



Removal of Dead Wood

as a key threatening process – *an overview*

The NSW Scientific Committee, an independent body of scientists, has made a final determination to list the “Removal of dead wood and dead trees” as a key threatening process under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (TSC Act). This does not alter current rules for collection of firewood in NSW.

The “removal of dead wood and dead trees” includes:

- the removal of forest and woodland waste left after timber harvesting (in the absence of a sustainable management regime)
- collecting fallen timber for firewood
- burning on site
- mulching on site, and
- the removal of fallen branches and litter as general ‘tidying up’, and
- the removal of standing dead trees.

Q.1 Why is the “removal of dead wood and dead trees” considered a threat to biodiversity?

Dead wood and dead trees provide essential habitat for a wide variety of native animals and are important to the functioning of many ecosystems. The removal of dead wood can have a range of environmental consequences, including the following:

Loss of habitat

Dead wood and dead trees often contain hollows used by many native species for shelter. For example, in Australia about 290 vertebrate species (that is frogs, birds, mammals and reptiles) use tree hollows. Hollows suitable for wildlife can take between 120 and 200 years to form in eucalypts. A reduction in hollows limits the ability of many native species to breed or avoid predators.

Fallen timber also provides camouflage. This helps some ground-dwelling native species, such as the endangered bush stone-curlew, to avoid predators.

Removal of dead wood may also result in the removal of plants, alteration to their habitat, and may introduce weeds and disease (eg the root-rot fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi*).

Disruption of ecosystem processes

Dead wood is essential for maintaining forest and woodland ecosystems. Along with the living understorey, leaf litter and soil components, it is vital for maintaining ecological processes.

A diverse range of specialised insects (and other invertebrates) and fungi species depend on dead wood for their survival. These species can have complex interactions

Questions & Answers

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with plants and other animals. Declines in one group of species will have indirect impacts on a range of other species and ecosystem processes.

Soil erosion

The removal of dead wood from the ground can expose the soil to wind and water. This can lead to an increase in soil erosion and sedimentation.

Q.2 Has anyone else recognised “the removal of dead wood and dead trees” as a threat to biodiversity?

The Commonwealth Government has recognised that the removal of dead wood is a national issue, and has developed a **National Approach to Firewood Collection and Use in Australia**.

Rather than stopping the collection and use of firewood, the National Approach proposes a number of strategies to make the firewood industry more environmentally sustainable. Suggested actions include:

- encouraging the use of firewood from plantations and sustainably managed native forests
- improving the efficiency of firewood use
- encouraging firewood merchants to sign up to a voluntary code of practice to demonstrate that their firewood is sustainably sourced.

Under the National Approach, each state and territory is encouraged to develop a Firewood Action Plan. NSW was involved in the preparation of the National Approach, and is working on a Firewood Action Plan to address air quality and biodiversity impacts of firewood collection and use. When the NSW government develops a threat abatement plan this will be separate from but integrated with the Firewood Action Plan (see Question 5).

As a first step to developing the action plan, a discussion paper is being developed by an Interdepartmental Committee on Firewood. The discussion paper seeks community input into practical measures to better manage firewood and its impacts.

Additionally, the Commonwealth Threatened Species Scientific Committee is considering the nomination of “the continued net loss of hollow-bearing tree and coarse woody debris due to firewood harvesting practices” as a key threatening process under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

Q.3 What is a “key threatening process”?

A key threatening process is a recognised threat to biodiversity, particularly threatened species. It is listed under the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995. No regulations or restrictions are triggered by the listing of a key threatening process.

For more information on key threatening processes, see the NPWS website: www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/Key+threatening+processes

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Q.4 What happens now that the key threatening process has been listed?

The listing of a key threatening process triggers two main processes:

- 1) the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW) must prepare a **threat abatement plan** for the key threatening process within three years of the listing, and
- 2) the key threatening process must be considered when assessing developments under Section 5A of the NSW *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act) – this section of the EP&A Act is commonly referred to as the ‘Assessment of Significance’.

The listing of the key threatening process **does not** alter current regulations to collect or remove wood. Private landholders are not required to alter their current practices unless they wish to do so.

Q.5 What is a threat abatement plan?

A threat abatement plan identifies actions to manage and reduce the impact of a key threatening process on biodiversity - particularly threatened species, populations and ecological communities.

Threat abatement plans are statutory planning instruments. They are prepared by DEC and developed in consultation with stakeholders, including:

- state and local government agencies,
- industry groups,
- community groups,
- individual experts
- scientists.

Threat abatement plans must consider and minimise any adverse social and economic impacts of the plan. The Threatened Species Social and Economic Advisory Committee provides advice on the likely social and economic impacts of proposed actions and the analysis of social and economic issues within the threat abatement plan.

Q.6 What will a threat abatement plan for the ‘removal of dead wood and dead trees’ contain?

It is difficult to predict what actions will be included in the threat abatement plan. However, the Department of Environment and Conservation will consult extensively with the rural community, firewood industry bodies, government agencies and other stakeholders during the preparation of the plan.

Any proposed actions must have the agreement of all parties involved before they can be included in a threat abatement plan. The threat abatement plan will build on the National Approach to Firewood Collection and Use in Australia, prepared by the

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Commonwealth Government, and the NSW Firewood Action Plan currently being prepared.

It is likely that the threat abatement plan will focus on:

- educating the public about the benefits of retaining dead wood and dead trees
- assisting firewood merchants develop sustainable practices for the collection of firewood.

Q.7 Will the collection of firewood be stopped?

No. Firewood has a high value as a fuel source, particularly for the rural community. This will be a major consideration in the development of any future threat abatement plan addressing this process.

There is no intention to stop firewood collection. However, in preparing the threat abatement plan consideration will be given to better ensuring firewood collection is done sustainably and with minimal impact on biodiversity. Any future actions or regulations proposed in a threat abatement plan would be developed in consultation with industry and stakeholder groups.

Q.8 Does the final determination affect bushfire hazard reduction activities?

If you are carrying out bushfire hazard reduction activities (including the collection and removal of dead wood) that are undertaken in accordance with the Bushfire Environmental Assessment Code then no additional consideration of dead wood is required. However, if other environmental assessment processes are used then the final determination will need to be considered under Section 5A of the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act (see Question 4).

Q.9 Does the final determination affect a public authority's ability to manage safety issues?

No. The final determination does not prevent public authorities (including local councils) from removing dead wood that may be posing a risk to public safety.

Q.10 Where can I get further information on the final determination and sustainable firewood practices?

All the determinations made by the NSW Scientific Committee can be viewed at NPWS offices, and on the NPWS website:
www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/List+of+Scientific+Committee+determinations

Additional information on key threatening processes and threat abatement planning can also be found on the NPWS website:
<http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/Threat+abatement+planning>

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If you don't have web access, you can call the National Parks Centre on 1300 361 967 for a copy of the website information.

To obtain a copy of the 'National Approach to Firewood Collection and Use in Australia' contact Environment Australia Community Information Unit on 1800 803 772 or it can be downloaded from the internet at:
www.ea.gov.au/land/publications/firewood-approach/pubs/firewoodstrat.doc

Further information on firewood can be found on the Environment Australia website:
www.ea.gov.au/land/firewood/



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