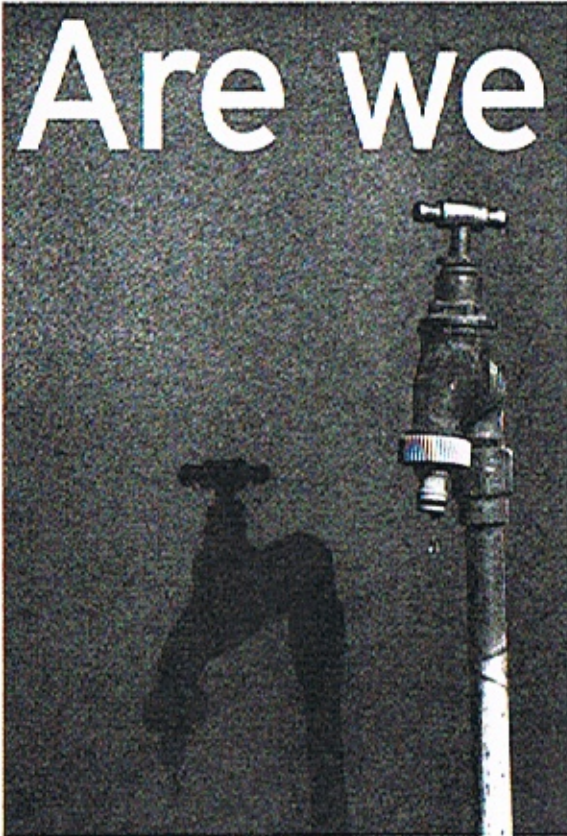


Are we

cutting down



Below: The aftermath of logging at Starvation Creek, east of Warburton. All photographs on these pages were taken last Saturday.



Victoria's timber industry has been making headlines again, as conservation groups step up their campaigns to protect native forests. However, while much of the attention has been focussed in Western Victoria, in the Otway Ranges and Wombat Forest, logging continues elsewhere in the state, including Melbourne's water catchment areas. AMANDA HURLEY reports.

ACCORDING to statistics released at the end of March by Melbourne Water, Melbourne's 11 reservoirs, which provide the bulk of the water for the state, are just over half full.

While much of that worrying statistic can be explained by the drought Victoria has experienced over the past three and a half years, environmentalists say logging in Melbourne's water catchments is a ticking time bomb.

Up to 25 per cent of Melbourne's water catchment areas, which are generally to the north east in mountainous regions of the state, are currently logged, with land cleared at a rate of 150 hectares per year.

While that may not seem like a significant proportion in relation to the size of the catchment areas - the Thomson catchment north of Traralgon alone exceeds 48,000 hectares - environment groups argue anything that compromises the quality and quantity of Melbourne's water should be looked at very closely.

"Australia's a dry country and in Victoria we've had low rainfall, drought conditions for three and a half years and our water levels are very low," Environment Victoria forest campaign coordinator Rod Anderson says.

"So although drought is a major contributor and main cause of our water shortages, it just makes no sense at all to be logging our water catchments because that drastically reduces our water yield."

Melbourne Water and the State Government's Department of Natural

Resources (DNRE) both argue that the impact of logging in water catchments is negligible, saying the proportion of land logged is not great enough to have any significant impact on water supply.

Melbourne Water's manager of catchment and transfer, Frank



Sawlogs await processing in Millgrove, outside Warburton.

Lawless, says that the majority of Melbourne's catchment areas are located in national parks and are therefore protected from logging.

However, the Thomson catchment, which includes Melbourne's largest reservoir, and four creeks that are tributaries of the Yarra River near Warburton, are open to timber companies.

"The Thomson...is a huge reservoir, but there is a limit to the amount of logging conducted there," Mr Lawless says.

"Over the last 15 years, 150 hectares have been logged on average per year. It would not have had an overly significant impact on the water yield. From Melbourne Water's point of view, we respect the need to address the social, economic and other environmental demands and what logging there is in the catchment areas."

The Thomson catchment, according to Mr Lawless, is unique compared to the majority of Melbourne Water's catchment areas, which operate under a "closed" basis.

The Thomson reservoir was finished in the 1980s, and because of the significant prior uses of the land for timber harvesting, recreation and sport, it was decided the area could still be used for purposes other than water harvesting.

The immediate area around the reservoir is barred to the public, but elsewhere in the catchment, economic social and recreational activity can and does occur.

For the four Yarra tributaries near Warburton - Starvation Creek, McMahon's Creek, Cement Creek and Armstrong Creek - timber harvesting occurs on a regular basis.

Under the Central Highlands Regional Forestry Agreement (RFA), a maximum of 30 per cent of each creek's catchment can be harvested over a 10-year period, and one creek is targeted each year. While each creek is logged, it is also disconnected from

our water supply?

Melbourne's water supply to cut down the risk of infection or pollution.

However, Environment Victoria's Rod Anderson argues that creeks and rivers affected by forestry can take up to 150 years to return to pre-disturbance water levels.

Mr Anderson argues that forests act as giant sponges, soaking up rainfall and holding moisture in root systems and soil to nurture the forests in times of drought.

When a forest is logged using the clear-felling method utilised by many of Victoria's timber companies, there are no longer roots to hold the moisture in the soil.

than 50 per cent of the original rainfall runs off into the surrounding streams, hence your prolonged reduction of water after clear-felling," he says.

Mr Anderson points to the current situation in Geelong as a worst case scenario of what could happen to Melbourne's water.

The city and greater area of Geelong have been under water restrictions for at least two years, with reservoir levels at just 25 per cent full.

Yet timber harvesting in many of the catchment areas, including the Otway and Wombat Forests, continues. And recent negotiations have set

based organisation, has claimed that logging in a relatively small area does not appear to have a major impact on the water supplies.

To determine the truth, the State Government has committed itself to an inquiry, as detailed in the Western Victoria and Gippsland RFAs, which will also investigate whether clear-felling is the most appropriate timber harvesting technique.

Environmental groups argue that the use of clear-felling, in which all but a handful of trees are removed from a section of forest or coupe before it is burnt to regenerate the forest, is an unnecessary and damaging form of harvesting.

They say that clear-felling has a spin-off effect by feeding a growing demand for woodchips on the international market, as residue timber not used for sawlogs is woodchipped and then sent away for pulp and paper production.

The Regional Forestry Agreement process, which has taken place in five locations across Victoria, has effectively removed the maximum quota level of woodchips.

Enter the Yarra Ranges Environment Coalition (YREC), a new environmental organisation formed to act against timber harvesting and woodchipping in the Central Highlands.

YREC member Peter Wadham argues that as much as 85 per cent of the timber taken from the Central Highland's native forests is wood-chipped and used for the production of pulp and paper.

He says the State Government's method of ensuring sustainability in the forests is flawed, as counts used to provide figures to determine sustainability are based only on those trees used as sawlogs.

Trees that are used for wood-chipping are not factored into the government's equation and as a result, more trees are being felled than the statistics show.

"I get the impression timber harvesting is at a pretty stable level, which is a bit of a worry because when the government does estimates of sustainability, they look at timber, they don't look at all the pulp stuff," Mr Wadham says.

"There probably wouldn't be logging in water catchments if it was as sustainable as some people say it is. Even back in the 19th century there were moves to protect the water catchments and up until the '80s the water catchments were all closed. It's only been the last decade or so that they have been allowed to do logging in these areas and I just think that's a sign that their demands for pulp, for woodchips and for timber aren't being met."

However, those claims are countered by the Victorian Association of Forest Industries (VAFI), a lobby group that represents timber companies.

VAFI resource director John Drohan says that woodchip levels are determined by the sawlog caps, which state that only a certain amount of trees in a certain area can be harvested.

"Under Victorian government policy, the industry has to be sawlog driven. We have got to have a certain level of sawlog yield, but all residual matter can be used for pulp for the domestic or international market," Mr Drohan says.

"You're making a round thing into a square thing, so of course you are going to get residual material. You might get up to 70 per cent of residual matter and 30 per cent sawlog but that's not a great deal different to (what happens in) a softwood plantation."



PHOTO BY ANDREW THOMAS FOR METRO NEWS



Above and right: Timber harvesting in progress in the McMahon's Creek catchment, one of the Yarra River's tributaries

In the first five to ten years after logging, according to Mr Anderson, water levels actually increase as rainfall runs off the soil into the creeks and rivers.

However, once the forest starts to regenerate, the growing trees use more water than they store.

"For the next 150 years or so as the regrowth forest grows, that regrowth water sucks up all the water so very little runs off, less

the deal in stone with the signing this month of the Western Victoria RFA.

Claims by environmentalists that water supplies are being degraded have been countered by scientists who argue that the amount of logging would have to be significant to affect water yield.

As reported last week, Rob Vertessy, deputy director of the Co-operative Research Centre for Catchment Hydrology, a Canberra

According to Mr Drohan, logging caps for sawlogs are, on average, comparable to a 1:2 ratio with woodchips. In 1995/96, Mr Drohan says, 628,000 cubic metres of pulp logs were processed, while 345,000 cubic metres of sawlogs are taken from the forests each year.

To date, the inquiry by State Environment Minister Sherryl Garbutt into the timber industry has been tentatively welcomed by both sides of the argument, but issues such as the terms of reference, timeframe and how the scientific studies will be designed have yet to be decided upon.

"This will be a major exercise and implementation won't be instant, but the government is working as fast as it can," a spokeswoman for Ms Garbutt told Metro News this week.

The State Government has undertaken to examine clear-felling and the production of woodchips from forest residue, review royalties, charges and grading and recovery of sawlogs, conduct an independent review into the process of setting sustainable yields, and review harvesting arrangements in state forests.

"If it is an independent inquiry that looks at both water yield and water quality," Environment Victoria's Rod Anderson says, "then I think that it's a good thing."