Landowners and loggers say 'eco-thinning' can save WA's native forests from fire and collapse

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Could thinning forests save them from fire?(ABC South West: Jon Daly)

Landowners and native loggers are turning to "ecological thinning" to try to save Western Australia's southern native forests from fire and collapse due to climate change.

The native forests of WA's South West are under increasing pressure, and risk of bushfire and ecological collapse, because the region's rainfall has fallen by 20 per cent since the 1970s.

Eco-thinning is the practice of mechanically removing smaller, weaker trees from regrowth or historically logged forests to reduce density and competition to help larger trees thrive.

Prominent conservationist and former South West Greens member, Chrissy Sharp, said the legacy of historic logging and more recent effects of climate change had created a dangerous situation.

"Now we have very dense areas of young trees that are very flammable and very thirsty, using up to twice the amount of water that old, well-spaced forests do," she said.

A 'diabolical' combination

Dr Sharp said the widespread death of native trees in WA's South West in 2011 — after the region experienced record-low rainfall the previous year — was an example of the consequences of climate change and poor regrowth forest management.

Traditional logging tends to harvest larger trees more suitable for saw logging but eco-thinning focuses on the removal of smaller diameter trees, which are currently wasted or left as a fire hazard.

To some, removing trees to improve forest health seems counterintuitive, but Dr Sharp said it was a vital way to adapt to a drying climate.

Dr Sharp said the practice of ecological thinning was contentious within the Greens movement.

"For the Greens movement, there tends to be one tool in the toolbox, if you like, for protecting forests and improving forest outcomes and that is to change land tenure, lock up areas, and not manage them," she said.

"That has been very successful in old growth forests, which are pretty much undisturbed, but where you have forests that have been heavily disturbed, I feel we have to contemplate the fact it requires additional disturbance."

Creating a market

Cattle producer, Richard Walker, began practising ecological thinning nearly a decade ago on his property near Boyup Brook, about 270 kilometres south-east of Perth.

"There was certainly no growth happening, the forest was over 100 years old," he said.

Since then, Mr Walker has seen "outstanding" outcomes in forest health and low fuel loads on his property.

One of the biggest challenges of eco-thinning is economic viability.

The farmer has been able to sell the wood fibre into local markets, such as charcoal used for silicon production or woodchips.

However Mr Walker said there needed to be access to bigger markets, such as export, to be able to practice eco-thinning on a larger scale.

Forest Industries Federation of WA's President, Ian Telfer, said his industry had an important role in creating and tapping into those markets of scale.

"What we're looking to do is show there's a role for industry in developing new markets, products and technology to be able to successfully and properly manage our forests," he said.

Mr Telfer said the industry would have to shift its focus and adapt to the eco-thinning model of forest management.

"It's not driven by the contracted volume to industry, it's almost creating new markets for that thinning residue rather than traditional sawmilling," he said.

Mr Telfer believed eco-thinning was the best way to add value to local communities and economies while maintaining the health of WA's native forests.

"We can't do nothing because the forest will die without some form of management intervention — not managing forests just isn't an option," Mr Telfer said.

Mr Telfer said the industry would begin eco-thinning trials in WA's South West early next year.