

Submission
No 52

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Coffs Harbour City Council

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SUBMISSION BY COFFS HARBOUR CITY COUNCIL TO THE NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL'S INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NSW

July 2019

General

This submission has been prepared by Coffs Harbour City Council, for lodgement with the NSW Legislative Council's Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment who are currently conducting an inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales. Due to the limited timeframe provided, this submission has not been endorsed at a Meeting of Council. Council has provided commentary on issues of most relevance to the local koala population of Coffs Harbour, and issues seen to be relevant to the committee's inquiry.

Koala Monitoring and Mapping

Council believes that better monitoring and mapping of koala habitat, and records of sightings, is critical to habitat preservation and understanding if koala recovery initiatives are working. However, a program such as this needs to be coordinated across all tenures to be effective unlike existing mapping that is often excluded from certain tenures such as state forests or commonwealth land.

Increased accuracy of koala habitation will also assist Council in development planning. The best current available information is accessed through the NSW BioNet (also known as the NSW Wildlife Atlas) and is commonly used by Council and the development industry when determining target species for flora and fauna surveys, and when assessing the impacts from development.

One of the most common sources of data to BioNet is through flora and fauna surveys for future developments which means that records are concentrated around development 'hubs' or future release areas.

Data from wildlife rescue organisations represents a unique source of data as it is not linked to future release areas and is sometimes the only source of records in undeveloped areas.

Council is aware that data from wildlife rescue organisations is mostly not entered into BioNet and would like to see support for wildlife rescue organisations so that that their data can be utilised by the database.

2016 Land Management Reforms

Council advocates that both core and potential koala habitat should cause the land to be mapped as 'regulated' as part of the Native Vegetation Regulatory Map, and that given the threatened species status of koalas, that approval under the *Local Land Service Act 2013* be required rather than the use of self-assessable codes of practice. Council urges the inquiry to recommend finalising the Native Vegetation Regulatory Map. Council also supports including predictive koala habitat and likelihood of koala occupancy information in the Biodiversity Assessment Methodology threshold Biodiversity Values Map and including impacts on koala habitat as serious and irreversible as discussed in the 2016 Independent Review into the Decline of Koala Populations by the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer Professor O'Kane.

Council is aware that a state wide koala habitat map is being produced however urges the inquiry to recommend the use of the best available mapping for each area and that the maps be tenure blind to allow for conservation efforts to be planned across all jurisdictions.

Private Native Forestry

Council is greatly concerned of the potential impact of Private Native Forestry (PNF) to the koala population of Coffs Harbour.

As stated in the 2016 Regional State of the Environment Report for the North Coast Region of New South Wales, *'since 2007, private native forestry in the North Coast region has increased significantly. Of the 2,916 PNF agreements approved in NSW between 2007 and June 2015, 69.4% were in the reporting region, covering 49.7% of the total area under PNF agreements in NSW (EPA Public Register 2016)'*. The Regional State of the Environment Report 2016 goes on to say that *'the area under PNF agreements for the North Coast region as at June 2015 was 266,727 hectares'* however the report also points out that only a fraction of these approvals have been enacted. Given that a PNF approval lasts for 15 years the impact and legacy of these approvals cannot be underestimated.

Council notes that the 2016 Independent Review into the Decline of Koala Populations refers to the Private Native Forestry Code of Practice several times throughout the report as being the appropriate regulatory tool for governing PNF in koala habitat. It has been the experience of Coffs Harbour City Council that the code fails to protect koala habitat as its interpretation is too limited, there is a failure to adhere to the prescriptions and there is limited resources for compliance.

Analysis of Coffs Harbour City Council's records has revealed that of the almost 19,370 hectares of Koala Habitat in the Local Government Area, up to 23% are covered by PNF approvals. It is noted that Council does not receive mapping data to indicate how much of a property might be affected by a PNF approval and as such that this percentage might be somewhat magnified. However given the PNF approval usually covers the vegetated areas, and that these same areas are koala habitat, the figure is likely to still be representative.

The 2016 Regional State of the Environment Report for the North Coast Region of New South Wales also noted that *'during consultation with councils in the reporting region in 2012, a number reported that they considered private native forestry to be the biggest threat to biodiversity'*. With additional issues relating to PNF being raised in 2016 including, *'Approvals being issued on land designated as koala habitat'* and *'Failure to adhere to the PNF Code of Practice'*. Council urges the inquiry to recommend that core habitat continue to be excluded from PNF and that additional resources are made available for compliance of PNF and unauthorised vegetation removal more generally.

State Environmental Planning Policy No 44—Koala Habitat Protection

Council is aware that *State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) 44* is currently under review. This review has been delayed and Council urges the inquiry to recommend that the NSW Government finalise the review as soon as possible. Council believes that the SEPP should continue to give guidance to the zoning of koala habitat under Local Environment Plans to better reflect the value of the habitat and the land constraints. The issue of zoning urban land (i.e. residential, business and industrial land) to an environmental zone should also be discussed. Known as 'back zoning', this is currently very difficult to achieve and can lead to landholders having unrealistic expectations on the capacity of the land for development.

Council is also in favour of retaining the provision for comprehensive koala plans of management as they are an effective means to preserve koala habitat, however would like to see the feed trees in schedule 2 expanded to reflect to full suite of feed trees used by Koalas across the state. The incomplete list is currently preventing true koala habitat being classified as core habitat under the SEPP. Council urges to inquiry to recommend that the review of the SEPP be finalised.

Coffs Harbour Bypass

The Coffs Harbour Bypass is meant to commence construction in 2020 and be completed by 2024. Despite previous assurances, the concept design released in 2018 showed a series of cuttings instead of tunnels. The bypass route impacts on a known koala habitat corridor called Roberts Hill. Cuttings instead of tunnels will have a disastrous impact on the local koala population. While elected members campaigned on tunnels being provided this has not been confirmed by the Roads and Maritime Service and the Environmental Impact Statement is overdue for release. Council urges the inquiry to recommend that the Environmental Impact Statement for the Coffs Harbour Bypass be urgently released and that the bypass be built with tunnels to reduce impacts to the local koala population.

Conclusion

Council urges the inquiry to take actionable, positive steps for the long term survival of koala populations and habitat in New South Wales and hopes that this submission assists in outlining some of the issues relevant to Coffs Harbour, but also wider NSW.