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'Ecological thinning' or logging by another name

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In 2024, the Victorian and Western Australian governments announced they had ended commercial logging in native forests. But did they?

In Western Australia, 'ecological thinning' is applied annually to up to 8,000 hectares of native forest. The Coalition in Victoria has pledged to apply thinning to 5,000 hectares per year across their native forests if they win the upcoming state election. Thinning has long been recognised as a form of industrial logging, but it is currently being rebranded by government and the logging industry as a strategy to restore 'forest health'.

So, what is thinning? Forestry guidelines describe thinning as 'the removal of surplus trees in order to concentrate the future growth of a stand on to a limited number of selected trees'. The primary outcome of most thinning operations is the removal of around 50 per cent of the trees, with the logs cut from the forest sold to timber and pulp mills, and the retained trees are expected to grow faster with less competition. The retained trees would be logged in the future, but the logging rotation would be decreased as the retained trees reach a greater size for saw-milling sooner than if the forest were left unthinned.

In recent years, thinning has been rebranded as 'ecological thinning', as some foresters argue more open forests are 'healthier forests'. It is no longer described as logging, but is now branded under the rubric of 'active forest management'. However, past thinning operations reveal anything but a 'healthy forest'.

Victorian government research showed that mechanical thinning significantly increased fire hazard by adding about 24 tonnes per hectare of fine and coarse debris to the forest floor. These effects of higher amounts of debris on fire risk are compounded by thinning altering the climate of the forest, by exposing it to higher wind speeds, increased light and air temperatures from reduced tree crown cover, lower humidity, and lower moisture content in the vegetation itself.

Thinning crushes and destroys much of the under-storey of forests, which provides key habitat components for a vast array of bird species. There is also no evidence that thinning increases forest resilience. Tree removal in thinned forests is based on taking out a set number of trees, so often the fastest growing, competitively superior trees will be removed. The result is forests that are less resilient, not more.

So-called 'ecological thinning' has become a source of wood for industry in Western Australia following the government of that state announcing it had ended commercial logging in native forests. The Minister for Agriculture and Food; Fisheries; Forestry; Small Business; Mid West, Jackie Jarvis, announced to the Western Australian Parliament that nearly 200,000 tonnes of logs were sold under contract from ecological thinning in Western Australia between 2024 and 2026. We argue that if trees are cut, logs are hauled by heavy machinery to a log landing and then trucked to sawmills, then it is reasonable to conclude this is a logging operation. Ecological thinning can therefore be seen as logging under another name.

Many Australian forests have been degraded by extensive industrial logging compounded by intense and more frequent bushfires. Thinning will only add yet another compounding degradation factor to many already distressed and threatened ecosystems. As we are seeing in Western Australia, thinning is another means for industry to access and extract resources from native forest. Thinning does not create a 'healthy forest'. On the contrary, it creates one that is degraded and prone to carry more intense and frequent bushfires. Thinning is just another form of logging – it increases fire risk and undermines the very resilience it claims to build.

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Professor David Lindenmayer is a distinguished Australian scientist and academic, specialising in landscape ecology, conservation, and biodiversity. His research focuses on integrating nature conservation with agricultural production, improving biodiversity conservation in forestry and plantations, and enhancing fire management practices. With over 1000 peer-reviewed papers and 50 books, David is one of the most published ecologists globally. He leads large-scale, long-term research programs in south-eastern Australia. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, he has received numerous prestigious awards, including the ESA Whittaker Award, multiple Eureka Prizes, and the Australian Natural History Medal.

Chris Taylor

Dr Chris Taylor is an environmental scientist and researcher with a strong focus on landscape ecology, forest management, and conservation. With a background in studying the impacts of land use on biodiversity, Chris has contributed significantly to our understanding of how human activities affect natural ecosystems. His work often involves collaborations with Indigenous communities and other stakeholders to develop sustainable land management practices. Chris is known for his dedication to preserving Australia's unique environments, particularly in the context of climate change and habitat loss, and has published extensively in the field of environmental science.

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