

GUIDELINES FOR HARVESTING DEAD TIMBER FOR FIREWOOD



THE FIREWOOD ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA INC.

Cutting firewood from already dead trees is a good choice because the wood is often dry enough to burn immediately. However, dead standing trees and fallen trees and branches are important components of the ecosystem, providing habitat, nesting sites and protection against predators for many native animals. When harvesting firewood from dead timber it is important to be aware of the role that dead timber plays in the environment and ensure that your harvesting does not endanger vulnerable animal species.

It is reasonably easy to do this as long as you are aware of the issue. For example, before you cut down a standing dead tree look for signs that it may be a nesting site for birds or other animals such as possums. Look for bark scratching or signs of activity around hollows. Often nesting hollows are found in large dead trees which have a rotten or termite infested core. Generally these larger trees do not make for good wood cutting as termites carry sand into the tree which dulls chainsaw cutters instantly. You will spend more time sharpening the saw than cutting wood. The same goes for fallen hollow logs, a lot of cutting for little wood. It is best to leave them alone and select smaller solid trees and branches.

The removal of almost all of the coarse woody debris from a forested area is something that can often occur around country towns and popular camping destinations. This is because people will naturally choose the easiest source of wood available and want to travel the least distance to get it. Unfortunately this practice creates a halo effect around these locations, where many native bird and animal species cannot exist due to loss of habitat and increased predation by pets and feral animals. Oddly enough, many people who like to go camping or choose to live in the country do so to be closer to the very nature that they are unintentionally damaging by their wood gathering practices.

Most governments, federal state and local, have enacted laws to prevent the removal of woody debris, where its removal might impact on native species. These laws for example may not allow the cutting of dead wood from road easements in an agricultural landscape, as this is often the main refuge for animals and birds. The removal of dead wood is usually prohibited in parks and reserves, other than for access or fire safety reasons.

Where firewood cutting is permitted in state forests, the area in which it can take place is restricted and moved frequently to prevent over cutting. In some states the cutting of dead wood is not permitted, instead selected live trees are felled for this purpose by the government agency in control. To avoid risking heavy fines it is recommended that you check with the local council before cutting up any dead wood from public land or road easement.

In some states the removal of dead wood from private land is covered by legislation, in others it is not. For example the cutting of large dead standing trees in the south east region of South Australia is prohibited because they provide nesting sites for the glossy black cockatoo, an endangered species. In the mid north of South Australia large dead mallee trees cannot be cut because a rare bat species nests in their bark. If you are not certain you should contact your local council's environment officer who should be able to advise you what is permitted and what is not.

Regardless of any laws, it is sound environmental practice to ensure that there is adequate coarse woody debris available for the protection of habitat on any property. How much is adequate will vary greatly depending on local circumstances. For example if a property borders onto a national park, then there is less need to ensure habitat is available on that property. But, if the only wooded hill on your property is surrounded by thousands of hectares of wheat paddocks, then it will form an island refuge for native species. If a vulnerable native species is known to exist in your area then it would be socially irresponsible not to maintain a suitable habitat for its survival.

Like many things in real life there is always a balance. Coarse woody debris not only provides habitat for our wonderful native species but also for undesirable pests, such as rabbits and foxes, and for weeds like blackberry. Most farmers will also want to maintain clean paddocks for pasture or cultivation. Responsible land owners will recognise the importance of coarse woody debris and standing dead trees in the landscape and will incorporate them into their overall farming management strategy.

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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