VCAT orders Council to Release Timber Harvest Plan to Gippsland Forest Guardians as Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP) Withdraws VCAT Appeal.

In a significant development for environmental transparency, Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP) has withdrawn its appeal to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). VCAT have now ordered the release of the Timber Harvest Plan for Fellas Coupe at Turtons Creek to the Gippsland Forest Guardians (GFG).

Fellas Coupe area is home to several threatened species, including the critically endangered Slender Tree-fern, Pilotbird and Gang-gang cockatoo. GFG has raised concerns about HVP’s forestry practices, calling for 200 meter buffers around Slender Tree-ferns and have opposed HVP’s policy of converting native Mountain ash and Bluegum to pines .

The appeal to VCAT, lodged by HVP, contested the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner’s decision to grant GFG access to the Timber Harvest Plan under Freedom of Information laws. HVP’s withdrawal came just a day before the scheduled hearing, ending a year-long legal battle.

GFG spokesperson Stuart Inchley expressed concern over the prolonged process, stating, “We are pleased that VCAT has ordered the council to release the Timber Harvest Plan, but it’s pretty disappointing that HVP, having initiated this appeal last year, withdrew the day before, resulting in significant delay and use of public resources” He further criticised the tactic, noting, “Tactics such as late-stage withdrawal can have the effect of delaying outcomes and placing strain on community resources — a challenge often faced by smaller groups when engaging with large organisations.”

With the Timber Harvest Plan now accessible, GFG intends to scrutinise it to ensure the Code of Practice for Timber Production and the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act have been taken into account. “We’re hoping to shine some light on what environmental protections have been put in place. We want to make sure HVP are adequately protecting threatened species and that council, as the regulator, are ensuring this has been done.” Inchley remarked.

This outcome underscores the community’s right to access information about forestry operations on crown land and highlights the ongoing efforts of local conservation groups to protect Victoria’s unique biodiversity.