



koala.strategy@environment.nsw.gov.au

1 March 2017

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Submission on developing a NSW Koala Strategy

The Nambucca Valley Conservation Association (NVCA) is a voluntary community group which has operated on the mid north coast for over 30 years and which maintains a long-standing interest in the protection of koala habitat and survival of the koala in its natural habitat.

Overview

This Association supports the development of a whole of government NSW Koala Strategy (the Strategy) and the NSW Government's intention to base the strategy on the findings of the NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's 2016 report '*Independent Review into the decline of koala populations in key areas of NSW*', on the basis that:

- 1) Koalas are listed as a vulnerable species under the NSW *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* and the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999*.
- 2) Koala numbers are in alarming decline in NSW, having decreased by a third of their population size since 1990 and
- 3) The current state government legislation, policies and procedures have failed to protect koalas across all land tenures in NSW.

We welcome the opportunity to provide early input into the development of a state-wide koala strategy and recognise the urgent need for NSW Government to take real action to reverse the alarming decline of this iconic species. The solution is relatively simple – **address the key threatening process to koala survival - STOP THE DESTRUCTION OF KOALA HABITAT.**

It is distressing that the NSW Government currently allows land clearing, development and intensive native forest logging and clear-felling operations in identified koala habitat. This Association believes that any genuine effort to reverse this dismal situation must have as its basis, mechanisms which identify and protect koala habitat and resident koala populations in situ in perpetuity. These mechanisms must be based on solid science and include comprehensive on ground koala monitoring.

The time is long overdue for NSW Government to draw the line and recognise that there cannot be a cosy 'win-win' for koalas and those whose interests involve the destruction of koala habitat ie developers, logging industry, mining and agriculture - the koalas lose every time. Strong, clear and enforceable laws are needed to ensure koalas and koala habitat are identified and protected in perpetuity. These laws must be informed by a comprehensive scientifically based strategy.

It is essential that a koala strategy uses the best available science to locate and protect in perpetuity koalas and koala habitat and then use that science to fashion the legislative instrument that will give the koalas what they need to cease their decline and begin to increase their numbers across their natural range.

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 1

This recommendation proposes the development of a whole-of-government koala strategy for NSW with the objective of stabilising and then starting to increase koala numbers. We wholeheartedly agree with this urgently needed action.

For too long various government departments have worked under different legislation and with varying information with regard to koala and koala habitat management. The Planning Minister administers SEPP 44, while the Primary Industry Minister and the Environment Minister are responsible for native forest logging and the Environment Minister for creating protected areas. They have used different maps, data sets and science, with clearly disastrous results for koalas. All relevant departments and agencies must share relevant koala information and be 'on the same page'.

Any state-wide strategy must be based on solid peer reviewed science and be supported by such changes in legislation and government policy that will ensure the protection which koalas need to survive and thrive in the wild. It must be action based and tightly worded so that it avoids 'motherhood' statements which will sit on a shelf while our koalas die out. It must sort out the competing interests of development, logging and mining and conservation. To return the koala from its threatened status to one of growing and thriving wild populations, development and exploitation ie building, land clearing and logging must be foregone in many places.

Adequate resourcing for the preparation and implementation of the strategy is critical.

The strategy should be finalised before the finalisation of a new SEPP 44. It is critical that the government commits to improving protection of koala habitat via changes to SEPP 44 and not create legal and technical loopholes for further koala habitat loss.

The definition of core koala habitat will be pivotal in this process and we urge the adoption of the following definition: *Core habitat as land with a resident population of koalas, as evidenced by recent sightings or signs of koala usage, and high quality habitat (that may be currently unoccupied) with historical records of a population. 'Potential' habitat should be defined as native vegetation where known feed trees constitute at least 15% of the total number of trees in the upper or lower strata of the tree component and native vegetation with recent sightings or evidence of Koala usage.*

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 2

We strongly support the need for improved data on the number, location and occurrence of koalas. We also recognise the absolute necessity of monitoring trends over time as a basis for establishing baselines and assessing the effectiveness or otherwise of management strategies. Failure to monitor impacts of habitat loss over time, especially in public and private native forests, has been the 'elephant in the room' in terms of assessing effectiveness of management policies and legislation. This glaring deficiency must be addressed in the strategy.

The Strategy should be subject to regular, open and transparent reviews.

Climate change must also be considered throughout the strategy.

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 3

The NVCA holds significant concerns regarding the recommendation to produce a state-wide predictive koala habitat map. We do not see the value in a *predictive map*. What is needed is a map of occurrence based on solid science and on-ground searching for koala presence.

The recent NSW Environment Protection Authority *Koala Habitat Mapping Pilot in NSW State Forests* found that koala occurrence was not closely correlated with what was considered the best koala habitat. The EPA suggested this was because models could not accurately account for disturbance history (fire and logging) or koala behaviour (they like to associate with other koalas). The NVCA agrees – any koala mapping of native forests should consider logging history, fire history and growth stage of any given area. We therefore believe any allocation of funds for predictive habitat mapping should be redirected to on-ground koala occurrence surveys by qualified experts using existing mapping data.

All departments should be using the same peer-reviewed data. If this data is to be represented in a map, then all departments should use this same map.

NSW Forestry Corporation has GIS derived layers from Lidar Data on canopy heights in State Forests across a million hectares. This appears to be the only government data that could be used to approximate growth stages of forests. Despite scientific evidence that koalas are territorial and need older trees and areas of less disturbance, we are aware that this information is being used to target the best koala habitat and log it rather than being used to decide moratorium areas for the koala's protection. A government with a will to truly save koalas would not allow this situation.

The 36,000 koala figure quoted in the chief scientist's report is significantly greater than the 21,000 estimated by the federal government in 2010 and greater even than the 31,400 it estimated in 1990. These anomalies in statistics highlight the urgent need for on-ground surveys to determine the size and trends of koala populations across the state.

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 4 & 5

Changes to the planning system are critical if the decline of the koala is to be turned around.

This Association is of the opinion that the new Biodiversity Conservation legislation intentionally decreases the statutory protection of Koalas and must thus be reviewed as part of this process. The WWF estimate up to 2.2 million hectares of koala habitat could be at risk from the new Equity Code that allows the clearing of 625ha in any three-year period. We therefore urge the NSW government to undertake a thorough review of this pro-land clearing legislation to ensure koala habitat is better protected rather than more at risk as is the current status.

Biodiversity offsets do not protect koalas, they are a smoke screen allowing destruction of koala habitat to proceed while 'protecting' other habitat elsewhere. Where once there were two areas of koala habitat, after biobanking there is only one! We therefore consider offsetting a key threatening process in itself.

Appropriate management of koala habitat on private land is also of high importance and should be considered as part of this process. The review of PNF should strengthen rather than weaken protection for koala habitat.

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 6

Whilst we recognise that introducing new legislation that may reduce landowners' rights to destroy koala habitat will cause conflict and opposition, we believe that this is a necessary step. We believe that recommendation 6 does not go far enough. 'Guiding' and 'collaborating' are useful tools but in some cases an enforceable 'NO' to a proposal which will result in loss of koala habitat, is required.

The NSW EPA recently found that koala activity was strongly correlated with the size of their feed trees and the maturity of forests in northern NSW. Regional Forest Agreements will soon come to the end of their terms across NSW. We strongly urge the NSW government to commit to protecting koalas on public land by removing logging from all koala habitat.

We strongly believe that much great effort and resourcing by NSW government is required for the purchase and/or protection of key identified koala habitat and that careful consideration must be given to enhancing connectivity between protected areas.

The NSW government's announcement of \$10m to be used for purchase of important koala habitat is a step in the right direction, but is it such a tiny step that in the face of all the koala habitat loss due to intensive logging and clear-felling of public and private native forest, coastal development and land clearing for mining it does not go nearly far enough to make a difference. We strongly recommend that a much larger budget be set aside for this critical aspect of addressing the plight of the koala in NSW.

Areas purchased or set aside from logging for the purpose of protecting koala habitat and koalas have the potential to create jobs and revenue for the government. The Great Koala National Park is a perfect example of changing land use for the long-term benefit of the wider community through job creation, tourism, carbon storage, biodiversity, water and climate protection, while providing security for koalas to recover from relentless logging impacts.

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 7

We support the recommendation *'that Government agencies identify priority areas of land across tenures to target for koala conservation management and threat mitigation'*. This should be done based on on-ground information, not predictive mapping.

The identification of koala habitat and protection of that habitat in a well connected reserve system is fundamental to stopping the current alarming decline in koala numbers. Such a system must consider climate change and the need for east-west and north-south connectivity of koala habitat to ensure koalas can respond to pressures of climate change.

We urge the government to implement the 'Blueprint for a comprehensive reserve system for koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) on the North Coast of New South Wales' Love, A. & Sweeney, O. F (National Parks Association, Sydney, 2015).

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 8

Community consultation is very important, however this recommendation only calls for consultation with land managers, researchers and koala carers. Community environment groups fit none of these categories and will therefore be excluded from consultation. We obviously do not support this approach. NVCA strongly recommends that consultation includes the entire community, not just selected groups.

Once drafted it is important that the draft NSW Koala Strategy is exhibited for public comment.

The NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Recommendation 9,10,11

These recommendations are supported.

In summary

We ask that the government commits to a moratorium on clearing or logging in koala habitat on private and public lands pending the development of the whole of government strategy and until legal instruments are amended.

All koala habitat in public state forests should be permanently protected in a reserve network. In fact, this organisation is strongly committed to campaigning for the cessation of logging in NSW public native forests in response to industrial scale logging having a devastating effect on the health and biodiversity of our native forests and on koalas specifically.

Protecting koala habitat in a well connected network of reserves is critical for the survival of the koala in NSW.

Yours sincerely

Paula Flack

President, NVCA