



Cultural burning: healthy communities, healthy landscapes

9 December 2019

Portfolio Committee No. 7 - Planning and Environment
NSW Parliament
Macquarie Street, Sydney
NSW 2000

Logging moratorium for koala habitat

Dear Committee,

We are calling on the committee for the inquiry into Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales to call on the NSW Government to declare a moratorium on logging Koala habitat across all land tenures (public and private native forests) as an emergency response to the bushfires.

Over 2 million hectares of land has been severely impacted by a series of catastrophic fires across NSW in recent months and an emergency response is required to ensure the viability of threatened species including Koalas.

Fire is both a direct and indirect threat to Koalas through heat, smoke, injury, and death, while loss of habitat exacerbates other impacts including stress, dehydration, starvation, car strike, and dog attack.

As many as 300 Koalas have been reported killed in the Port Macquarie region alone. It is estimated that 300-700 Koalas have been affected by the Busbys Flat fire. The Myall Creek Road fire has decimated two coastal Koala colonies in the Clarence Valley. The impacts on all species will be extreme.

Of the high quality Koala habitat modelled DPI Forestry (Law et. al. 2017) in north-east NSW over 126,000 hectares (23%) has been burnt, and the area is increasing. Around a third of this identified important habitat on public lands has been burnt. This figure does not take into consideration primary habitat for Koala's outside public lands nor secondary Koala habitat that populations are likely to be utilising due to long term degradation of primary Koala habitat.

Of the OEH (2017) identified Koala Hubs in north-east NSW 4,540 ha (9%) have been burnt; 2,789 ha of these are on State Forests, representing a third of all those on State Forests. This is on top of the 2,727 ha of Koala Hubs logged from 2004-2019.

A few specific examples are:

- The Busby's Flat and Myall Creek Fires have burnt out over 57,000 ha of the DPIE's highest modelled (KHSM) Koala habitat on the Richmond Lowlands. Including the entirety of known important Koala colonies in Royal Camp, Carwong, Braemar and Gibberagee State Forests. Since conservationists highlighted the importance of Gibberagee in February this year it has been logged and burnt twice.
- The entirety of the NSW Government's proposed 5,600 ha Mt. Lindesay Koala Reserve, a key pillar of its Koala strategy, has now been burnt by the Border Trail fire around Woodenbong. Similarly, Carrai, and a significant part of Mount Boss, Koala reserves have been burnt out. Comleroy and Carrabare are now under threat.
- Half of the proposed 315,600 ha Great Koala National Park, both State Forests and National Parks, has been burnt out, encompassing over 49,000 ha of the DPIE's highest modelled (KHSM) Koala habitat, including most of this important Koala habitat on the Dorrigo Plateau. This includes 2,135 ha of OEH identified Koala Hubs, which is on top of the 1,807 ha of Koala Hubs in the proposal logged since 2004. Some 144 ha of the burnt Koala hubs were also logged since 2017.
- Clarence Valley Council's 'Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management' for the Ashby, Woombah & Iluka localities in the Clarence Valley LGA' identifies that wildfires have already significantly impacted populations, with an area around Ashby the only "core" Koala habitat identified in the Clarence Valley. Over 800ha of this important core habitat has so far been burnt, along with 2 OEH Koala Hubs. The remnant populations around Woombah and Iluka have also been hit hard.
- The Lake Inness fire, south of Port Macquarie, has burnt out 2,940 ha of the DPIE's highest modelled (KHSM) Koala habitat, including 958 ha of OEH's Koala Hubs. The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital estimates that this fire alone has wiped out over 300 Koalas.

Across all the fire grounds habitat for many thousands of Koalas has been lost, (at least until it regenerates), including many of our most important colonies, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Koalas. With their primary habitat degraded to such an extent that unknown consequences may result, impacting their survival into the future. Cumulative effects from recent catastrophic and unprecedented impacts from wildfire on forest structure, resource availability and regenerative capacity may see koala populations become extinct, in that their population size and diversity among isolated populations is diminished to the point where their survival into the future is not secured. There has yet to be an assessment of the impacts of the fires on Koala habitat or populations, Koalas' current refuges, or Koalas' recolonisation potential. Given the widespread loss of Koalas and habitat it would be irresponsible to allow forestry activities to impact on their remaining refuges.

Forestry Corporation NSW have harvesting operations planned in the remaining pockets of koala habitat that need emergency protection through a moratorium on logging. Koala habitat is also at risk on private native forests with harvesting operations continuing despite the ongoing fire risks. In the wake of the bushfires, hundreds of koalas have been so severely injured wildlife carers are left with no choice but to euthanize. For the koalas that have been rescued and rehabilitated by wildlife carers, the efforts will be trivial if the vast majority of remaining healthy habitat to release rescued koalas (and other wildlife) impacted by the fires is at risk of being logged.

Cultural fire management is a crucial element to looking after country and maintaining healthy habitats for Koalas and many native plants and animals. This means the ongoing management of country by Traditional Custodians in a way that brings back their kinship on country to enhance the health of people, plants, animals and trees, this will help prevent future impacts of bushfires. The Government must invest in community based training for

Indigenous fire practitioners and fund Indigenous rangers to carry out cultural fire management across the state.

These unprecedented fires have jeopardised the long-term viability of threatened species populations and forests ecosystems in several areas and requires a government response. Allowing further loss of habitat and impact on native species would be irresponsible.

The government must ensure sufficient remaining native habitat is maintained to protect species and ecological processes. It is an appropriate precautionary response to put on hold further native forest logging on both public and private land until a comprehensive and independent assessment is conducted, and the appropriate measures are taken to ensure the best possible outcomes for koalas and other threatened plant and animal species.

We call on the committee for the inquiry into Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales to actively call on the NSW Government to put in place a moratorium on logging koala habitat as an emergency response to the fires. We ask the committee to unanimously agree to take all political measures to call for this emergency response, including but not limited to making representations to Premier Gladys Berejiklian, Deputy Premier John Barilaro in his capacity as Minister for Forestry and Environment Minister Matt Kean to urge the NSW Government to put a moratorium on logging in place.

Yours sincerely,

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