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OLD FORESTS AND THE GROWING FIRE RISK

Tall eucalypt forests require periodic burning to regenerate, so fire management and forest management have always been inextricably linked. However, climate change and the growing risk of fire in highly-flammable forest landscapes are likely to throw a spanner in the current national forests debate for both loggers and conservationists.

The warning was sounded by Professor David Bowman of the University of Tasmania, at the Old Forests, New Management Conference in Hobart today.

“Already we can see we are facing an increased challenge of managing highly flammable landscapes due to global warming – while at the same time having to pay a lot more attention to the carbon storage potential of both old-growth and regrowth forests,” he says.

“This will raise questions like the necessity to cut huge firebreaks around old growth forests if we don’t want to risk losing them altogether in the mega-fires that are likely to develop and releasing their carbon into the atmosphere.

“Worldwide the pressure is rising to use our forests to store carbon. In that event there is the distinct possibility that logging regrowth forests will lose the current social licence – which is something I doubt anyone has yet seriously considered. The assumption we will be able to continue logging regrowth forests is probably up for grabs under climate change and the new carbon economy.”

The reason is that, while old growth forests lock carbon up, they do not remove much extra CO2 from the atmosphere, whereas regrowth forests are an important means of reducing the net amount of atmospheric carbon and there is a lot of interest in using them as carbon traps. Logging of regrowth forests may prove to have a significant carbon cost.

“People won’t thank me for saying it, but I can foresee a time when the political pressure not to log regrowth forests is as strong as the current pressure not to log old growth forests,” Prof. Bowman says. “These are the issues we need to consider in thinking about how we manage our forests in a fierier future.”

The growing interest in using regrowth forest as a carbon trap and the necessity to manage old growth forests in a more flammable landscape are two issues which may overwhelm the classical debate of whether to log or to conserve, Prof. Bowman predicts.

old forests NEW MANAGEMENT

"There is undoubtedly a worldwide trend towards forests drying out as the climate warms, and there is no doubt these forests will carry big fires in future.

"The issue is how we will manage this new regime in order to conserve our forests, store carbon and maintain productive and biodiverse forests. And we simply do not have the answers to these questions yet. There are serious gaps in our knowledge, and it is a horribly complicated set of problems which renders the current comparatively simplistic forest debate somewhat obsolete."

"There is also the question of which forest types are more prone to fires – old forests or regrowth forests," he says, adding some theories suggest that regrowth burns more readily.

The Old Forests, New Management Sir Mark Oliphant Conference is at Hobart's Hotel Grand Chancellor. It features more than 160 scientific presentations and papers about advanced temperate forest management.

The conference is hosted by the CRC for Forestry, Forestry Tasmania and the International Union of Forest Research Organisations and sponsored by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) under the International Science Linkages Programme, the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering and the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

Media are welcome to attend and to interview participants.

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