

Case study

Regional firewood plans

Department of
Sustainability and
Environment

North East Victorian Firewood Strategy

Background

Around half of all households in Victoria's North East are dependent on firewood as their primary heating resource, therefore ensuring a sustainable firewood supply is an important issue for the community. However there are concerns that the current available and accessible firewood resource will not be able to cater for a significant increase in demand. It is also possible that existing sources of firewood, including red gum from New South Wales and Victorian sawlog harvesting residues could become unavailable in the future. So, the North East Victorian Firewood Strategy was seen as a necessary tool to manage the supply of firewood from public land in a coordinated way, and to ensure that sustainable options for meeting community demand are developed.

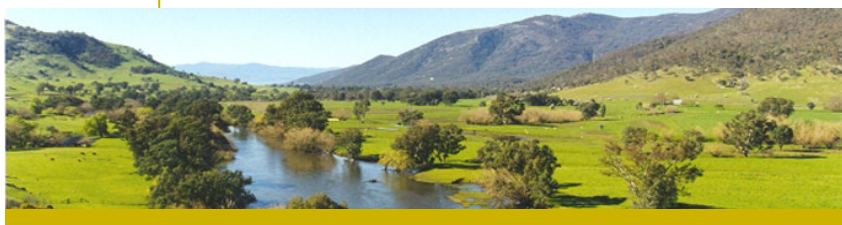
North East Victorian Firewood Strategy

Funded by the Victorian Government, the North East Victorian Firewood Strategy was developed in 2004 by the North East Catchment Management Authority in collaboration with local councils and communities. The project set out to address a range of important social, economic and environmental issues related to firewood supply in the North East region. As a result, five strategic areas were identified and formed the basis of an action plan aimed at identifying sustainable firewood sources to supply communities in the North East region for the next 20 years and beyond.

The five strategic objectives identified were:

1. to ensure an adequate and continuing supply of firewood
2. to ensure firewood is collected, produced and harvested in an environmentally sustainable manner
3. to have a firewood industry that contributes to the social needs and environmental objectives of the wider community
4. to ensure affordable firewood is available whilst encouraging efficient use
5. to promote a streamlined, consistent and clear process for permits and access to firewood.

Since 2004, the North East Victorian Firewood Strategy Implementation Committee has worked with the community, local councils, and a range of other partners to implement the strategy. Community involvement has played a key role in the successful adoption and implementation of the strategy actions, through an implementation committee consisting of members from a wide range of organisations. As a result a great deal has been achieved with minimal funding or changes to policy and legislation, primarily through cooperation and coordination between land management agencies.



Some of the committee's achievements include:

- assisting in the investigation of firewood supply and demand across Victoria
- conducting a localised study to examine current firewood usage
- the establishment of seven community firewood depots
- the establishment of 560 hectares of firewood plantations in collaboration with landholders, local council and government
- commencing the development of an Emergency Response Firewood Salvage Strategy, including engaging local governments to coordinate the provision of storm damage timber to depots for firewood use
- the salvage of around 10,000 tonnes of fire-damaged native forests at Moyhu and East Carbour
- the development of a system for temporary depot identification and mapping to enable immediate access in the event of local emergency
- the successful operation of seven community firewood collection days which included the delivery of community education in safe chainsaw use and efficient firewood burning
- the launch of community education programs including "Turning Waste into Warmth" and "Firing up the Community Sustainable Firewood in Action".

Sharing many of the same objectives, several other projects have also been developed to compliment the firewood strategy, including the North East Firewood Plantation and Access projects.

North East Firewood Plantation Project

Ensuring a sustainable supply of firewood into the future was a key objective of the North East Firewood Strategy. Among the options for supplying firewood, the strategy considered the potential for the establishment and management of firewood plantations. It was estimated that if planted at a rate of 100 hectares per year for 15 years, plantation firewood could sustainably produce around 40 percent of the region's total firewood needs.

The development of plantations for firewood has the potential in some cases to contribute to the sustainable supply of firewood to Victorians. Firewood plantations are not viable in all regions within Victoria due to issues including land availability and suitability and water resource impacts. There has been a potential for plantation projects to address firewood shortages in some cases, such as at Chiltern and Beechworth. The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) introduced the North East Firewood Plantation Project with the aim of providing a valuable alternative resource. This offered private landholders the opportunity to obtain assistance to establish plantations for firewood production.

The project received an enthusiastic response from local landholders, and as a result, the project had successfully established more than 560 hectares of firewood plantations on 122 properties by mid-2008.

Throughout the project, DPI supported land-owners by coordinating and funding a range of activities including the mapping and preparation of planting sites and the supply and planting of seedlings. Landholders were responsible for identifying the planting area, selecting the species to be planted, as well as undertaking pest control and the construction of stock-proof fencing.

But beyond the obvious benefit of creating a renewable energy resource and boosting firewood supplies for the community, the success and appeal of this project can also be attributed to the range of opportunities for environmental and economic benefits gained from establishing woodlots. From an environmental perspective, plantations assist in carbon sequestration, reduce fossil fuel emissions provide salinity and erosion control and protect Box Ironbark forests by providing a substitute for native forest timber. Plantations also provide important woodland habitat when established using indigenous tree species with some understorey and when mosaic coppice harvesting techniques are used. From an economic perspective firewood plantations offer landholders a long-term source of income, savings from substitutions for other fossil fuel based energy sources, as well as potential increases in property values. For farmers, tree plantations can also enhance agricultural systems by providing shelter for stock and crops and provide potential carbon

offsets.

North East Firewood Access Project

Significant amounts of firewood-grade timber can often result from day-to-day maintenance activities of local councils and businesses. Whether it be cleaning up damaged trees after a wind storm or removing dangerous overhanging branches, the resulting timber often ends up becoming waste product. Working in partnership to investigate ways to relieve the region's firewood shortfall, the Rural City of Wangaratta and Indigo Shire recognised the potential for these activities to produce an immediate source of firewood for the local community.

With a particular focus on ensuring that lower-income households in the area had access to affordable supplies of firewood, the North East Firewood Access Project was implemented to make these valuable resources available to the local community.

The project discovered that valuable timber waste product was produced by a range of council activities including:

- the removal of trees or limbs that encroach within VicRoads safety standards
- the removal of dangerous trees or limbs encroaching on public areas
- the removal of woody weeds
- road works such as road widening or black spot projects and
- clean-up activities after natural disasters such as bushfires and windstorms.

To ensure the wood could be salvaged and made available to the local community for firewood, councils incorporated the project's objectives into the council's maintenance and clean-up activities.

The council also issued an expression of interest for local businesses to register their timber off-cuts. As a result, a list compiled from the respondents was distributed throughout the community and promoted during each firewood season.

To provide the community with easy and convenient access to the gathered firewood, several local community firewood depots were established where firewood was deposited, ready for collection by Domestic Firewood

Permit holders. Issues such as insurance, requirements for suitable depot sites, signage, and development of a permit system, were addressed in collaboration with the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). Permanent community firewood depots were established at Eldorado, Beechworth, and Chiltern, while several temporary depots were established in special instances.

The North East Firewood Access Project highlighted some of the innovative ways in which new and sustainable sources of firewood supply can be harnessed. Through collaboration between councils, state government departments and local business, the project was able to supplement the firewood resource shortfall by providing the community with access to valuable and previously untapped sources of firewood.

Opportunities and challenges

The development of the North East Victorian Firewood Strategy and its related projects presented a number of opportunities and challenges for firewood supply management.

Firstly, the strategy requires increased levels of cooperation between agencies to address firewood management issues, including joint funding for education and engagement and cooperative management of firewood depots. For example, the Beechworth Transfer Station and using low risk prisoners to cut and deliver wood to concession card holders.

Secondly, the success of firewood strategy projects in the region depends heavily on community acceptance and support, and a change in the way people have traditionally collected firewood from public land. This was achieved through the use of media, signage, education and community engagement to increase awareness and compliance. It also required a more focused and strategic approach to compliance operations. As a result of these efforts, managed firewood supply is now generally viewed positively by the community.

Thirdly, the provision of continued support to landholders to assist in the initial establishment of firewood plantations is a challenge. This is due to considerable up front plantation establishment costs involved and a 15-20 year wait before any potential harvest return. The delayed nature of these harvest

returns also results in high risks associated with marketing the product.

Another significant challenge is the integration of firewood strategic objectives into the planning of other forest activities including dangerous tree removal, fuel reduction burning, and track clearing. As a result, proper management of on-ground firewood supply requires a commitment of resources, including the involvement of field staff to assist with implementation.

Note: Over the last five years the majority of firewood licensed for removal from State forest in the North East FMA has been sourced from 'salvage' after windstorm and fire events. The number and intensity of extreme weather

events may increase as the impacts of climate change become more pronounced.

Finally, legal liability associated with health and safety is also a major issue for managing access to firewood on public land. In particular, hazard assessments, and identification and communication of hazards to the public are required on an ongoing and consistent basis.

As firewood licensing generates more funds, more compliance and education activities can be funded which in turn results in a greater proportion of firewood being removed under permits from public land. Of particular promise is the setting up of movement activated cameras to deter illegal collection.