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Exclusive National Victoria Bushfires

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# Conservation watchdog investigates: Is bushfire tree removal 'overzealous'?

Miki Perkins March 5, 2020 – 4.54pm

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The government's conservation watchdog is investigating claims that "unprecedented" roadside tree removals throughout areas of East Gippsland affected by the catastrophic summer bushfires have been over-zealous and will fragment ecosystems.

Members of environment and landcare groups in Gippsland have raised the alarm over the quantity of trees being felled and removed by logging contractors in fire-affected areas, including near Cann River, Mallacoota, Cape Conran and Orbost.



Cape Conran Coastal Park, the Marlo-Conran roadside.

Residents say they understand roads need to be reopened and made safe, but they are concerned that large trees - often blackened but still intact - are being unnecessarily cut down by contractors without the proper oversight of arborists.

"We are extremely disturbed at the amount of questionable clear felling of large habitat trees occurring along thousands of kilometres of East Gippsland's roads," says a submission prepared by Friends of the Earth on behalf of environment groups, and lodged with the Office of the Conservation Regulator.

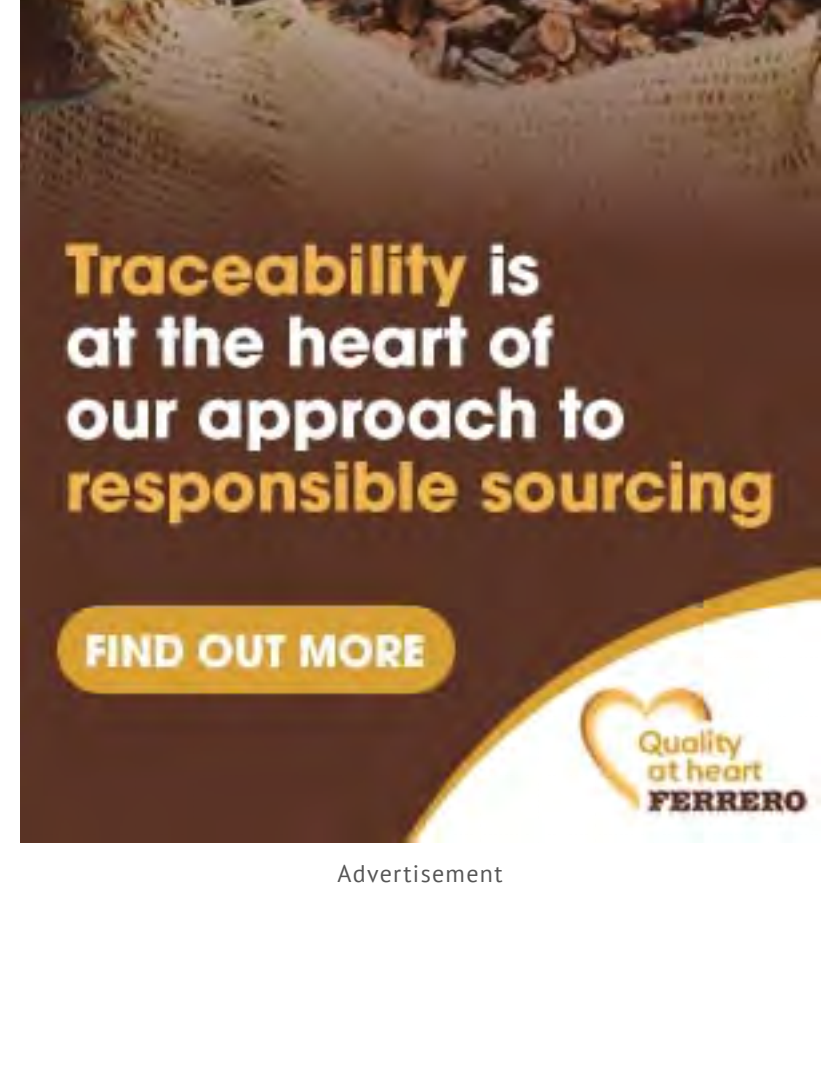
"We fear that demands from industry for salvage logging of burnt public forests is already happening under the guise of road clearing operations."

Their submission alleges only a small proportion of trees being cut down are hazardous, and the 80-to-100 metre buffer being created along some roadsides will fragment ecosystems.



Sarsfield Roadside Reserve, Sarsfield.

"It appears to us that there has been clearing well beyond what is required to make roads safe," said Friends of the Earth spokesperson Cam Walker.

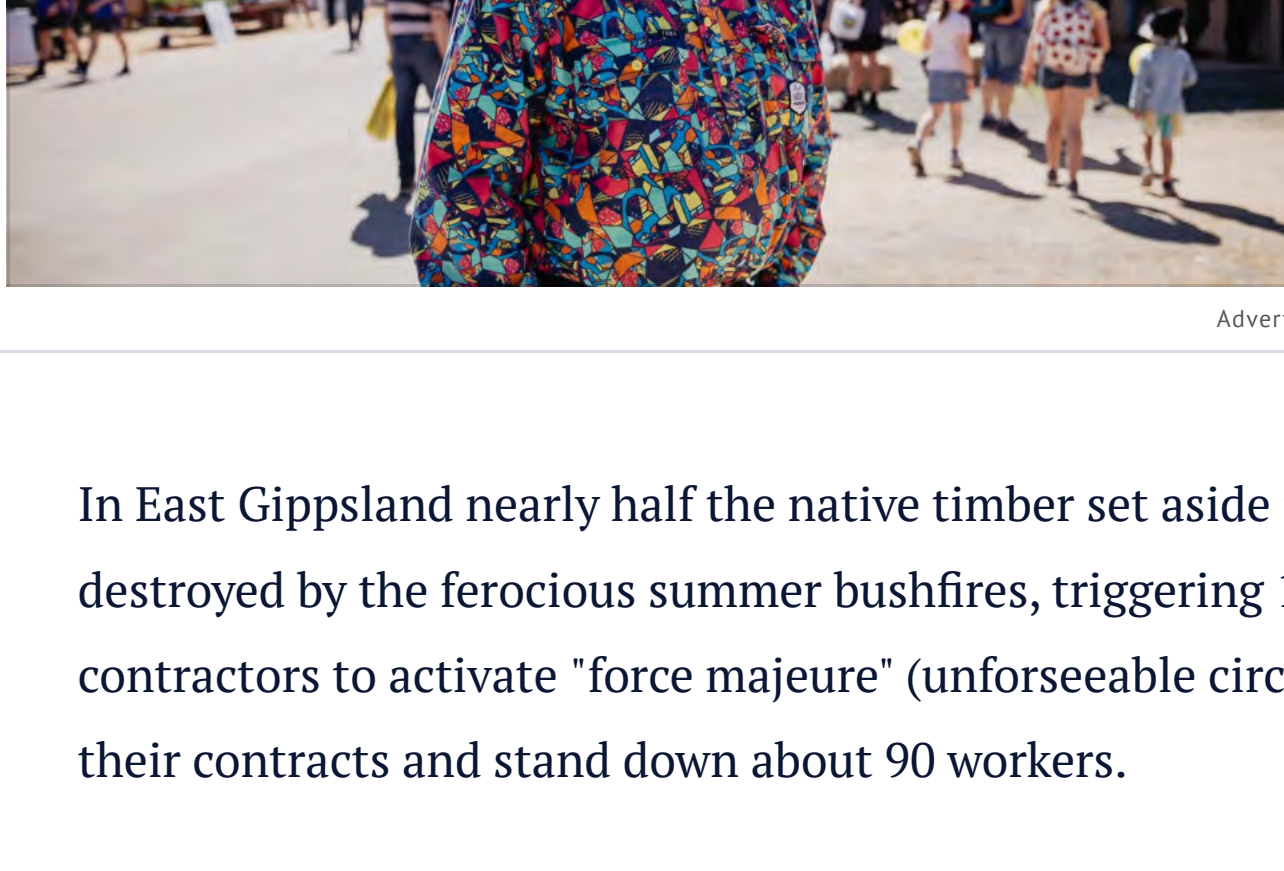


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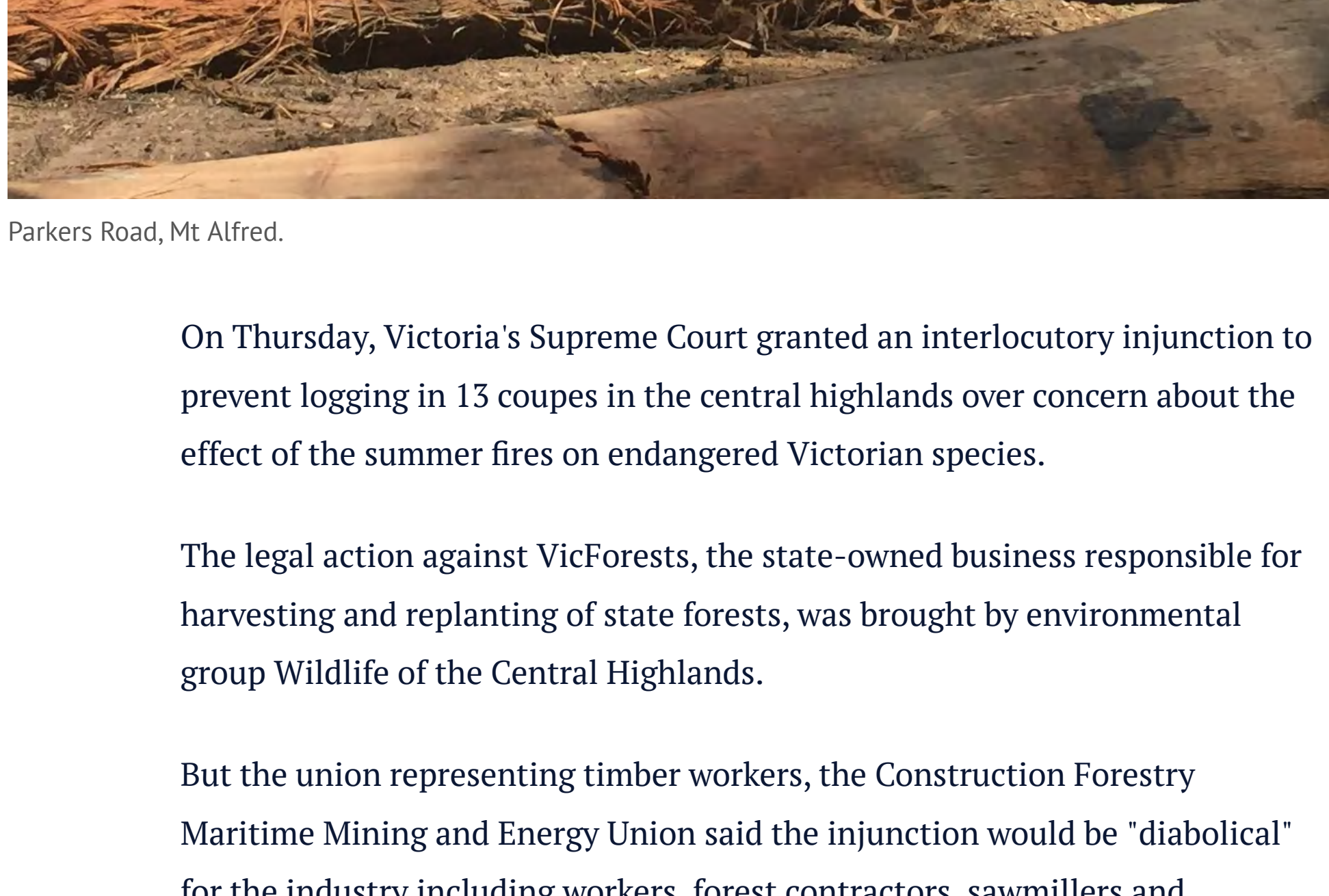
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In East Gippsland nearly half the native timber set aside for logging was destroyed by the ferocious summer bushfires, triggering 10 VicForests contractors to activate "force majeure" (unforeseeable circumstances) clauses in their contracts and stand down about 90 workers.

It was a major setback for an industry already facing an uncertain future. Last November Premier Daniel Andrews announced the logging of old-growth forest would end immediately, and native timber harvesting would be "phased down" before ending completely in a decade.



Parkers Road, Mt Alfred.

On Thursday, Victoria's Supreme Court granted an interlocutory injunction to prevent logging in 13 coupes in the central highlands over concern about the effect of the summer fires on endangered Victorian species.

The legal action against VicForests, the state-owned business responsible for harvesting and replanting of state forests, was brought by environmental group Wildlife of the Central Highlands.

But the union representing timber workers, the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union said the injunction would be "diabolical" for the industry including workers, forest contractors, sawmillers and Gippsland's largest private sector employer, Australian Paper.

It called on the government to amend regulations governing timber harvesting to allow harvesting in these coupes, and to shield other harvesting from these types of challenges.



Sarsfield, in East Gippsland.

A spokesperson for the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning did not comment on whether the roadside clearing in Gippsland was excessive, confirming only the Conservation Regulator was currently investigating reports from the Princes Highway.

The department's spokesperson said hazardous tree removal and roadside clearing were done regularly to suppress fires, allow residents to return to townships and ensure roads were accessible for emergency and utility services.

The Office of the Conservation Regulator was established by the department of environment early in 2019 after an [independent review of timber harvesting regulation](#) into the state's native forests found the system of regulation was labyrinthine and the department was "neither an effective or respected regulator". It is responsible for monitoring compliance with timber harvesting, biodiversity, fire prevention and land-use regulations.

VicForests has an agreement with the department to remove timber following the Gippsland Fires. As part of this, VicForests has all rights to the timber once it has been removed.

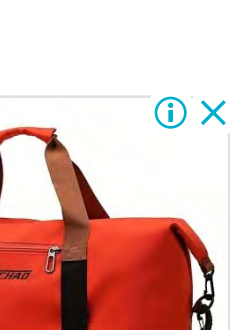
[VicForests says](#) timber removed as part of these fire recovery works will be used for replacing lost timber stocks, timber processing, and made available to local operators and communities for firewood and other uses.

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Miki Perkins is a senior journalist and Environment Reporter at The Age. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).

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