

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE FIREWOOD?



THE FIREWOOD ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA INC.

In recent years the word *sustainable* has become a commonly used – and often misused – adjective. Sustainable has joined words such as “*pristine*” and “*fragile*” as iconic environmental descriptors. These words occur so often in our media, in political spin and in social commentary that their meaning and their relevance has been lost behind their emotive impact. To some people “*sustainable*” is merely a trendy buzzword but for many it is a hard to define, but important concept, like *liberty*, *freedom* or *justice*.

Anyway, let’s start from the start. According to most dictionaries the word “*sustain*” means to “*maintain*”, “*support*” or “*endure*”. The term “sustainable development” was defined by the United Nations in 1987 as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the future” With reference to the environment “sustainable production” can be defined as “capable of being maintained without exhausting natural resources or causing severe ecological damage”.

So – Is firewood sustainable? And what does sustainable firewood actually mean? At first glance it seems simple enough – firewood comes from trees. Trees regenerate or re-grow naturally from seed, coppicing etc, or they can be planted or regenerated by humans. And if the quantity of firewood that is harvested is less than the quantity that is re-grown, then obviously this must be sustainable.

But there is more to it than that. With the exception of trees in plantations that have been set up to generate firewood, the wood used to produce all firewood is “recovered” from various sources of dead trees. This may be from trees that have died naturally, trees that have been cut down as a result of farm or mine site clearing operations, from sawn timber or forest harvesting and management residues, from urban tree removal and a number of other sources. The key point is that in almost all circumstances firewood is a secondary or residue product from operations that are conducted for other purposes. As such, the recovery of firewood from these residues is simply a sensible and responsible utilisation of a resource that would otherwise be burnt or left to rot.

In the Australian context, a lot of work has gone into determining what forms of firewood and what methods of harvesting can be realistically accepted as “*sustainable*”.

In the year 2000 a Firewood Taskforce was set up under what is now called the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council (NRMMC) to address the issue of sustainable firewood harvesting in Australia. This Taskforce was made up of representatives from state and federal governments plus some other experts in the field of environmental management. One of the first challenges faced

by the Taskforce was to decide what constitutes sustainable firewood harvesting. The end result of their deliberations was a list of the sources of firewood in Australia that are considered to be environmentally acceptable according to sustainability principles.

This list was summarised by the Taskforce as:

1. Firewood harvested from sustainably managed forests or plantations, including residue or by-product taken from harvesting of other timber products. This includes softwood or hardwood forests or plantations on private or public land.
2. Residue or by-product from saw milling or other wood processing operations that are supplied from sustainably managed forests or plantations.
3. Firewood collected from forest or woodland on public or private land, under government authorisation (i.e. a legally obtained permit or licence)
4. Firewood collected from private property under formal management plans or environmental guidelines, or in conformity with regional vegetation and catchment management plans or prescriptions.
5. Firewood collected from agro-forestry, planted shelterbelts, planted windbreaks or waste timber.
6. Salvage of waste timber from approved or accepted selective harvesting or clearing on private or public land.
7. Recycled or waste timber from tree lopping, building demolition or urban salvage.

This list of acceptable sources was then enshrined by the NRMMC in a National Voluntary Code of Practice, which remains the current expression of government policy with regard to sustainable firewood harvesting and use. All FAA members who operate businesses in the firewood supply chain agree to comply with the National Code, and therefore to obtain their entire wood intake from one or more of these approved environmentally sustainable supply sources.

There is no doubt that significant quantities of firewood are harvested with little regard to environmental impact, or the regeneration and renewal of the resource. As these issues are addressed by both State and National legislation such firewood is often illegal. Therefore the best option for environmentally aware firewood consumers is to source their wood from members of the Firewood Association of Australia.

Look for the distinctive FAA membership logo which is displayed by FAA members or call **1300 131 481** for your nearest member.

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