

SENATOR JANET RICE

Greens Senator for Victoria



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Mr Grant Hehir
Auditor-General for Australia
Australian National Audit Office
GPO Box 707
Canberra ACT 2601
Via email: External.Relations@anao.gov.au

Dear Mr Hehir

Re: Commonwealth actions under the Regional Forest Agreements

I write in relation to the Commonwealth's obligations under the *Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002*, and the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) signed with states and territories.

I welcome the decision by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit (JCPAA) to reinstate the "the review of the operation of Regional Forest Agreements" as an audit priority of the Parliament for 2020-21, in the JCPAA *Annual Report 2019-20*.

I would also draw your attention to the conclusion reached in the recent *Independent review of the EPBC Act*, which noted that:

"The Review considers that the environmental considerations under the RFA Act are weaker than those imposed elsewhere for MNES [matters of national environmental significance] and do not align with the assessment of significant impacts on MNES required by the EPBC Act ...

"There is insufficient Commonwealth oversight of RFAs and the assurance and reporting mechanisms are weak. The RFA Act requires agreements to be subject to a 5-yearly review process but those reviews have been consistently late by an average of approximately 3 years. The first RFA to be signed was not reviewed until 13 years after the commencement date. All RFAs have been progressively extended as their initial 20-year term came to an end, rather than renegotiated from scratch."

In addition, the attached report prepared by the Wilderness Society, *Creating Jobs, Protecting Forests? An Analysis of the State of the Nation's Regional Forest Agreements* provides a powerful summary of the failings of RFAs. I note particularly their conclusion that:

"... the RFAs have not been successful in achieving their intended outcomes. While the establishment of the CAR Reserve System made a significant contribution to forest conservation in Australia, it is based on outdated science and standards that have since been superseded. Many forest-dependent threatened species are closer to extinction than 20 years ago, and the native forest logging industry has undergone substantial declines in production and employment since establishment of the RFAs."

I understand that while Regional Forest Agreements were listed in a 2015 work plan, to date the ANAO has never examined the Commonwealth's fulfilment of its obligations under the RFAs. I therefore ask that you consider auditing the Commonwealth's responsibilities in

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relation to RFAs, including monitoring implementation, coordinating annual reports and conducting reviews.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Janet Rice', written over a faint circular watermark.

Senator Janet Rice
Australian Greens spokesperson on Forests