

old forests NEW MANAGEMENT

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HOT FUTURE FOR OLD FORESTS

Handling the increased risk of catastrophic wildfires is one of the key issues to be addressed by leading international forest scientists gathering at the Old Forests, New Management conference in Hobart starting today.

“Climate change is a big issue,” says CRC for Forestry CEO Professor Gordon Duff. “We’re clearly heading into a period where our current approach to forest management is going to be severely challenged in many ways, but particularly by fires.

“Over the past two decades we have witnessed increases in both the incidence and intensity of wildfires, in comparison with all our previous knowledge of Australian forest fires. We know that temperatures will be higher and there will be more very hot days under climate change.

“It means we have to think seriously about how we adapt our management to the increased fire risk, as well as the need of various forest types to migrate to cooler or damper regions,” Prof. Duff says.

“There has been a global scientific effort to describe the features that make a forest an old-growth forest”, says Conference Chairman, Dr Steve Read of Forestry Tasmania.

“Contrary to what some people think, Australian old growth forest is constantly changing, dynamic, always being modified by fire and other factors. If we are going to manage these forests, it isn’t simply a matter of locking them up.”

“If future generations are to have the opportunity to enjoy old-growth forests, we need to achieve a mix of age classes of trees across the whole landscape today.”

For the past few decades Tasmanian forest scientists have been carrying out large-scale, long-term experiments to understand how eucalypt forests evolve after disturbances such as fire or harvesting.

“They are naturally disturbed systems, and this means it is possible to take timber from them and still have old growth characteristics, still have the same biological and ecological qualities in the landscape,” says Dr Read.



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One of the major issues at the conference will be how climate change affects the distribution of forest species across the landscape. Cool climate trees will migrate into the high country, but since Australia has little of this country, they will eventually run out of places to move.

“Another big issue is going to be the management and containment of weeds, pests and diseases which will move into old growth forests as they are stressed by climate change. We need to be a lot smarter in how we detect, monitor and control these,” adds Prof. Duff.

Both agree that an issue looming large for old growth forests in the 21st century is their role as carbon stores. “Forests are a big part of the carbon economy,” says Dr Read. “If you want to maximise the stored carbon, you have to manage the whole forest and get the age-class distribution of trees right,”

Related to this is the opportunity to convert forest residues into ‘green’ energy for both transport and static uses, adds Prof. Duff.

“The bottom line is that there is a very complex set of tradeoffs between conserving old growth forests, timber and energy production, fire control, pest management and other issues, which has still to be worked out,” he says.

However both conference organisers say Australia is at the forefront of global old growth forest science. Thanks to government intervention the total area of trees on the continent is now expanding again, a very large area of undisturbed native forest has been set aside, while Australia forest researchers are at the cutting edge in working out how to deal with changing conditions.

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 (contact details on next page).



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