

This fact sheet clarifies the planning arrangements for tree farms, as set out in *State Planning Policy 2.5 - Rural Planning (SPP 2.5)* and the *Rural Planning Guidelines*. It provides information about the planning issues relevant to tree farming, for application by local governments and other decision-makers.

What is a tree farm?

The Planning and Development (Local Planning Schemes) Regulations 2015 (the Regulations) defines tree farms as *“land used for commercial tree production where trees are planted in blocks of more than one hectare, including land in respect of which a carbon right is registered under the Carbon Rights Act 2003, section 5”*.

This definition is applied in local planning schemes as they are reviewed and updated. Schemes that have not been updated may still include historic definitions such as ‘plantation’ or ‘agroforestry’. However, the intent is for a single land use definition, that caters for tree farms for harvesting for timber products and/or in sequestration of carbon, as the land use planning considerations are similar.

Planning context

Where are the current tree farms?

In September 2021 the State Government announced a \$350 million investment over 10 years to bolster the State’s softwood plantation estate. This was estimated to require an additional 33,000 ha of land for pine trees to support the forestry industry, and provide timber products to the construction industry, while also contributing to carbon capture and storage.

In WA, existing pine tree farms are mostly in the Donnybrook, Bridgetown, Nannup and Margaret River areas. They currently represent approximately 30% of harvestable tree farming, with blue gums comprising 70%. Blue gum plantations make up approximately 160,000 ha with two thirds of plantations planted in the Plantagenet and Albany areas.

Where are the most suitable locations for pine tree farms?

The most suitable location for new pine tree farms is on land with rainfall generally exceeding 600mm and within an approximate 150km radius to the timber processing hub in the Shire of Dardanup.

What are the land use planning considerations with tree farms?

Growing of trees for timber is similar to other crops, however there are some planning issues associated with tree farming that may require further assessment and management, if relevant. As set out in SPP 2.5, these include:

- **Bushfire risk** - tree farms may establish a bushfire risk where not occurring before. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services has published guidelines to assist in the management of bushfire risk for tree farms. Any development conditions to manage bushfire risk should accord with these guidelines.
- **Environmental and economic issues, including planting thresholds** - the location of tree farms relative to environmental and/or biodiversity assets, and management of potential impacts (eg wildling spread). So too, ensuring there is a balanced supply of rural land for other economic activity can be addressed in local planning strategies.
- **Water availability and recharge** - potential impacts on groundwater and surface water systems may need to be considered.
- **Visual landscape impacts** - local governments may identify rural prominent landscapes to exclude tree farms for visual reasons. While the converse

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may occur, these areas can be identified in keeping with the Western Australian Planning Commission's (WAPC) Visual Landscape [planning manual](#).

- **Transport impacts** - where tree farming involves harvesting, local governments may need to make arrangements with developers for road and/or intersection upgrades to manage potential haulage impacts.
- **Separation from sensitive land uses** - local governments may establish buffers to exclude tree farming around these land uses eg. electrical substations or transmission lines.

Interpretation of SPP 2.5 Policy measures

SPP 2.5 sets out seven key policy positions to facilitate a co-ordinated approach to tree farms in WA. For the purpose of clarifying the WAPC's position, the intent of each policy statement is explained below:

1. *tree farming is supported and encouraged on rural land as a means of diversifying rural economies and providing economic and environmental benefit* - this means the WAPC supports tree farms in rural areas and will implement this approach in assessment of local planning strategies and schemes;
2. *tree farming should generally not occur on priority agricultural land* - generally, land that is identified for horticultural or food production purposes;
3. *tree farming should generally be a permitted use on rural land, except where development of a tree farm would create an extreme or unacceptable bushfire risk or when responding to specific*

local circumstances as identified in a strategy or scheme - this means that tree farms should be a 'P', 'D' or 'A' (permitted or discretionary) uses in local planning schemes, with the local planning strategies and schemes providing additional guidance (as required) to address local planning issues listed below in this fact sheet;

4. *local governments should manage the location, extent and application requirements for tree farming in their communities through local planning strategies, schemes and/or local planning policies* - this means that local governments should use their local planning frameworks to regulate tree farming in their municipality, in keeping with the intent of SPP 2.5, which is to support and encourage tree farms;
5. *in planning for tree farming, local government considerations should include but are not limited to, potential bushfire risk, environmental and economic factors, water availability and recharge, visual landscape impacts, transport impacts of tree farming (where harvesting is proposed), planting thresholds, appropriate buffers, and location relative to conservation estates and sensitive land uses* - this means that local governments should consider tree farms in the context of other existing and proposed land uses in their municipality, and set planning controls as required, based on demonstrated evidence that the control is needed;
6. *where tree farm proposals are integrated with farm management for the purpose of natural resource management and occupy no more than 10 per cent of the farm, the proposal should not require local government development approval* - this means that local governments may consider

exemptions for integrated tree farms, related to natural resource management, due to their minimal impact and environmental benefit; and

7. *the establishment of tree farms does not warrant the creation of new or smaller rural lots* - this means that future subdivision of rural land is not warranted based on a tree farm proposal or development.

While the above policy measures relate to all tree farm species and types in Western Australia, **Map 1** shows the main focus area of tree farming in the State.

Do tree farms have an impact on agricultural communities?

The Australian economy has been forced to adjust structurally over time, which has seen ongoing change in the agricultural sector. Research by Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) in 2001 and 2007 highlights the impacts of globalised economic rationalism on family farms and subsequent issues of their declining viability, leading to farm amalgamation, reduced labour hire and the contraction of local economies.

Tree farms are part of the ever changing agricultural sector. But they are not the underlying cause of the population or economic changes.

For local governments where pine tree farms are likely to be developed, population change data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Census 2001 to 2021), indicates that the general trend is for increasing or stable population figures, and the 'family' makeup of households has remained steady at around 70%. Family composition or population has not significantly declined in the last 20 years.

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Can a local government seek to prohibit or mandate what percentage of a lot can be used for tree farming?

WAPC policy is that tree farms should be supported and encouraged on rural land. Therefore, any local planning strategies or schemes seeking to prohibit or severely restrict tree farming would not be in keeping with State policy.

Some local governments have local planning policies expressing a preference for tree farms to occupy a percentage of the overall land area eg. 10% or 30% of a lot or property. However, if a land use is capable of being approved in a local planning scheme, and a development application has addressed relevant scheme requirements, it may not be open to a local government to prevent a landowner from using the landholding for an approvable land use. Any local planning policy seeking to prohibit or restrict the extent of tree farms would need to have a planning reason for taking such an approach.

In the absence of this, limiting the ability of a landowner to use their land as zoned, may be unreasonable. Local planning policies that refer to a percentage a tree farm cover may also conflict with a local planning scheme, which would render the local planning policy as having no effect. Should a local government refuse a development application for a tree farm, this decision can be reviewed by the State Administrative Tribunal. Such a review provides an independent test of the effectiveness of the WAPC's policy, and its application at a local level.

Local planning approaches

Examples of local planning approaches are included in this section.

Local planning strategy and tree farms:

Local governments may include information about tree farms in their local planning strategies. This could consider:

- the location and extent of existing tree farms;
- analysis of available rural land to support tree farms relative to other rural land uses;
- areas where tree farms may provide environmental benefits such as use of less productive farm land and addressing land degradation such as soil erosion or salinity; and
- areas where tree farms might be unsuitable eg. priority agriculture land, bushfire buffers to sensitive land uses or visual landscape protection.

Local planning scheme and tree farms:

The Planning and Development (Local Planning Schemes) Regulations 2015 requires local planning schemes to use the model definition for tree farm.

In keeping with SPP 2.5, the permissibility of tree farms use in schemes would need to be a 'P' (permitted), 'D' (discretionary) or 'A' (discretionary subject to advertising). For small scale plantings, related to natural resource management, it may be appropriate to exempt tree farms from requiring development approval, as is recommended in SPP 2.5.

The various local planning framework mechanisms to control tree farms can include:

- permissibility in the zoning table, including for rural and priority agricultural land;
- use of Special Control Areas to identify suitable areas, or exclusion areas in and around townsites or areas where viewsheds may be protected;
- exemptions from seeking development approval; or
- local planning policy guidance on discretion, where tree farms are a 'D' or 'A' use, regarding management of bushfire risk, visual landscape amenity or road haulage impacts.

Additional resources

Plantation Management and Industry overview:

- *Code of Practice for Timber Plantations in Western Australia*, Forest Industries Federation of WA (FIFWA). (2014). [Code of practice for timber plantations in Western Australia \(www.wa.gov.au\)](http://www.wa.gov.au)
- *Guidelines for Plantation Fire Protection*, DFES 2022. (in preparation).
- *Guidelines for Plantation Fire Protection*, DFES 2011. (current at time of publication). [Guidelines Plantation Fire Prctn 2011 P.indd \(website-files.com\)](http://www.wa.gov.au)
- *Plantation fire management and protection*. Plantation information series. Forest Products Commission - Western Australia (2020). [Plantation-fire-management-and-protection.pdf \(www.wa.gov.au\)](http://www.wa.gov.au)

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- *Western Australia Plantations: the Missing Piece of the Puzzle*, Forest Industries Federation of WA (FIFWA), (2016).
<https://www.forestindustries.com.au/uploads/1/2/3/2/123273289/fifwa-wa-plantations-missing-piece-of-the-puzzle-2016-min.pdf>

Structural change and socio-economic impact:

- *Drivers of Structural Change in Australian Agriculture*, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Commonwealth of Australia. Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (2007).
[07-057.pdf \(agrifutures.com.au\)](#)
- *Rural restructuring, policy change and uneven development in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia*, School of Social Sciences and Asian Languages, Curtin University of Technology. Tonts, M.A. (1998).
[Rural restructuring, policy change and uneven development in the central wheatbelt of Western Australia \(curtin.edu.au\)](#)
- *Socio-Economic Impacts of Farm Forestry*, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Tonts, M. A., Campbell, C. and Black, A. (2001).
[01-045.pdf \(agrifutures.com.au\)](#)
- *Socio-Economic Impacts of Plantation Forestry in the Great Southern Region (WA)*, Forest and Wood Products Research and Development Corporation, Australian Government, (2005).
[Pn04.4007 great southern region \(WA\).pdf \(fwpa.com.au\)](#)

Local Government example local planning policies:

- Shire of Donnybrook-Balingup: road haulage impacts, bushfire protection, water quality impact of works and visual landscape amenity (exclude term 'agroforestry')
[LPP 9 3 Private Tree Plantations Agroforestry.pdf \(donnybrook-balingup.wa.gov.au\)](#)
- Shire of Plantagenet: special control areas surrounding townsites for full or partial exclusion; bushfire, amenity and environmental impacts.
[Microsoft Word - Policy 15 - Commercial Plantations.doc \(plantagenet.wa.gov.au\)](#)
- Shire Bridgetown-Greenbushes: plantation management plan, minimum application content, example conditions and approval renewal guidance.
[Microsoft Word - 08 - Policy Manual - Town Planning \(bridgetown.wa.gov.au\)](#)

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Map 1: Area of main tree farm focus