

Inquiry into Koala Populations and Habitat in NSW

Post Hearing Responses

Question taken on Notice:

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In terms of the reference you make to a lack of resources and more resources being required, do you have a specific idea about how many resources or what sort of resources?

The CHAIR: Now is your chance.

Dr LEIGH: Yes, a lot of money—we need a lot of money.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In terms of how long is a piece of string, I know, but in terms of us and getting an idea of what would make a difference—if you are not aware of anything specific, how would you arrive—

The CHAIR: You can also take questions on notice and get back.

Recommendations on the nature and amount of resources required include the following:

- I. Listing selected occupied/core koala habitats as assets, to include for protection and conservation under fire management planning to ensure there are patches of habitat that koalas and other wildlife can recolonise from after fire events.
- II. A significant increase in resources so that wildlife conservation can be properly considered and managed during bushfires. Most of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area which burnt in the recent fires was avoidable. The total resource pool was insufficient and so required multiple agencies, and Remote Area Firefighting Teams (RAFT) in particular, to respond to burns on the edges of National Parks not within Parks. Due to limitations in the overall resource pool, all resources were focussed on preventing loss of human life and property. This was particularly notable in Wollemi National Park with the Gaspers Mountain fire, and Kanangra-Boyd National Park with the Green Wattle Creek Fire. These fires have to date burnt up to 80% of the World Heritage Area. A significant increase in net fire resourcing is necessary, rather than a re-categorisation of existing resources.
- III. Funding for urgent surveys and mapping of remaining (post-fire) koala populations and habitats to inform planning for the long-term conservation of koalas in the region. This should include ongoing monitoring to assess post-fire population recovery, as well as resources for testing and monitoring disease prevalence and genetic diversity levels to guide population connectivity and viability modelling.
- IV. A single government agency in NSW should be made responsible and accountable and resourced for threatened species management in emergencies. Ideally this would be an agency with local/regional structure and existing emergency management responsibilities. The actions for koalas can be applied to other threatened species and should include:

- Collaborative development of protocols for threatened species emergency responses.
 - Protocols for safe wildlife retrieval and care immediately before and after fire.
 - Protocols for general fauna management including water stations & food drops and providing funding and assistance to other stakeholders including NGOs and volunteer agency operations.
 - A requirement for the development of regional threatened fauna emergency response plans. For example, a Greater Sydney/Blue Mountains Koala Emergency plan developed in collaboration with the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, WIRES, Science for Wildlife, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Rural Fire Service, Fire and Rescue NSW, local Councils and other relevant stakeholders. A key outcome should be that all stakeholders are resourced and with protocols in place before the annual fire season arrives.
- v. The state of Victoria has a model that could be considered as a basis for use in NSW for emergency responses.
<https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/wildlife-emergencies/wildlife-emergencies>. An extracted summary is included here:
 “Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan
 The [Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan](#) (VEAWP) provides principles and policy for use in emergency planning, response and recovery phases for addressing animal welfare in an emergency. It defines roles and responsibilities of agencies and organisations and their operational interactions with the overarching objectives of: **Contributing to enhanced human safety and community resilience through effective planning and management of animals in emergencies; and** Ensuring animals are better considered and protected from suffering during and immediately following emergencies.”
 The plan is a joint responsibility of the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (DEDJTR) and DELWP.”
- vi. Significantly increased resources for wildlife care in the Greater Blue Mountains/Sydney basin region, where nationally significant and growing populations of koalas have only recently been mapped including a chlamydia-free population. This should include consideration of a dedicated koala hospital with capacity for treatment areas, as well as recovery/rehabilitation enclosures for koalas immediately prior to release.
- vii. Increased resources and supporting legislation to conserve koalas and habitats in developed areas. These are increasingly important as developed areas comprise asset protection zones and as a result of the 2019/2020 bushfires in many areas, for example in the Blue Mountains region, the majority of surviving koalas will be in these land use zones.
- viii. As discussed at the hearing on the 16th December, improved fire management using a strategic approach incorporating traditional ecological knowledge and cultural fire

practice can help protect threatened species and increase biodiversity, improve vegetation condition and control invasive weed species, and reduce fire hazard fuels. This has been demonstrated through the Firesticks program (<https://www.firesticks.org.au/about/cultural-burning/>). It is important to note that the changing conditions expected under climate change need to be carefully considered, including increased frequency and severity of fires, lower rainfall in many areas and shorter annual periods with conditions suitable for hazard reduction burns (Bureau of Meteorology, State of the Climate Report 2018; <http://www.bom.gov.au/state-of-the-climate/>).

To get an idea of the funding required for broad-scale management in NSW, a rough estimation of the cost of implementing an improved prescribed burning program at a state-wide level is approximately \$70million per annum. This figure was derived from Koala Habitat Models in the Koala Habitat Information Base created by the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (excluding 3 far west regions). The koala habitat included in the cost estimate was comprised of the combined approximate area for very high, high and moderate quality koala habitat. An average cost per hectare was then applied based on a recent costing for implementing the Firesticks model for a 12,000ha reserve.

To put this in context, while the funding amount appears high, in the recent Business Relief package for the bushfires a single commercial company was paid through the DPI Agriculture & [Livestock] Animal Services Hotline program for a convoy of 50 b-double trucks worth of feed for livestock - an order which would have been well over \$1million of tax alone. Over 1 million litres of replacement water was granted to a single cut-flower business in Bilpin for fire relief. For conserving a species at a state-wide level this budget estimate is relatively small in comparison to Business Relief budgets and the actions taken would benefit asset protection zones and businesses by reducing the intensity and scale of bushfires in protected areas.