

GIPPSLAND FOREST DIALOGUE

Co-chairs' Report

Plantations
in the landscape

YARRAM, 10-11 NOVEMBER, 2023

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Engage • Explore • Change



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The Gippsland Forest Dialogue is conducted across the Traditional Lands of the Gunaikurnai, Bunurong, Wurundjeri, Woi-Wurrung, Taungurung peoples, and into the lands of the First Nations of far East Gippsland, the Moogji, Bidhawal/Bidwell/Bidwall and Monero peoples. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. We acknowledge Traditional Owners on whose land we tread as the original custodians of Country, their enduring rights, and that many of the issues we will discuss are the product of settlement. We open the door to hear and respond, to listen and learn, to understand and acknowledge their individual and collective voice. We aspire to strengthen partnerships and acknowledge that increasing agency for traditional owners comes through ongoing conversations and working together.

Introduction

Focus

Exploring the past, present and futures of Gippsland's planted forests.

- the role of plantations in landscape health and their environmental impact;
- the role of plantations in community health and culture; and
- the role of plantations in the provision of forest products.

About the initiative

The Gippsland Forest Dialogue (GFD) was launched in early 2022 and aims to build understanding and agreement among stakeholders around the opportunities, challenges and knowledge gaps required for the sustainable management of forests in Gippsland. The GFD creates space for diverse stakeholders to come together to discuss how to look after the region's forests, for people and the planet, and to explore, agree on and facilitate collaborative actions that bring about positive changes. The emphasis is always on creating safe environments to discuss issues and opportunities, and a diversity of perspectives and comments are welcomed.

The Yarram Dialogue was the fourth convened by the GFD. We aimed to explore a wide range of stakeholder perspectives on the values, management and use of plantation forests in Gippsland. The aim of the Dialogue was to look at what we want from and for our planted forests in the region. The Dialogue explored what these goals mean to different stakeholders and communities. Over the two days we worked to find actionable recommendations to achieve balanced values through the exploration of three themes:

At this dialogue-based initiative, the GFD brought together individuals with experience in farming, industry, conservation, academia, and civil society, among other sectors. The dialogue process we used at Yarram is adapted from the process developed by the The Forests Dialogue (TFD), an international organisation based at Yale University that brings together and supports groups of forest stakeholders to learn from each other, to trust each other, and to implement collaborative and adaptive land management.

About this report

This Co-Chairs report is a synthesis of the process, discussion points and key themes arising from the Yarram 'Plantations in the Landscape' Dialogue. The report content was compiled from a combination of participant generated information gathered during the field day, presentations from participants and co-chairs over the course of the Dialogue, as well as the series of group and breakout discussions held on Day Two, along with written notes maintained by the Co-Chairs and appointed rapporteurs throughout the dialogue process. The final report brings together these sources in combination with the reflections of the co-chairs and the editor and was circulated to the Dialogue attendees.

Section 1 – Scoping Dialogue Summary

Dialogue context

The GFD established an Advisory Group to guide the Yarram dialogue process and to provide participants with a baseline understanding of three intertwined elements that influence and shape the role of Gippsland’s plantation forests—landscape health and environmental impact; community health and culture; and the provision of forest products.

The GFD Advisory Group produced and circulated a Scoping Paper that presented a summary of information about the opportunities and challenges on each theme, provided further reading and posed discussion questions to provoke ongoing thought and discussion. The paper outlined how Gippsland’s plantation landscapes are shaped by culture, historical and current land use and management decisions, and the effects that these have on landscape health and associated human and community well-being.

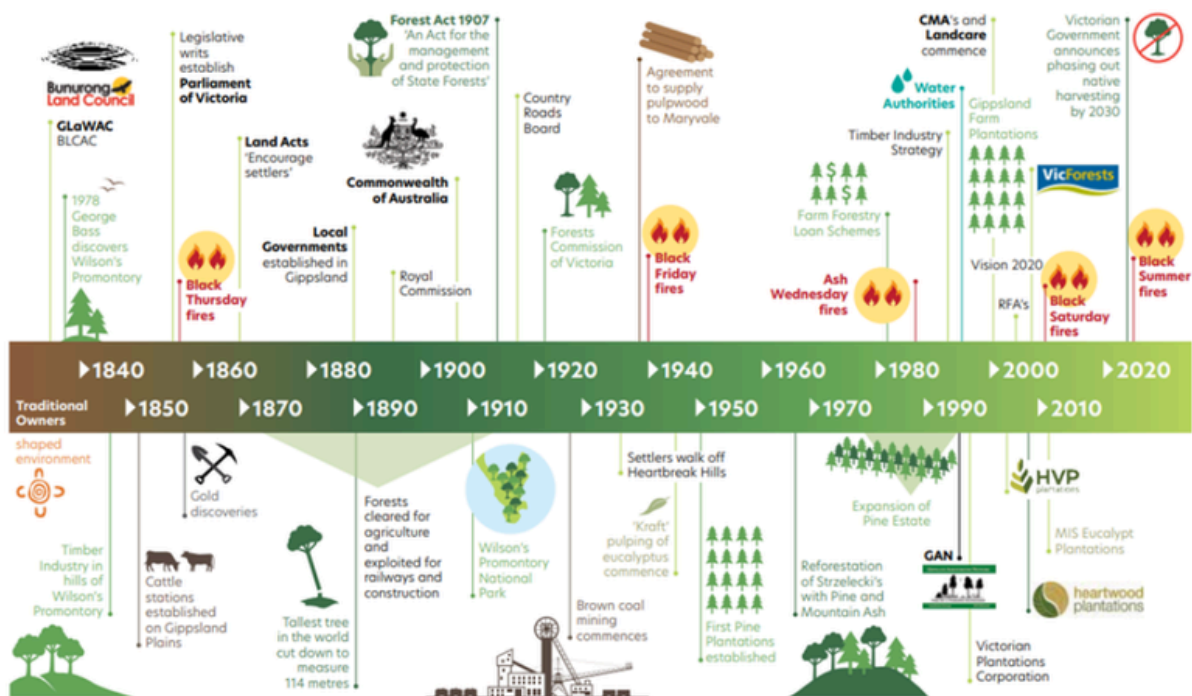


Figure 1: Key events and organisations that have influenced the current forest estate in Gippsland. Source.

Section 1 – Scoping Dialogue Summary

Aims and objectives

The aims of the GFD Plantation Dialogue were to:

- Build a collective understanding of stakeholders' perspectives, priorities and concerns – in particular, to allow community members a 'close up' window into plantation management possibilities and challenges; and to allow tree growers to hear the concerns and interests of the community;
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement, common ground, and knowledge / capacity/ research gaps relating to Gippsland's plantation forests across a variety of tenures, including private land, softwood and hardwood plantations, and farm forestry;
- Build trust and foster collaboration among stakeholders, allowing forest managers, land owners, community members, conservationists, wood product producers, policy makers, academics, and other interested parties to learn from one another and establish new connections/ relationships.
- Synthesise current knowledge and mobilise stakeholder networks to advocate and influence positive changes for the regions' communities and plantation forests.

Dialogue process

The 'Plantations in the Landscape' Dialogue was held over two days, comprising:

- a welcome session and field dialogue (day one);
- dialogue discussions, including a series of plenary and breakout sessions, co-chair presentations, mock debate and closing discussions (day two).

The Field Dialogue displayed the key themes in their wider context through carefully planned site visits, including touring various sites in the hills north of Yarram, hosted by Hancock Victorian Plantations and Heartwood Unlimited, ending with a tour of the radial timber mill at Yarram, hosted by Radial Timber Australia. After an initial session involving reflections from participants on the previous day's field dialogue, the Dialogue began with introductory talks from the four co-chairs.

The Dialogue sessions comprised a series of predominantly breakout group discussions with plenary discussions. These sessions were used to brainstorm opportunities for change in the way we interact with plantation forests. Outputs were reported back to the group.

Opportunities for change

1

At the initial breakout sessions participants focused on the following key questions:

1. What do we want from and for our planted forests in the landscape?
2. What are planted forests?
3. Why are each of the themes important? Where are we at currently?
4. Where do we want to go?

This exploratory exercise was intended to foster creative thinking, knowledge sharing and build trust among participants. The word cloud below summarises the topics discussed.

2

Participants investigated four further questions at the second brainstorming session:

1. How will we achieve our vision?
2. What do you need to do differently?
3. How will we measure success?
4. What is our preferred future for our planted forests in Gippsland?

Answers to these questions helped shape the Strategies for Action, Future Directions and Next Steps outlined in the section below.



This word cloud was created from the outcomes of a series of discussions exploring “visions of Gippsland’s plantations as they are and could be” during the course of the fourth Gippsland Forest Dialogue.

Opportunities for change

At the end of day two, participants discussed key aspirations and summarised what they believe 'our planted forests need' and what 'our planted forests could provide'. These are outlined in below.

What our planted forests need:

- culture of tree growing
- self sufficiency
- markets for our mistakes
- innovation, learning
- access to robust expertise and capacity with longevity
- clarity of objectives
- value-based regulatory and institutional mechanisms
- flexibility and certainty

What our planted forests could provide:

- Stacked co-benefits
- circular resource
- forests that meet community needs
- value added wood products
- community focused solutions
- shared benefits across communities
- economic resilience
- investor confidence

Overarching Co-Chair synthesis

The Co-Chairs convened before, during, and after the Scoping Dialogue.

During the event, Co-Chairs and note-takers maintained written records of discussions and themes arising. This method enabled access to the rich data from the multiple plenary and breakout group discussions, as well as informal participant comments.

These sources provide the basis for this report.

The Yarram Dialogue recognised that many parties are involved in managing plantations and the landscapes in which they occur and that balancing the resulting multiple objectives is challenging. What follows is a synthesis of the main points that were discussed:

Landscapes and plantations have many cross cutting functions, uses and values that are interrelated in complex ways, and need to be respected and considered in a process of holistic management. Values include but are not limited to: impacts to ecosystem functions such as biodiversity, fire, climate change mitigation, water quality, carbon accrual, as well as provision of timber and other fibre products, community and heritage values, recreation services.

Landscape managers grapple with achieving resilience through encouraging diversity and complexity, whilst also striving for efficiency through simplicity.

Synergies are possible in achieving multiple values simultaneously; however, some plantation management objectives are mutually exclusive, and require conscious trade-offs. Trade-offs and synergies may exist between different wood product types, timber vs agricultural production, production vs environment/ ecosystem services, ecology vs (fire) risk, etc.

Plantation owners and stakeholders need to be clear about what the primary purpose of a plantation resource is. The role of plantations can be perceived on a spectrum from agricultural crop to natural forest. It is important not to lose sight that many plantations are being grown to meet human resource requirements such as timber for housing.

We have an intergenerational responsibility to achieve plantation management outcomes that will meet the needs of future generations, both in terms of healthy landscape function and effective production of wood fibre resources. However, the needs and aspirations of future generations will evolve during the life of a plantation. Current and historical land use and plantation management decisions leave a legacy that will impact on future management choices and outcomes.

Plantations are often privately owned and managed as a commercial (profit driven) enterprise, within landscapes that hold values in the public interest. Prioritising investment that balances private and public enterprise objectives is critical but complex.

At the Yarram Dialogue participants identified the following major directions:

Be willing to listen to and understand different perceptions, experiences and opinions regarding environmental and production values in the landscape and recognise the importance of including a wide diversity of stakeholders in these conversations, acknowledging the need for time, resources and processes that work to establish better understanding, trust and agreement on the range of issues.

Foster a spirit of learning, community engagement and education about the potential of plantations to contribute to a wide range of values. "Tell me, I'll forget; show me, I'll remember; involve me, I'll understand."

Recognise that much like planting trees, 'planting ideas' is a long game! Be prepared to invest in stakeholder communication/ collaboration processes and community education initiatives that may bear fruit for future generations, but not in the short term.

Build a sense of ownership and stewardship between community members and plantation environments through recreation, tourism and employment in plantations.

Generate pilot projects, demonstration sites and case studies to encourage investor confidence and promote more sustainable, innovative, integrated and scalable plantation management approaches across the region and along the value chain; in particular towards developing Gippsland's plantation estate and manufacturing capacity to better supply Australia with valuable timber construction products.

Encourage mosaics of multi-scale farms and plantations as solutions to landscape scale challenges (biodiversity, water, fire, carbon etc). Encourage 'stacking' of co-benefits and circularity of resource use where possible.

Target and measure plantation/ landscape management objectives at a regional/ catchment/ landscape scale, rather than at farm scale – encouraging a diversity of land units/uses within a catchment that combine to achieve a holistic range of values within the catchment, without expecting each land unit to achieve all potential values independently. Neighbouring land owners at different scales can support each other to fulfill a range of purposes.

Match different stakeholders and different plantation types to the roles and objectives to which they are best suited. Encourage accountability.

Find new ways of working to enhance the contribution of plantations to the region that are more integrated, local and connected, including increasing community agency in the management of private plantation assets.

Encourage a culture of innovation, adaptability, freedom to fail. Recognise that large scale plantation managers may have less flexibility to experiment if beholden to meet narrow performance metrics; smaller scale plantation owners may have more flexibility to innovate.

Learn from existing models of cooperation/ collaboration – including examples from different industries and countries, landcare etc.

Creating a better future for Gippsland's plantation forests will involve overcoming global and local challenges. Identifying bridges and points of communication between stakeholders, managers and communities; advocating for change on multiple fronts; and, providing examples of positive, scalable actions will be central to successfully living with and limiting negative impacts on our plantation forests, ensuring that they remain functional and provide for future generations.

GFD strategies for action

The broader role of plantations in Gippsland, the GFD initiative's long-term directions and key next steps were discussed during a plenary session on day two of the Yarram Dialogue.

Future directions

Overall, broader discussions around the future directions for the Gippsland Forest Dialogue fell into several main categories.

- Community Education
- Developing better links to landcare, farm forestry and catchment health
- Processing industry innovation
- Investigating future industry development and transformation potential
- Working to inform wood users and buyers about local production

Next steps

Key priority next steps for the GFD were identified as:

- Co-Chairs report drafted for circulation and feedback in June.
- Establishment of working groups on education, biodiversity, carbon and plantations.
- Future themed dialogue held in partnership with Latrobe Valley Authority, local Gippsland councils, Gippsland Forestry Hub and other stakeholders around industrial transformation in the region
- Prioritisation of education and outreach
- Prioritisation of communications, engagement and advocacy – GFD members to network and pass on the message so that the movement can expand, facilitate understanding and participation from missing stakeholder groups, and better advocate for Gippsland's forests.
- Encourage co-operative leadership with a bold vision, including investment partnerships involving the four pillars of industry, government, community, academia; for example, a 'Gipps Futures Foundation', which could include the Latrobe Valley Authority, Gippsland Forestry Hub, Food and Fibre Gippsland, CMAs, local governments etc. Articulate the vision differently to different stakeholders in a way that is relevant to short term needs and connects to long term goals.

Section 2 – Exploration of Key Themes

This section of the Co-Chairs report explores the key themes that arose leading up to and during the inaugural Scoping Dialogue process. It is a synthesis of the dialogue process (including whole and breakout group discussions, informal comments and remarks by participants across the two days).

Exploration of themes

The themes identified by the GFD Advisory Group, as outlined in the Scoping Paper, were explored during the Dialogue. The additional themes of 'Past, present and futures' and 'Education', were identified as shaping and framing discussions on plantations in Gippsland.

Key Insights, Concerns, Aspirations, and Knowledge Gaps are presented for each thematic area. Key Insights are intended to provide context, perceived opportunities, and central challenges. Concerns reflect shared and individual doubts as well as points of disagreement or misunderstanding between participants. Aspirations express ideas and opportunities for action. Knowledge Gaps capture data, network, and communication limitations.

Landscape health & environmental impact

Key Insights

Plantations in Gippsland are an integral part of many landscapes that can have both positive and negative impacts on biodiversity and landscape health, depending on how they are managed. There are many different perspectives on the roles and benefits of plantations. The legacy of major historical decisions to develop and allocate plantations in Gippsland to different uses/users continues to have significant impact on land use options. Despite several decades of farm forestry programs and numerous smaller plantations initiatives, the major areas of plantation production estate have resulted from historical decisions that involved major government interventions.

Participants reflected that what a 'good' landscape looks like varies depending on their perspective. Pasture paddocks look 'neat' for some people and 'barren' to others, forested environments are 'messy' and complex, but are likely more resilient and fulfill a greater diversity of ecosystem functions. Diversity can also be assessed at landscape scale, relieving the expectation that each land unit at every scale must represent maximum diversity.

It was noted that the vegetation in the Strzeleckis is in a constant state of succession and competition, with native vegetation species and weeds constantly encroaching on production environments,

and vice versa, and also that the forest structure and associated landscape functions and habitat value of a plantation change during the life of a plantation. Different land uses such as plantation and native forest can have positive and negative effects on each other where boundaries are shared. The biodiversity of a region is impacted by the fragmentation and scale of plantations, farms and intermediary wildlife corridors/refuge patches, where different types of wildlife have different habitat connectivity needs. Smaller 'production' zones are better ecologically, but create more edge effect and complexity for plantation managers.

Concerns

- Some large scale plantations are increasingly being managed for the single purpose of pulp and paper production.
- Some large scale plantations are not responding to community environmental concerns during the harvesting process
- Opportunities to integrate landscape functions are being overlooked ignored.
- The potential for bio-industry transformation is not being actively developed
- There is insufficient landholder education on farm forestry and its potential to restore landscape functions
- More integrated approaches to landscape health are neglected

Landscape health & environmental impact

Concerns (cont)

- The use of chemicals for weed control
- Plantations harboring pest plants and animals
- Wildfire risks increasing under climate change
- Plantations can be managed to actively enhance biodiversity and other ecological values (for example, retention of thinning and pruning debris to augment nutrient cycling, moisture retention and habitat value; retaining coppice for a multi-aged stand of constant vegetation cover (no clear-fall). However, these strategies may compromise other values (e.g. increased debris may increase fire risk, coppice retention may slow productivity of dominant age class).
- There is a reluctance in Gippsland to use fire as a landscape management tool. The value of an appropriate burn schedule (e.g. small, frequent) is misunderstood. The impact of wildfire at different times in/ near the Strzeleckis has impacted the supply chain and shaped decisions about future species choices for large and small growers.
- Community expectations of plantation functions are often derived from comparisons to natural forest, without acknowledging that the primary purpose of a plantation is often to be managed as an agricultural crop to provide a particular product or service.

Knowledge gaps

- There are many knowledge gaps relating to how plantations can be better included within the 'commons' of landscape management, delivering (for example) wildlife corridors, while performing economic production roles.
- The commercial models of the next generation of industrial development that use wood fibre as the feedstock for engineered timber products are not well developed.
- Concerted research and development is needed to understand how to create modern value chains and industrial clusters that apply best practice from genetics to the end value add.
- Growing a better understanding of the professional capacity, industry networks and industry clusters that support a modern, high value, multi-value plantation industries
- Ways of attracting investors to pay for the multiple benefits from plantations that sequester carbon, support biodiversity, improve water quality and produce biomass etc
- Developing a locally branded high value wood industry and wood/tree farming culture
- If both timber products and the ecosystem services/ co-benefits of plantations can be viewed as utilitarian outcomes associated with a crop that is designed to achieve human objectives, including environmental objectives; do plantations have intrinsic values that should be protected in their own right?
- If zoning land types for tree production vs other land uses would help or hinder allocation of land for plantation production

Community health and culture

Key Insights

The Gippsland community wants the employment and prosperity that can be generated from a viable plantation industry, but does not want this industry to over-exploit the community or the natural environment. Understanding what the community expects of plantation management includes understanding how communities live within a landscape that includes plantations. Ongoing engagement with the community requires telling and listening to stories, but also continually refocusing the conversation on why plantations matter, and how they are relevant to each stakeholder in the community, now and in the future. There is scope for plantations to be used for education and community engagement. This would also support an understanding of landscape relationships, e.g. with the water and carbon cycles, landscape health, industry and investment, genetics and innovation.

It was also noted that there is an enthusiasm for encouraging increased ownership and care of plantation environments through recreation, tourism and employment within the plantation sector. However, attracting and retaining workers in the forest industry is a critical challenge; some smaller operators are able to attract those who want to spend time in nature; others are struggling to retain staff, especially at a larger scale. Training opportunities for developing skilled labour in

the plantation sector are limited. This impacts the capacity for the sector to expand and/or recruit from adjacent industries.

Recognising Indigenous and community connections to Gippsland landscapes is critically important. Members of the First Nations communities in Gippsland called on the GFD to be open to a spirit of learning and teaching, and encouraged a willingness to try to listen to and understand different perspectives.

Concerns

- The use of chemicals for weed control
- Dominance of major players
- Plantations harboring pest plants and animals
- Wildfire risks increasing under climate change
- Lack of investment in employment generating industries

Aspirations

Community response to plantation management will be a measure of success of holistic multi-value management; are the short and long term needs of the community met, are stakeholders showing understanding and support for growers; are stakeholders sharing regular respectful dialogue?

Community health and culture

Knowledge gaps

- Future industry viability and impacts on employment and industry.
- How to have a tourism and plantation industry that coexist?
- Downsizing and attrition in some parts of Gippsland regional industry (native forest timber production, fossil fuel energy sector etc) may have positive and negative flow on effects to both plantation sector and other industries in the region; we need to understand and look for opportunities to close the gaps across industries to bolster regional resilience.
- Need to explore the potential of collaborative business and resource management models that are better suited to integrated landscape-scale management in response to evolving business conditions, and which offer returns to the community.
- Capacity building and education includes development of robust information and advisory services that provide accountable, evidence based support to investors.

Provision of forest products

Key Insights

Gippsland's plantation industry is dominated by radiata pine, mostly for paper pulp production. Solid wood processing has been in decline due to areas lost to wildfire, short-term commercial thinking, high labour costs and risk mitigation (plantation management and timber processing) discouraging onshore production, over-reliance on the native forest estate (pre 2024) and now offshore wood resources.

Timber supply has almost shifted overnight, with a rapid rise in pricing of timber products; this may close the profit gap in a way that create opportunities for smaller growers and new investors to enter the market. However, the potential for multiple commercial products and services from a plantation forest creates a complexity in product marketing that is less of a factor in alternative agricultural enterprises such as food production (crops, livestock).

Participants observed that this diversity could also be a benefit to whole-of-farm resilience. Cost efficiencies for plantation investment could be substantially improved if markets are developed for low grade mid-rotation thinnings (posts, poles, peeler logs for veneer, firewood etc). Similarly, quantifying and monetising co-benefits (carbon, biodiversity, bioenergy, other ecosystem values) allow 'stacking' the value chain for better returns. Alternative management regimes that enable

integrating fibre products with agricultural outputs (eg wide spaced trees integrated with fodder crops) provide options for land owners to add value across the supply chain. Continuing investment in R&D, technology, experimental management strategies and capacity/ skill building to improve the value proposition of plantation investment at different scales will be key.

Yet while there are increasingly diversified plantations in terms of species being planted,, true diversification of the plantation sector is a chicken and egg problem. Participants observed that there is a need to establish more direct and local linkages (eg CERES Fair Wood) to wood buyers and users (eg architects, builders, furniture makers, DIYers) who want local quality products. It was also noted that capital investment for innovation at a smaller scale is more feasible than capital requirements to innovate at a large scale. New species, new site types, new processing technologies and new custodianship expectations from the community provide impetus for ongoing innovation and experimentation. However, despite the need to be adaptable to changing circumstances and expectations, plantation growers still require a minimum degree of business certainty and risk management to warrant the confidence to invest. Getting plantation management right is a complex challenge, and enabling freedom to fail includes developing 'markets for mistakes'.

Provision of forest products

Key Insights

The existing networks of contractors, processors and professionals is a critically important basis for future plantation development. It is important that the transition from native forests does not result in a dramatic loss of capacity.

It was also noted that there is an enthusiasm for encouraging increased ownership and care of plantation environments through recreation, tourism and employment within the plantation sector. However, attracting and retaining workers in the forest industry is a critical challenge; some smaller operators are able to attract those who want to spend time in nature; others are struggling to retain staff, especially at a larger scale. Training opportunities for developing skilled labour in

Concerns

- Insufficient research and development in innovation.
- Current private enterprise environment limits the capacity for businesses to collaborate and share resources to explore common research and capacity building challenges.
- Over reliance on a handful of proven species; species diversification opens up opportunities but creates complexity and reduces economy of scale.
- Need to improve production systems from genetics to marketing of wood products
- Lack of Gippsland local quality branding.
- Losing industry capacity during transition from native forests
- Limited land availability impacts capacity to expand the plantation estate
- Labour shortage and the conundrum of out-sourcing skilled labour & professional expertise Vs developing in-house capacity

- Long term “right to harvest” is a risk for growers of native tree species. State-level guidelines through the Code of Forest Practice are implemented by local government, with little consistency between jurisdictions.
- Do we have an ethical obligation to use highly productive land for efficient resource production that can meet local, regional and global commodity markets? What are the ethical considerations if tree/ forest products and services are competing with food production?
- Objectives need to be achievable with available resources.
- A key limitation of small scale plantation production is securing cash flow for intensive mid-rotation management interventions.

Aspirations

- Given that plantations are often privately owned, there is potential for greater agency in the innovation and development of the plantation sector as compared to public native forest – this lends itself to future focused solutions-based thinking

Knowledge gaps

- How to move from commodity to niche production
- Development of long term demonstration sites and case studies
- The economics of carbon sequestration on smaller areas and smaller titles (like Gippsland)
- How to reduce fire risks through green breaks, use of deciduous species etc

Cross-cutting themes

This section explores emergent dialogue themes that cut across the previously identified pillars. They reflect topics and/or overarching themes that arose regularly in discussions among participants and were subsequently documented by Co-Chairs during the dialogue process.

Cross-cutting themes that emerged during the GFD Scoping Dialogue include:

- a need to understand how historical and current plantation management practices impact on the future
- a desire to expand educational opportunities around plantations in Gippsland; and,
- the potential to establish an Advisory Board for farm forestry and industry development

The opportunities for education are expanded on under the “Community” theme above. Ideas relating to inter-generational connectivity are expanded on in detail below

Past, Present and Future

Due to the long term nature of plantations, the dialogue focused on the legacy of past decisions and how today’s decision will affect the future. The history of plantations in Gippsland indicates that an era of bold state development was responsible for major plantation expansions, including both pine plantation expansion on crown land, and bluegum expansion on private land. Is it appropriate and likely that governments will drive a shift in plantation development at this time? State owned plantations have subsequently been privatised, and are now

owned/ managed by Hancocks. Some of the planted ash forests that were originally intended for timber production have been returned to state control and have become part of the public park/ conservation reserve estate. While the Victorian and Federal governments have recently expressed support for plantation expansion, future public policy trajectories and strategies remain uncertain. There is potential for improvement in policy and regulatory mechanisms at every level of government to address barriers to make this support more tangible. Climate change is here. Changes in social values are also significant with much of South and West Gippsland under the influence of Melbourne’s population and its demand for lifestyle and recreation blocks. Engaging some of the new land holders in the plantation journey may be a significant opportunity.

Recognising that we are managing the Gippsland plantation estate and landscape to meet the needs and expectations of both current and future generations is critical, given that management objectives will change over the lifetime of any planted forest, and the choices we make today create a legacy our children will inherit. Stakeholders may feel a greater sense of agency over the future of plantations as a largely privately owned resource that is partly decentralised, as compared to publicly owned resources. As such, this lends itself to future-focused action oriented thinking, in which plantations can be seen as a solution to landscape and regional community scale challenges – driving an energy of optimism and empowerment amongst stakeholders.

Fracture Lines

The Co-Chairs identified the following 'fracture lines' – defined as sources of points of disagreement and uncertainty between stakeholders – which came through in discussions during the Yarram Dialogue. This is not an exhaustive list, or comprehensive analysis of the varying views and opinions underpinning each fracture line described. It is acknowledged that additional fracture lines will likely emerge during ensuing dialogue discussions.

Although the issues presented in this section are contentious and risk alienating participants from the GFD process, there is a greater risk of ignoring these topics; it will be more important to bring these tensions to the surface, where they may be respectfully addressed, for the group to progress in a meaningful way. It is hoped that a respected and knowledgeable GFD will have influence on the forming up and carriage of these critical discussions moving forward.

The following were identified as fracture lines:

- Industrial plantation management for maximising fibre production and its impact on biodiversity and wider landscape health.
- Holding forest managers to account for the way their policies are implemented in practice, particularly in relation to environmental commitments and neighbour engagement.
- Fears about trees increasing the wild fire risks, supporting feral animal populations etc versus trees as welcome additions to the ecology of over-cleared landscapes. Relative priority of protecting forest ecology vs timber assets vs infrastructure and housing in fire response.
- Competition for land from different kinds of users – farming, lifestyle and plantation developers. Land owner and investor perceptions that have been influenced by the legacy left by the "Managed Investment Scheme" (MIS) model.
- Reconciling the need for the plantation and timber processing industries to be globally competitive, versus the idea of focusing on local niche production, including using certification of compliance with social and environmental standards

Section 3 – Reflections

Gippsland's people and its forests have, are and will always be intimately connected and this was evident in the passion expressed by participants during the GFD. Key outcomes and takeaways from the Dialogue are outlined [here](#) and the themes are explored at length [here](#), but we also include learnings from the facilitation process and reflections from the participants in this section, in order to both aid future dialogues and record responses to the event. The GFD Yarram event felt like a success in terms of people learning together. The participants represented a diverse group, for the first time including a more significant presence from the farming community. The event had a buzz of excitement and a sense of being involved in something bigger.

Several participants reported making meaningful new connections, appreciating the exposure to valuable new insights, and developing a deeper understanding of the shared challenges we face in helping the plantation sector realise its potential. Many participants expressed that they felt welcomed and like they belonged in the discussion, despite an initial apprehension about whether this would be a respectful and relevant forum for them. The event finished with a sense of pragmatic optimism and enthusiasm for the future potential of plantations in Gippsland.

If this energy and trust can be sustained and mobilised it will support better community and industry networks. At the event it became clear that the future of Gippsland's plantation sector and the industry that depend on it requires people to cooperate and work together to add value to the region's natural resources and primary productivity. While the region has some natural advantages – high rainfall, fast growth, good soils etc – it also faces significant challenges.

Learnings for future dialogues

Twenty people responded to the post-dialogue survey, with 85% indicating that the Dialogue helped to advance their thinking on plantations, and most noting that the field trip, open and respectful conversations and the opportunity to connect with new people were the most significantly successful aspects of the dialogue. Everyone (16/20) who responded to the 'are you likely to commit to attending future dialogues?' affirmed that they would attend future events.

The Gippsland Forest Dialogue offered a unique opportunity for participants to recognise and reflect on the past, present and future of Gippsland's plantations, through the lens of an optimistic, solutions-based focus. This focus had both positive and negative aspects and during the facilitation of the dialogue we learned firsthand about the challenges associated with holding an event of this kind. Our observations and reflections include that :

Section 3 – Reflections


- The field trip was really useful to engage people in the diverse landscape, their stories, and for learning about the differing objectives and strategies amongst different forest managers.
- Moving a large number of people in and out of the chosen locations in a timely fashion was challenging
- Everybody has strong views on how landscape should be managed but fewer people have first hand experience of what is involved; it is key to seek participants that currently have agency and accountability over how the landscape and plantation estate is managed.
- Having people knowledgeable about the landscape/ plantation history in Gippsland is important to generating understanding of long term perspectives and making patterns of change and industry development more visible.
- The event was carefully curated to enable diverse voices to be heard. Along with setting a friendly tone at commencement, the astute facilitation helped minimise overt conflict over fracture lines. There was some debate as to whether more prominent conflict is necessary to uncover key areas of disagreement.
- The organisers noted that some invitees were reluctant to attend, particularly those with deeply held views, and/or those that lacked confidence that the process would be inclusive and respectful. Finding ways to support the organisers to articulate the GFD purpose and process to prospective participants would be helpful for future events

Acknowledgements

The GFD Co-chairs would like to thank all the dialogue participants who so generously donated their time and resources to making the weekend a success, the members of the GFD who were unable to attend the dialogue in person but have contributed significantly and generously to the ongoing process, and the support staff on the ground – Alex Leib, Aly Nichol and Cara Schultz. As key advisory group members, Chris McEvoy and Tom Fairman also generously contributed their time to shaping the event. The dialogue and the creation of this report would not have been possible without leadership and financial support from the EcoLands Collective.

Appendices

Participants list







A T T E N D E E S	Jason Alexandra	John Crocker	Dave Gover	Morrie Kileen	Peter McHugh	Cara Schultz
	Tracey Anton	Carolyn Crossley	Paul Haar	Seb Klein	Aly Nichol	Charmaine Sellings
	John Ballis	Peter Devonshire	Ash Hall	Matt Langdon	Wally Notman	Keith Solomon
	Anda Banikos	Alex Dudkowski	Jonathan Hauser	Joanne Lewis	Gideon Kwarne Otchere	Bronwyn Teesdale
	Neil Barraclough	Tom Fairman	Frank Hirst	Alexandra Lieb	Ian Peterson	Bryan Watterson
	David Bennett	Ross Gillies	Stuart Inchley	Marg McNeil-Alexandra	Heather Phillipson	Wendy Wright
	Tim Cornwall	Lesia Goodwin	Braden Jenkin	Chris McEvoy	Jim Phillipson	

Event overview

A G E N D A	Friday 10 November	
	8.30am	Informal meet & greet Memorial Park (under the rotunda), 312 Commercial Rd, Yarram, 3971 <i>(Parking available off Grant St in front of library)</i>
	9.00am	Official Start of Yarram Dialogue • Introductions • Welcome to Country
	10am Travel to Stop 1 - Bulga Park Rd, Macks Creek (15 mins)	
	10.15am	Stop 1 - Macks Creek/ Tarra Valley Mosaic Landscapes a) History of plantations & land use change in Strzeleckis • Looking back to look forward - what can we learn from history in new plantation development on Gippsland Plains? b) Do you see what I see? • Connectivity between plantations, native forest, farm land • Plantations & landscape health
	11.15am Travel to Tarra-Bulga Visitor Centre, Balook (30 mins)  	
	11.45am-12:30pm	Lunch at Tarra Bulga Visitor Centre (catered) • First Nations aspirations, conservation priorities
	12.30 Travel to Stop 2 - HVP, Grand Ridge Rd, Blackberry (20 mins)	
	12.50pm	Stop 2 - Young Pine & Eucalypt Plantations – Blackwarry • Plantations & landscape health (eg HVP "cores & links") • Biodiversity in plantations • Forest products & markets, plantation expansion
	1.50 Travel to Stop 3 - Travel to Stop 3 – cnr Willis Rd & Old Carrajung Rd, Carrajung (30mins) 	
2.30pm	Stop 3 (optional, time permitting) – Mature pine plantation • Biodiversity & forest structure in mature pine	
3pm Travel to Stop 4 - Cnr McAlpine Rd & Carrajung Lower Rd, Carrajung Lower (10min)		
3.10pm	Stop 4 - Finlay Eucalypt Plantation, Agroforestry – Carrajung  • Mixed species forest structure & management • Agroforestry – trees & livestock, goats for weed control • Equipment, training & skill development for forest workers • (possible thinning demo with Scandinavian harvester)	
4.10 Travel back to Yarram (20 minutes): OFFICIAL FINISH: 4:30pm		
4.45pm	Optional: Radial Timber Sawmill Tour Livingston Rd, Yarram • Supply-demand for hardwood timbers 2024 onwards • Milling techniques for young, small diameter eucalypts • Bioenergy	
5.30pm	Free time (Co-chairs & note takers meet to collate discussion points)	
7pm Dinner (to be paid individually) at Yarram Country Club, 322 Commercial Rd, Yarram. Guest Speaker Peter McHugh - history of the Strzeleckis 		

Appendices

Event overview

Saturday 11 November												
A G E N D A	<table border="1"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">8.00am</td> <td> Pre-session tea & coffee Regent Theatre, 210 Commercial Rd, Yarram, 3971 <i>(all day parking available at Sports Centre, 2 Smith St – walk through to main street via alley next to bakery)</i> </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">8.30am</td> <td> Summary of field trip Feedback, questions, discussion points arising from field trip </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">9.30am</td> <td> Overview & ground rules for discussion Introduction to themes 1. Update on status of plantations in Gippsland 2. Role of plantations in landscape health/ environmental impact 3. Role of plantations in community & culture 4. Role of plantations in provision of forest products </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">10.15am</td> <td> Morning tea (catered)  </td> </tr> </table>	8.00am	Pre-session tea & coffee Regent Theatre, 210 Commercial Rd, Yarram, 3971 <i>(all day parking available at Sports Centre, 2 Smith St – walk through to main street via alley next to bakery)</i>	8.30am	Summary of field trip Feedback, questions, discussion points arising from field trip	9.30am	Overview & ground rules for discussion Introduction to themes 1. Update on status of plantations in Gippsland 2. Role of plantations in landscape health/ environmental impact 3. Role of plantations in community & culture 4. Role of plantations in provision of forest products	10.15am	Morning tea (catered) 			
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Dialogue outputs: Gippsland woodflow diagram



The coloured segments in the diagram above show the qualitative flows of wood fibre in and out of Gippsland, other regions of Australia and other countries, to serve domestic, import and export markets in 2024. The comparative volume of wood fibre drawn from Gippsland forests is very roughly represented in segments at the core of this diagram. All other rings beyond the core do not reflect comparative volumes of wood flow.

This diagram only picks up on major industrial wood flows. Small enterprise in farm forestry, wood salvage and processing is also active across Gippsland but it's quite small in scale. Moreover, the above is an imperfect attempt to indicatively illustrate current flows of wood based forest products in and around Gippsland, aimed at stimulating discussion. Source: Paul Haar and David Bennett

Participant feedback

Feedback from participants was solicited both during the dialogue process and through a feedback survey completed after the conclusion of the Dialogue. On day one, participants were asked what they hoped to get out of the Dialogue. Responses to this opening question could be broadly characterised as follows:

Community and Collaboration

- community self-reliance and building trust, multi-generational, consensus-driven change.
- respectful dialogue and engagement, with a focus on listening and evolving perspectives.
- Focus on connecting public and private lands for ecological and economic benefits through a regional alliance.

Ecological and Economic Integration

- multi-functional use of land for timber, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration.
- need for the industry to engage with conservation values.
- Need to integrate timber production with ecological enhancement.
- Concern about the future of industry workers and multigenerational businesses.
- Support for farm forestry and landowners economic benefit
- Engagement in regenerative agriculture and timber interest over generations.
- Interest in sustainable timber sourcing and its impact on climate change and biodiversity.
- Importance of timber to the local economy and supports for innovative approaches post-native harvesting.
- Discussion of the role of timber and plantations in a post-coal future.

- Connecting forestry with traditional farming economic
- Integrating forestry with conservation and production
- Producing biochar and other products from leftover materials, contributing to sustainable practices.

Conservation and Biodiversity

- Work to protect and connect remnant bush with neighbors.
- Need to invest in revegetation and biodiversity projects through local initiatives.
- Support for revegetation efforts for biodiversity.
- Promotes the understanding of plantations in relation to fire ecology
- Focus on climate adaptation and forward-looking community planning.
- Focus on interaction between people and wildlife.
- Reconnect people with nature