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News

VicForests issues “stop work order”: Loggers forced out of forests

VicForests has ordered timber workers to halt harvesting, following a Supreme Court judgement. See the update.

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The Weekly Times



24 comments



Timber Harvest Worker Mick Morrison.

VicForests has made public its order calling on timber contractors to halt harvesting today, following last Friday's Supreme Court ruling on a drawn-out case involving Environment East Gippsland versus VicForests

"You may have heard reports that Victorian native timber harvesting will cease today as VicForests has ordered stop work orders following the judgment in the Supreme Court," VicForests chief executive Monique Dawson said.

"We are taking the necessary steps to ensure we are compliant with the final (court) orders that are likely to be handed down by the Supreme Court tomorrow, which will include a permanent injunction impacting operations in the East Gippsland and Central Highlands FMAs (forest management areas).

"VicForests has asked those contractors who are likely to be affected by the Orders to cease planning and operations by COB today."

“We anticipate that the final (court) orders will be effective tomorrow morning.

“When we receive the final orders we will consider in detail its impact on our existing, planned and future operations. Crews that are not affected by this case will continue to operate as usual.”

The order brings to a standstill most of Victoria’s timber harvesting, given most coupes are in the Central Highlands and East Gippsland.

VicForests ordered the stand-down, after [Justice Melinda Richards ruled](#) the state-owned enterprise’s pre-harvest surveys were inadequate and it was not doing enough to protect two possum species – greater and yellow-bellied gliders.

The ruling forces VicForests to resurvey hundreds of coupes, which it confirmed would take months to complete and would leave harvest and haulage contractors without work and exacerbate a sawlog shortage that has already led to the closure of one mill.

Justice Richards also ruled that VicForests had failed to meet its obligations to retain enough vegetation on coupes to protect gliders, under the precautionary principle of the Code of Practice for Timber Production.

Justice Richards left it to the parties in the case to negotiate what final orders the court should impose tomorrow, but made it clear her preference was to retain 3ha around a possum sighting and retain 60 per cent of the trees in the rest of the coupe.

coupe.

MWM Logging operator Andy Westaway said most coupes would no longer be viable if only 40 per cent of trees could be cut.

"Today we're clearing away and parking machines," Mr Westaway said. "The two crews are down with no work."

East Gippsland harvest and haulage contractor Rob Brunt said the ruling marked "the end of the industry".

"It will make most coupes impossible to harvest," Mr Brunt said.

As for resurveying Mr Brunt said "by the time VicForests gets them done I won't have a business left. It's just not workable."

Injunctions imposed by Justice Richards on the harvesting last December had already locked harvesters out of many coupes, leading to lost work, idle machinery and a sawlog shortage that has crippled many timber communities as mills slowed or stopped work.

Central Highlands harvest and haulage contractor Brett Robin said "we may as well pack up and go home".







Logging contractor Brett Robin with a koala he saved, and nicknamed Coota, near Mallacoota. Supplied Brett Robin

“It’s been 12 months since I cut trees,” Mr Robin said. “You feel like just curling up in a ball and hiding.”

East Gippsland’s timber industry is already on the brink of collapse, with 115 workers facing the axe and [warnings Orbost will become a “ghost town”](#).

In her ruling Justice Richards said the spotlight surveys VicForests “relies on to detect gliders are limited to a 1km transect through a coupe.

“This leaves most of the coupe unsurveyed, and provides incomplete information about whether gliders are present and where their home range is located.

“Without knowing where the gliders are within a coupe, it is not possible for VicForests to take management actions to address risks to them.”

But VicForests has highlighted to the court that more intensive surveying at night is next to impossible, even taking Justice Richards and her associate out to an unharvested coupe to show them the difficulty of the terrain.

The Victorian Government spokesman said “VicForests has advised it will work with contractors to ensure work can proceed in coupes not affected by the court ruling”.

But VicForests and contractors say there are very few that are not affected, given they have not been surveyed to the standard demanded by Justice Richards.

The government spokesman also said "we will continue to support contractors, timber businesses and the community as we implement the Victorian Forestry Plan".

But most of that plan has not been enacted.

"The government is seeking more information from VicForests with final orders in the case not due until Friday," the spokesman said.

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