



NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Portfolio Committee
Koala populations and habitat in NSW

Your reference
Our reference

Email: PortfolioCommittee7@parliament.nsw.gov.au

17 March 2020

Dear Committee Members

Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales - Post-hearing responses - 18 February 2020

Please see following responses from the above hearing.

Question:

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What is the funding for the Hotspots project?

Mr LUCAS: I would need to take that on notice if I could?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes.

Mr LUCAS: We run a partnership with the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, so I would need to get some information to take that on notice if I could?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That will be fine. I appreciate that. The project has been in place since 2005 so I do not want you to give me a year by year analysis of what your budget is. I am wondering whether your budget has remained steady, whether it is increasing, whether it is decreasing? Would you be able to let the Committee know?

Response:

From 2005/06 to 2009/10 the Hotspots programme had one dedicated staff member who co-ordinated activity across the state. Beyond that, there were a number of indirect resources that assisted in carrying out workshops throughout the financial year.

In 2010/11, three additional staff were recruited to carry out Hotspots workshops and environmental approvals. Indirect resources continue to assist as required but are not specifically budgeted for the Hotspots programme.

An amount is paid each financial year to the Nature Conservation Council (NCC) as part of their partnership with the NSW Rural Fire Service. In 2019/20, the annual grant paid to the NCC for Hotspots was \$327,796 in two instalments.

Question:

The Hon. SHAYNE MALLARD: I was interested in your experience in terms of koala responses to fire, particularly the cooler fires, the lower level fires. Do they move away when they smell smoke? Do they move into gullies and so on? Do you have any experience of that?

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Mr LUCAS: Not personally. I can certainly get that information coming to you if you like. I would not be able to give you specific examples of their behaviour around that.

The CHAIR: That would be useful if there is somewhere for you to be able to get that information. Is that what you are suggesting in terms of the way koalas respond to fire?

Mr LUCAS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: We have had evidence that they climb but it would be interesting to see if that is their experience. I wanted to ask about working with koala volunteers. We have had evidence from Port Macquarie that the volunteers work with the local Rural Fire Service to get accreditation so they can go in and rescue koalas after a bushfire. I am just wondering if you are aware of that project and if there is any work to do that as a statewide program so that there can be an after-fire response by the koala volunteers?

Mr LUCAS: I can confirm some of that. It is not specifically a thing that is done with Hotspots so that is slightly out of my area. My understanding of it is that most of the accreditation is around their ability to get on a fireground after a fire has passed and it is declared safe. They have training in bushfire awareness; it is not necessarily a firefighting qualification as such. It is an awareness that allows them to get onto a fireground when it is safe to carry out those activities. Again, I can get more detail around that if that is helpful.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Sure. Can I just clarify, are you not responsible for advising the Rural Fire Service on what to do after a fire has gone through in relation to wildlife? Is there someone else in your organisation who is managing that?

Mr LUCAS: My detail is a bit hazy on this but my understanding is a lot of that is being done from the local district up there. As I say, I could probably get some more detail to properly answer the question.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I guess the point is that there is no statewide policy capacity at the moment in the RFS for managing wildlife rescue after a fire event; there are not any policies. I am not criticising the RFS, I am just trying to identify if there is a potential learning there from these fires and if you think that would be a good idea that there could be a statewide policy because everybody seems to be doing their own thing and it is very patchy.

Mr LUCAS: I am not aware of any statewide policy for the Rural Fire Service on wildlife rescue and the like but again I would not mind being able to confirm that to make sure I have properly answered the question.

Response

The NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) is aware of anecdotal evidence that indicates that koalas will climb trees to escape the heat of a fire, but it is also possible that koalas climb trees in response to the presence of people. It is also possible that koalas climb down trees to escape fire. There is also suggestion that koalas might move to cooler gullies (where available) on days of high temperature. Such days coincide with bush fires at times and thus the gullies may provide a form of refuge from both the heat and a bush fire should it occur. However, it is important to note that the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE) are the authority with the principle responsibility of wildlife management. As such, the RFS relies on evidence and information provided by DPIE regarding animal behaviour.

The RFS understands that bush fires that consume or significantly impact the canopy may injure or kill individual koalas if they are present in those trees. Injuries to individual koalas may also occur as a result of climbing down burnt tree trunks or even traversing burnt ground. Depending on the size and capacity of adjacent unburnt areas, there may also be impacts relating to a reduction in their food source, along with other stresses. However, some areas that have experienced high intensity bush fires in the past now contain significant koala populations. Unfortunately, due to the complexities of monitoring there are gaps in the knowledge base as to the mechanisms for how these populations increase post fire event.

It is however well documented that rehabilitation of koalas injured by fire has a high success rate when they are returned to the post-fire environment. Therefore, it is important to encourage and enable koala rescue teams to search and recover injured wildlife whenever feasible following bush fire events that may have injured resident koalas.



The RFS supports and enables access for wildlife search and rescue activities post a fire event. The RFS operates to establish an Incident Controller (IC) for fires under its control. The IC is responsible for authorising access to active firegrounds. This access ranges from firefighters to a range of other personnel including members of animal welfare and rescue organisations. There are well established local arrangements with these animal welfare and rescue organisations that enable access once it is deemed sufficiently safe.

The triggers for the initiation of wildlife search and rescue include sightings of injured animals by volunteer firefighters, the Incident Management Team (IMT) initiating based on size and nature of the fire, or via the animal welfare and rescue organisations themselves. It is worth noting that NPWS (under DPIE) are commonly on IMTs and although support firefighting operations they will also monitor the situation regarding wildlife impacts.

DPIE is responsible for the regulation and licencing of native wildlife rescue and rehabilitation which is ostensibly undertaken via the licensing of animal welfare and rescue organisations rather than individuals. The animal welfare and rescue organisations are well versed regarding their responsibility for ensuring their volunteers have attended the Fireground Awareness course (delivered by the RFS) so that they are qualified to enter the fireground. They are also responsible for ensuring volunteers are complying with Safe Work Method Statements and other Work Health and Safety paperwork and wearing full Personal Protection Equipment and have access to other required resources such as a UHF/VHF radio set to the appropriate channel. A current medical assessment is also required.

Once initiation has occurred there are well established practices for the point-of-contact from the local animal welfare and rescue organisation to arrange access to the fireground from the IC. Firegrounds are inherently environments with risks and as such the IC only enables access once satisfied that that it is reasonably safe. The point-of-contact works with the IMT to pre-plan each day's rescue activities. Once on the fire-ground, wildlife volunteers operate under the direction of the IC.

Local animal welfare and rescue organisation seek the assistance of veterinarians (if required) listed on the native animal vet directory who have identified themselves as having expertise in treating particular native wildlife.

Please contact me if you require any further information.

Yours Sincerely

Jeff Lucas
Director, Planning & Environment Services

