/or site visits
- 4) Respond directly to the stakeholder to address their query, concerns or complaint following the completion of the investigation
- 5) Improve our performance when a stakeholder's query, concern or complaint highlights where improvements can be made to VicForests' practices

## 11. Further investigation of complaints

If the stakeholder is dissatisfied with VicForests' response to their complaint then they should direct their concerns regarding this to VicForests Chief Executive Officer (CEO) via email at [vfs.admin@vicforests.com.au](mailto:vfs.admin@vicforests.com.au)

The CEO will review the outcome of the investigation and the response provided by VicForests to the stakeholder. This may include requesting clarification from the stakeholder and/or VicForests staff regarding specific relevant issues.

The CEO will provide the stakeholder with a follow up response to their complaint within 45 days. Once this response is provided by the CEO then the matter is considered finalised by VicForests.

In the event that a stakeholder remains dissatisfied with VicForests' handling of their complaint once this final response is provided, they have the option of taking their concerns to the Victorian Ombudsman - [www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au](http://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au)

## 12. Respectful engagement

VicForests is committed to engaging with stakeholders in a professional and respectful manner and places high expectations on staff in relation to their actions and behaviour when engaging with our stakeholders.

We also have an obligation to provide a safe workplace for our staff and ensure employees are not exposed to harassment or bullying.

As a result, VicForests expects stakeholders to engage with our staff in a respectful manner.

VicForests reserves the right to limit engagement with a stakeholder in cases where we believe the stakeholder's behaviour has been unacceptable. This may include nominating a specific staff member as a single point of contact for the stakeholder or insisting all correspondence be in writing.

Examples of unacceptable correspondence/behaviour include:

- abusive/threatening language or behaviour
- refusing to provide name and/or relevant contact details
- gratuitous criticism
- swearing
- illegal activity including entering Timber Harvesting Safety Zones around harvesting operations
- behaving in a manner which is unsafe to the stakeholder or others including VicForests' staff
- failure to accept the final position has been presented in relation to an issue

VicForests will inform the stakeholder that we believe their behaviour has been unacceptable and, where appropriate, offer the stakeholder an opportunity to amend unacceptable correspondence before further engagement takes place.

In severe cases, VicForests may cease engaging directly with stakeholders on specific issues and any threats of physical violence will be referred to the police.

### **13. Release of information by VicForests**

VicForests is committed to open and transparent dealings with our stakeholders and the broader community.

Many of the documents relating to our management activities are made available either via our website or provided directly to stakeholders upon request.

Some documents are not publicly available for a number of reasons including documents which are commercially sensitive, would breach VicForests' privacy obligations if released (such as the personal details of individuals) or contain Intellectual Property which VicForests believes would leave it commercially disadvantaged if released.

We are also committed to fulfilling our legal obligations relating to the disclosure of information to stakeholders about its operations including Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and Privacy.

### **14. Freedom of information (FOI)**

As a Government Business Enterprise, VicForests is bound to comply with the Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Vic). The Act provides a legally enforceable right of access to documents in the possession of Government Agencies and Ministers.

Agencies must:

- provide every assistance to identify the documents requested; and
- make the maximum amount of information available promptly and inexpensively

An applicant is not entitled to documents which are exempt under the Freedom of Information Act or are outside the scope of the request. More information on VicForests' Freedom of Information processes can be found on our website - [www.vicforests.com.au/legal/freedom-of-information](http://www.vicforests.com.au/legal/freedom-of-information)

### **15. Privacy**

VicForests is committed to ensuring the privacy of individuals who provide it with personal information.

We are required to comply with the *Information Privacy Act 2000* (Vic) including the Victorian Public Sector Privacy Principles in regards to privacy.

For more information on VicForests' approach to the use and collection of personal information can be found in VicForests' Privacy Policy which is available on our website - [www.vicforests.com.au/legal/other-legal](http://www.vicforests.com.au/legal/other-legal)

### **16. How to contact us**

VicForests has offices in Melbourne and in the regional areas where we operate across eastern Victoria. Stakeholders with queries regarding our operations can contact us via:

- Website: [www.vicforests.com.au](http://www.vicforests.com.au)
- Enquiries form: [www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us](http://www.vicforests.com.au/contact-us)
- Phone: (03) 9608 9500 or VicForests local regional office
- By appointment