

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

9 DECEMBER 2019

Responses to questions taken on notice by:

Michelle Dumazel, Executive Director Policy, Environment, Energy and Science Group, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment

Atticus Fleming, Deputy Secretary, National Parks and Wildlife Service

Naomi Stephens, Acting Executive Director, National Parks and Wildlife Service

Question 1

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What are they able to ask for?

Ms DUMAZEL: It is in relation to equipment and on-the-ground support to help them in their efforts in the rehabilitation.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I get all of that. What I am getting at is that we have wildlife carers who are completely overrun, on top of the general stress of operating in a fire area. How easy are we making it for them to be able to access the money, or is this really the point that, yes, there is money there—I mean, if you could take on notice how much money has actually physically been dispensed I would really like that.

.... continues

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It just seems to me that if you spoke to the WIRES people—we just had Ms Flanagan in—they could tell you on the phone in five minutes what people who are looking after burnt koalas need. It seems to me that there is a very bureaucratic process and I am not at all convinced by your answer that one carer has had one extra bit of money for what they need to be doing what they are doing now.

Mr FLEMING: I am happy to take that on notice and make sure we get you some more information. Richard Kingswood is actually the guy who is responsible for overseeing that program and he worked last night in one of the incident control teams, which is why is not here.

Answer

I am advised:

The NSW Government is providing up to \$1 million in new funding for a Bushfire Relief Fund for Wildlife Rehabilitators to support the rescue and rehabilitation of injured wildlife affected by bushfires. This funding is in addition to the newly announced Wildlife Heroes initiative under the Government's draft NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy, which provides \$1.47 million (over 3 years) to build capacity in the State's volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector to help them meet the growing demands of rescuing more than 100,000 animals every year. A further \$4.05 million is committed under the NSW Koala Strategy.

This makes the government's commitment to support the wildlife rehabilitation sector \$6.52 million.

Requests for funding under the Bushfire Relief Fund are made through a simple application process on the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife (FNPW) Backyard Buddies website. FNPW has contacted all groups operating in areas impacted by the fires. All groups, and the NSW Wildlife Council, also received information through the National Parks and Wildlife Service in late November 2019. The application process was designed to minimise the administrative burden on the rehabilitation sector and assistance was provided where necessary. Most respondents described the process as 'very easy', or 'easy'.

As at 4 January 2020, \$150,000 had already been allocated to licensed groups and individuals in the wildlife rehabilitation sector to assist with their immediate needs for items such as fuel vouchers, cages, tents, tables, animal feed, wraps, pouches and first aid. All groups receiving funding have been notified.

In addition, FNPW has made up to \$35,000 available through the Wildlife Heroes initiative (Emergency Grants) to cover emergencies that are not bushfire related (such as heat stress, flood and drought). These funds will help build further capacity in the sector to support the rehabilitation of injured wildlife.

In 2018-19, \$185,000 was also distributed to 17 providers (15 groups and 2 individuals) under the NSW Koala Strategy for rescue equipment. The equipment has assisted with the rescue and rehabilitation of native animals impacted by fire. An additional \$120,000 is expected to be provided to the sector by end June 2020. A further \$120,000 will be allocated to the sector in 2020-2021.

As these are public funds, they are being dispensed in an orderly and considered manner with proper processes in place, without placing an undue burden on applicants.

Question 2

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you tell us how that \$1.4 million was calculated?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It is over three years.

Ms DUMAZEL: It is over three years.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But how did you come up with that number?

Ms DUMAZEL: I will have to take that on notice.

Answer

I am advised:

The Environmental Trust worked with the Foundation of National Parks and Wildlife (FNPW) to develop a business plan for the \$1.47 million, three-year Wildlife Heroes Initiative. This was based on significant consultation with the wildlife rehabilitation sector by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in partnership with FNPW.

NPWS reviewed the sector and found it provides a significant public good which is poorly understood and appreciated, and ill-equipped to meet increasing demand. NPWS developed a draft three-year NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy; a strategic plan to support volunteers and improve the capacity of the sector to deliver services.

Question 3

The CHAIR: You are talking about the Koala Strategy. That is great. We have heard about that. This is a hearing that has been called with a focus on fire because of what has happened in the last two months to try to get more information from parks around what I think I was hoping would be a response that matches where we are in terms of these unprecedented fires. Other than the Koala Strategy, which we have heard about, are there additional carers now? Are you able to put in place additional carers over the next summer, for example? Because you are talking about a strategy that is rolling out over the next three years and this is an emergency now for koalas, you would agree.

Ms DUMAZEL: I will take that on notice. What I just want to say is that the reason I was bringing up the Koala Strategy was around the training in place for local vets. You were asking about the capacity beyond rehabilitators. One of the things that can really help is around upskilling the local vets as well, who have facilities as well that can be used. But I will take the question on notice in terms of what addition work has been on the ground with those local facilities.

Answer

I am advised:

Wildlife rehabilitation organisations are directly responsible for recruiting and managing their volunteer members. However, a key component of the \$1.47 million Wildlife Heroes initiative is to develop greater community recognition and awareness of the wildlife rehabilitation sector to attract and retain more volunteers. It also provides funding for training and support resources.

Furthermore, the government is providing an additional \$1 million to the sector to aid with wildlife recovery and rehabilitation due to bushfires. A key action will be to create wildlife response teams consisting of appropriately trained wildlife rehabilitation volunteers in strategic locations across NSW. The response teams will be provided with face to face training in Bushfire Awareness and the capture, handling and provision of first aid to injured wildlife.

Question 3

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I will talk about the Biodiversity Conservation Trust [BCT]. I thought the old conservation trust was working really well. It was turning over land and making money, and it was all able to be self-sustaining and reinvesting. In terms of the performance of the new one, the Government refers to 250 hectares of koala habitat being conserved through private conservation agreements. It just does not seem like very much. Secondly, the 81 hectares that are covered in the Lismore-Ballina area have cost \$1.6 million, which may account to be nearly \$20,000 per hectare. This private land conservation of habitat is critical. I am trying to understand how the performance of this fund is being monitored. We have had suggestions from community that habitat being purchased, particularly in the Macarthur area, is not necessarily, in their opinion, good habitat.

Mr FLEMING: I am not sure, wearing a National Parks and Wildlife Service hat, I can respond to that. I am not sure if you have BCT representatives as witnesses to whom you could direct that. Otherwise, we can take that on notice for you.

Ms DUMAZEL: We will take that on notice.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: My understanding was that it was part of the koala management plan and that you were oversighting that. Maybe take it on notice but what are the accountability measures for the performance of that trust?

Ms DUMAZEL: The Biodiversity Conservation Trust had made some purchases relating to core koala habitat. In terms of their performance, we will take that on notice for those particular ones but it is a critical part in terms of they are the first few purchasers with core koala habitat but with the \$350 million over the five-year period, we would expect further koala habitat to be protected through that process.

Answer

I am advised:

Investment by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT) is guided by the Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy which requires the BCT to invest in priority investment areas, as well as conservation assets such as koala habitat.

Koala focused conservation tenders have been held in Port Macquarie and in Lismore-Ballina, and one is currently being held in the Southern Highlands. The tenders align with the NSW Government's Koala Strategy.

Through the tenders, eligible landholders submit a bid to protect and manage good condition koala habitat on their land. Successful applicants are those that put forward the highest value habitat for the best price. The BCT uses an Assessment Metric to rank the best value for money sites via the generation of a Biodiversity Value Score for each site, which is then divided by the price for conservation management of the site, to generate a Biodiversity Value Index.

Tender assessments are supervised by an independent probity adviser and approved by the BCT Board.

Successful applicants receive annual payments for implementing an agreed management plan, under an in-perpetuity conservation agreement. The land is not purchased by the BCT.

The BCT provides information publicly on its website about the outcomes from each of its Conservation Tenders. From the Lismore-Ballina tender, the BCT invested \$1.6 million to fund the annual conservation management payments to landholders. Typically, the BCT is paying these landholders from \$120 to \$1,637 per hectare per annum over the life of these in-perpetuity agreements.

Further information is available at www.bct.nsw.gov.au/private-land-conservation-outcomes.

Question 4

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Wollondilly have had their plan with you for, I think, seven years or eight years. It was well before this review of the SEPP anyway. What is wrong with their plan? That is a growth area. That is so critical that that plan be determined.

Ms DUMAZEL: I would have to take the details of that particular issue on notice.

Answer

I am advised:

Wollondilly Shire Council has not yet submitted a comprehensive koala plan of management to the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment for review and approval under State Environmental Planning Policy No 44 – Koala Habitat Protection.

The preparation of a comprehensive koala plan of management is identified as a short-term action in Wollondilly's draft Local Strategic Planning Statement.