

WATER AND FORESTRY

Forestry – Boon or bane for the Western Cape?

Most of the State forestry plantations in the Western Cape have been clear-felled over the past decade, but some are set to make a comeback – or are they? Sue Matthews reports.



More than 20 years ago, environmentalists in the Western Cape were overjoyed when government announced in September 2000 that its pine plantations in the province would be phased out. The region was experiencing a drought at the time, and commercial forestry was under renewed scrutiny, having been accused for decades of reducing runoff and then declared a streamflow reduction activity in the National Water Act just two years previously. And since the launch of Working for Water in 1995, the threats posed by invasive plants in the Cape Floristic Region – in terms of their water use, fire risk and biodiversity impact – had been repeatedly highlighted. Pine trees were by no means the only culprits, but vast tracts of mountain fynbos had been invaded by plantation escapees.

Fast forward to the end of 2022, when the Department of

Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) issued a call for proposals from investors to lease plantations in the Western Cape representing half of the total area originally intended to be phased out. In the intervening years, much has transpired, and today many environmentalists consider this a positive development. Forestry stakeholders, on the other hand, generally feel it is too little, too late, and there will be harsh repercussions for the sector for years to come.

The decision to phase out the plantations, known as the Western Cape Exit Policy or Cape Conversion Process, was primarily because they were viewed as not commercially viable – trees grew very slowly compared to other regions, so could only be harvested after 30 years or more in some parts. In 1999, when the plantations – then managed by SAFCOL – were put out

to tender, no bids were received for the south-western Cape's Boland area package, and the preferred bidder for the southern Cape package withdrew from negotiations in mid-2000. This, on top of the environmental concerns, presumably resulted in the knee-jerk announcement a few months later of a phase-out, which was approved by Cabinet a year later.

The plantations still needed to be managed until the trees were ready for harvesting, though, so the Boland and southern Cape packages were combined as the Mountain to Ocean package and taken on by MTO Forestry (Pty) Ltd, which began as an entity of SAFCOL but was later privatised. Part of the agreement was that 15 000 ha in the Boland area and 30 000 ha in the southern Cape would be phased out over 20 years and converted to other land uses such as conservation, agriculture and human settlement. In addition, an agreement was reached with SANParks to incorporate the Tokai and Cecilia plantations on the Cape Peninsula into the Table Mountain National Park, with harvesting to be completed by 2024.

Shortly after MTO took over, a fire in the Tsitsikamma area in 2005 destroyed a massive swath of plantations, which prompted MTO to motivate for a review of the phase-out decision on the basis that socio-economic impacts and future timber shortages had not been adequately considered. The then Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAFF) commissioned a review by the VECON group of consultants, who found that some plantations were more commercially viable and/or socio-economically important than others, and made recommendations for specific areas to be retained.

In light of this, in 2008 Cabinet approved the partial reversal of the exit policy to allow replanting on almost 22 500 ha – half of the 45 000 ha originally identified for phasing out – once MTO had harvested the current rotation and handed the land back as per the 'exit lease' agreement. In 2014 the Industrial Development Corporation, on behalf of the then Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), commissioned Louis Heyl & Associates (LHA) to evaluate the feasibility of the reversal and the most commercially viable options for implementation. The study recommended that the total reversal area should be split into five packages – Boland, Jonkersberg, Bergplaas, Homtini and Buffelsnek – and that replanting should start as soon as possible.

Then the process stalled again, despite some progress being made. In 2015 DAFF signed a two-year agreement with MTO to replant approximately 2 000 ha by the end of 2017. In 2016 DAFF commissioned a land rights enquiry, since the 1996 White Paper on Sustainable Forest Development in South Africa recognised that some plantations might be subject to land claims. And because both the White Paper and National Forest Act promoted community forestry, which the LHA report had recommended would best be achieved by entering into community forestry agreements with community trusts, DAFF began organising the identified beneficiaries to form community trusts in 2018, and the following year facilitated community meetings on trust deeds and the election of trustees. In June 2019 the Forestry Branch was moved from DAFF to the new DFFE, which probably caused further delays, and Covid lockdowns no doubt put any community work on hold in 2020.

In the meantime, MTO had concluded its exit in October 2020, with much of the land handed back some years previously, and most of the trees that had been replanted having been lost to the devastating fires in Knysna in 2017 and George in 2018.

When the tender to lease the reversal areas was finally advertised in mid-December 2022, with a closing date in the first week of February, the plantation packages were essentially those recommended in the 2014 report. The Boland package (7 053 ha) is made up of portions of the Grabouw, La Motte, Hawequa and Kluitjieskraal plantations, and there are four separate southern Cape packages at Jonkersberg (4 106 ha), Bergplaas (4 868 ha), Homtini (757 ha) and Buffelsnek (4 507 ha), altogether totalling 21 291 ha.

Five bids were received by the closing date in February, but the tender for the Boland package is to be readvertised. It is not clear whether this is because none of the bids met the qualifying criteria, or because no bids were received for that package. The MTO-owned Stellenbosch Sawmill closed at the end of 2015, and none of the small sawmills still operating in the Boland area would have capacity for large-scale timber production. This means that logs would either need to be trucked to the sawmills in the Garden Route, or a new sawmill built at a cost of hundreds of millions of Rand, according to the Executive Director of Sawmilling South Africa, Roy Southey. It's unlikely that any investor would consider that financially viable given that the lease is for a 50-year period and the four plantations making up the package were clear-felled, so it may be at least 20 years before newly planted trees are ready to be harvested.

Another complicating factor is that portions of the cleared Grabouw plantation were illegally occupied in a 'land grab' in December 2020 by a group identifying as Khoisan descendants, and by the time the tender was advertised two years later the settlement of 'Knoflokskraal' had grown to between 2 500 and 4 000 people. Minister Barbara Creecy had already indicated that DFFE would be releasing the land back to its owner – the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure – and had abandoned plans for any form of forestry there, given that the Knoflokskraal community were not interested in a community forest agreement. It is unclear whether any other portions of the Grabouw plantation have been retained by DFFE, as VECON had recommended replanting 4 686 ha of its total 7 173 ha. However,



The Boland package – made up of portions of the Grabouw, La Motte, Hawequa and Kluitjieskraal plantations – and the four southern Cape packages lie within the Boland and Outeniqua Strategic Water Source Areas, respectively.



Part of the Grabouw plantation in May 2020 (left), following MTO's exit and handover in September 2019, and in January 2023 (right), after the land was illegally occupied in December 2020. This is just a small part of the much larger area now settled by the Knoflokskraal community, and DFFE has abandoned plans for forestry there.

some of those portions are adjacent to the town of Grabouw, where there are over a dozen informal settlements with a long history of land invasions. At Wolsley, some 80 km to the north as the crow flies, part of the Kluitjieskraal plantation has also been illegally occupied.

"There's a big concern that it will happen elsewhere," says Dr Brian van Wilgen, who originally studied forestry and nature conservation but made his mark researching the impacts of invasive alien vegetation in fynbos. "Unless you have some viable form of land use and a means to protect the land, there's going to be a risk from this kind of thing."

A preferred bidder was selected for the Outeniqua area, but negotiations were still taking place at the end of November, and it was not revealed whether the lease was for all four packages or only one or two. The preferred bidder was the only one of the five to include a community partnership, even though the final of four objectives listed in the advertised tender document was "partnership with communities who have tenure rights and are resident in former forestry villages and the surrounding areas". Of course, organising such partnerships in a little more than a month and a half over the Christmas holiday period was a tall order.

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MTO Forestry did not tender for any of the packages and will instead focus on its so-called sustainable lease areas, where the lease expires no earlier than 2075. Apart from Jonkershoek in Stellenbosch, which was ravaged by fire in February 2021 but is to be replanted, these include a few small plantations in the Outeniqua area and much larger ones in the Tsitsikamma area, east of Plettenberg Bay.

The forestry and wood products sectors have long been champing at the bit for the exit reversal areas to be replanted because there is already a dire shortage of logs in the Cape, but

environmentalists and others familiar with the southern Cape landscape see the benefit now too.

"There's a number of issues – one is the roads," says Cobus Meiring of the Garden Route Environmental Forum. "If you don't take care of them, they become erosion channels. There was one in Bergplaas deeper than I am tall, so I don't know where all that soil is washing away to! Some of the areas have become very seriously infested, and massive amounts of clearing will need to be done before replanting can start. We need a responsible landowner that has the funding to manage the land, and the two main forestry companies here, MTO and PG Bison, have been really good in taking their environmental responsibilities seriously."

The four plantation packages that were offered for leasing all lie within the Outeniqua Strategic Water Source Area, which supplies water to the Garden Route – an area that has experienced its share of droughts. But the potential streamflow reduction is no longer considered a reasonable justification to prevent their replanting.

"It's not the impact of the plantation on water resources so much as the impact of the invaded catchment of the plantations that's the big worry," says Van Wilgen. "If you're running a forestry plantation properly, you're using water but you're getting a product for it. With the invasions you're getting nothing for it except damage – damage to the soil, damage from fires, damage to biodiversity."

Plus, of course, invasive trees in riparian zones along rivercourses and in wetlands are likely to use more water than pines in plantations, where a buffer of at least 20 metres is normally maintained between the outer boundary of a riparian zone or outer edge of the temporary zone of a wetland, in accordance with DWS guidelines. This requirement is included in the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) National Forest Stewardship Standard for South Africa as well as the Forest Management Standard of the South African Forestry Assurance Scheme (SAFAS), which has been endorsed by the Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). Both standards require forestry companies or small-scale owner-managers to show that they are implementing measures to restore wetlands and riparian zones and to control alien invasive species. Forestry South

Africa's 'Code of good practice for managing alien and invasive species', compiled and updated by a team led by John Scotcher to incorporate the 2021 NEMBA: Alien and Invasive Species Regulations, is no doubt helpful in this regard.

Nowadays it's the fire risk associated with self-seeded pines and other alien invasive vegetation on the forestry exit areas – both those that have been made available to conservation authorities and the reversal packages to be replanted if and when the leases are agreed – that is the chief concern in the Garden Route.

The threat, which was comprehensively discussed in a 2011 paper by Kraaij, Cowling and Van Wilgen in the *South African Journal of Science*, was starkly brought home by the 2017 and 2018 fires. Since then, DFFE and the Working on Fire Programme launched the Forestry Support Programme in December 2019, with the objectives of ensuring compliance with the National Veld and Forest Fire Act, protecting government plantation assets, reducing fire damage and spread, and creating employment for surrounding communities.

But what it's achieving is not nearly enough, says President of the Southern African Institute of Forestry, Braam du Preez, who lives in George. "The Forestry Support Programme are doing some basic fire protection actions, primarily making fire breaks, but to the best of my knowledge they're not doing much to address the build-up of fuel loads, areas becoming overgrown with alien invasive vegetation, and deterioration in the infrastructure due to heavy rains."

He explains that bridges have been washed away by flooding in places and some roads are littered with trees blown over by galeforce winds, hampering the ability of firefighters to get in with their equipment should a fire break out. This means that residential areas adjacent to the exit areas will be completely exposed if a fire coincides with bad weather conditions.

"It's all fair and well to say the land must go to the conservation organisations, but they're in even a worse state than the forestry companies – they haven't got money."

The Garden Route National Park, declared in 2009, initially comprised the region's indigenous State Forests and mountain catchment areas that DWAF inherited from the Department of Forestry, with the Tsitsikamma and Wilderness National Parks and the Knysna National Lake Area added two years later. The park's 2020–2029 management plan, completed in mid-2019, indicates that more than 10 000 ha of plantation area had by then been transferred from MTO to SANParks, and there is a plantation exit landscape restoration plan that is updated annually, following assessments of the areas exited.

The provincial conservation authority, CapeNature, was also allocated State Forest Reserve land in the region, back in 2006, but has since been offered 20 parcels of forestry exit area totalling 12 621 ha, according to the 2023–2033 management plan for the 'Garden Route Complex World Heritage Site and Nature Reserves'. The Garden Route Complex is conservation land that was included in the existing Cape Floral Region Protected Areas World Heritage Site in 2015, and consists of CapeNature-managed protected areas together with the

SANParks-managed Garden Route National Park. One of the goals stated in the management plan is that all forestry exit areas and other identified state land will have been transferred and secured into the conservation estate by 2033.

This is a long way off, and in the meantime the protected areas of the national park and provincial reserves are a patchwork of fynbos, indigenous forest, and forestry exit areas in various states of recovery and alien infestation, interspersed with privately owned plantations, farmland and urban areas. That makes things very difficult from a fire- and biodiversity-management perspective, particularly since fynbos does best when burnt on a 10–20 year cycle, while foresters have historically done more frequent controlled burns on land adjacent to plantations to keep the fuel load low.

It is widely understood now that the battle against invasive alien plants is being lost. Although Working for Water has spent considerable sums of money on control operations, studies detailed in a number of reports and papers by Van Wilgen and co-authors have estimated that alien plant invasions are spreading more rapidly than they can be cleared. While there has been progress in some areas, the outlook for reducing invasions to manageable proportions in areas like the Garden Route is not good.

Asked whether it is preferable to replant the reversal areas rather than having unmanaged areas invading river corridors and fynbos, Van Wilgen replies: "It's no use shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. The mountains are already invaded with pines that came from previous plantations, so if you put some of those plantations back where they were, there could be an argument for saying that's better than just leaving them, because at least you're creating some value. It's more complex than that, because you're then creating an additional seed source, which will mean the catchments will become more quickly invaded than they would have had the plantations not been there."

"The ideal would be to return some of these areas to nature conservation, with proper budget to rehabilitate them, but we know that's unlikely to happen," he says. "They should never have planted trees there in the first place."