



North East Forest Alliance

NORTH EAST FOREST ALLIANCE

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Penny Sharpe

Minister for the Environment

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Dear Penny,

I write to you on behalf of the North East Forest Alliance to ask for a meeting with you to discuss Koala conservation, to remind you of the abuse of Koalas occurring on State forests, and to complain about the Government's continued denial of the problem.

NEFA considers that the continued logging of Preferred Koala Feed Trees within occupied habitat is a direct threat to the survival of already diminished Koala populations. As feed trees are cut down the carrying capacity of the forest is reduced. Koalas have been lost from many areas of habitat, particularly after the 2019/20 fires, so it is essential that remnant populations are given the opportunity to rebuild and reoccupy potential habitat.

With the growing frequency and intensity of droughts, heatwaves and wildfires continuing to threaten populations, and jeopardising Koalas recovery in suitable habitat, there is no time to waste if there is a genuine intent to save Koalas from extinction. The first thing the NSW Government needs to do is stop logging and clearing occupied habitat and Preferred Koala Feed Trees.

For State forests NEFA requests that you:

1. **urgently re-instate the requirement for thorough pre-logging Koala surveys, this time undertaken by independent experts**
2. **exclude logging from, and rehabilitate, the most important habitat for Koalas, including:**
 - a. **areas with high Koala usage, including home ranges**
 - b. **patches with relatively high densities and diversities of Preferred Koala Feed Trees**
 - c. **likely refugia from the impacts of climate change, including droughts, heatwaves and wildfires.**
3. **protect mature (>30 cm DBH) Preferred Koala Feed Trees in potential and linking habitat.**

This letter is further to my letters to you of 3 April 2023 regarding logging of Koala habitat in the proposed Great Koala National Park and Sandy Creek Koala Park (Braemar State Forest), and 25 May 2023 attaching my assessment of the Forestry Corporation's proposed logging of the Commonwealth's identified Nationally Important Koala Areas and the NSW Government's identified Koala Hubs.

I provided evidence to you that on the north coast of NSW the Forestry Corporation's May 2023 Plan of Operations identified for logging compartments containing 40,803 ha of Nationally Important Koala Areas and 2,716 ha of Koala Hubs. In response to my complaint [The Guardian 28 May 2023](#) reported you as stating:

"The government wants to create the Great Koala national park as soon as possible. During the election we laid out a process for its creation. As the process is being established, the [Environment Protection Authority] is engaging with Forestry Corporation of NSW to encourage them to take a precautionary approach to conducting forestry operations in areas with highly suitable koala habitat."

Yet all that the EPA claim they are doing is enforcing compliance with the existing logging rules (CIFOA). They are doing nothing more, and the Forestry Corporation are certainly not taking a precautionary approach when logging Koala habitat. There is nothing being done to protect *highly suitable koala habitat*.

I know that you are well aware of my criticisms of the Forestry Corporation's inadequate protections for Koalas due to my presentations to the Koala inquiry and at the Coffs Harbour Koala conference. I remind you that your committee found that the existing protections are inadequate, and emphasise the following findings from your inquiry:

2.61 *The committee accepts that, whilst koalas can shelter in and obtain feed from younger trees, evidence indicates that higher koala activity correlates with more mature and larger trees. The committee is concerned that increased logging activity in areas of quality koala habitat has reduced the availability of such trees for koalas. The committee believes that over many years, logging in public native forests in New South Wales has had cumulative impacts on koalas because it has reduced the maturity, size and availability of preferred feed and roost trees.*

2.101 *The committee understands that the recent changes to the Coastal IFOA agreements relating to tree retention in koala habitat were contentious, even amongst the NSW Government's agencies. The committee is of the opinion that the current regulations are insufficient to conserve large intact areas of koala habitat and corridors.*

2.103 *In light of the above evidence and the ongoing recovery efforts in burnt forests, the committee acknowledges that the forests are essential habitats for not just koalas, but other threatened species, and need to be monitored for recovery before any further decisions about salvage logging are made. The committee thus recommends that the Government consider the impacts of logging in all public native (non-plantation) forests in the context of enabling koala habitat to be first identified and then protected by a combination of transferring land to national parks or inclusion in Forest Management Zone 2 – Special Management, where appropriate.*

2.130 *Habitat is integral to the survival of the koala in New South Wales. The committee believes that unless the Government acts urgently to prevent the further loss of any more koala habitat, the future of the State's wild koalas cannot be guaranteed.*

I also wish to emphasise these two recommendations:

Recommendation 7

That the NSW Government consider the impacts of logging in all public native (non-plantation) forests in the context of enabling koala habitat to be identified and protected by a combination of transferring land to national parks or inclusion in Forest Management Zone 2, where appropriate.

Recommendation 15

That the NSW Government urgently investigate the utilisation of core koala habitat on private land and in State forests to replenish koala habitat lost in the bushfires.

It is now 3 years since your inquiry and there have been no improvements to the logging or land clearing rules, and every year Koalas are pushed further towards extinction as their preferred feed trees are indiscriminately cleared or logged from within their home territories.

And now, if anybody writes to you complaining, the EPA assures them on your behalf that the logging rules (CIFOA) you once condemned are really very good at protecting Koalas:

The CIFOA includes specific provisions for identifying and protecting koalas and koala habitats, including retaining important feed trees and excluding forestry activities from areas of active koala use.

It is clear that the CIFOA Koala prescriptions are not based on the results of adaptive management, are based on inaccurate Koala models, are contrary to the best available information, contravene research findings, ignore multiple expert advices, and are consequentially not protecting koalas or their habitats. I consider that the EPA are knowingly misleading the general public, on the following grounds:

Identifying and protecting koalas and koala habitats

The government is doing nothing to enable "koala habitat to be identified and protected" in accordance with the Koala inquiry's **Recommendation 7**. It is grossly misleading for the EPA to claim that you are.

From 1997 until 2018 the logging rules required the Forestry Corporation to thoroughly search for Koala scats ahead of logging to identify and protect Koala High Use Areas. For the remake of the State forest logging rules, the EPA (2014) was intent on removing the need for costly surveys, so they decided they would use modelling for regulation and to identify and '*protect important and currently occupied koala habitat*'. Accordingly, the EPA (2016) established a project overseen by an expert panel to examine and test approaches for modelling Koala habitat, though the project determined that '*available methods tested cannot produce an accurate and reliable map of koala habitat at the local scale for the purpose of managing koala populations and associated habitat in a state forest context*'. It was clear that "*the expert panel concluded that future work should be directed at determining the known, existing koala distribution and resident population*", meaning that because the models are unreliable, surveys were required to identify where Koalas are. At the inquiry I presented you with maps proving how the DPI Forestry model is grossly inaccurate.

As the EPA could not use the modelling to identify and '*protect important and currently occupied koala habitat*' they abandoned that intent, instead the 2018 CIFOA (new logging rules) rely upon an unreliable model to identify high and moderate quality habitat, where the only requirement is to retain 10 or 5 small potential Koala feed trees (respectively) per hectare.

Do you think that requiring the Forestry Corporation to retain a few small trees in poorly modelled Koala habitat, while doing nothing to identify occupied Koala habitat, qualifies as ***Identifying and protecting koalas and koala habitats?***

Retaining important feed trees

You are allowing impacts on Koalas to continue because nothing has been done to stop the reduction in "*the maturity, size and availability of preferred feed and roost trees*", including in "*core koala habitat ... in State forests*" vital "*to replenish koala habitat lost in the bushfires*".

For the 2018 CIFOA the EPA did try for increased retention of slightly larger trees but they were over-ridden on resource grounds. Because of differences between the EPA and the Forestry Corporation, the Natural Resources Commission (NRC 2016) was directed to resolve a Koala prescription based on a "*modest increase in tree retention rates aim to minimise impacts on wood supply to best possible extent while recognising Government's policy initiatives and targeted investment in Koalas as an iconic species (no net change to wood supply)*".

Based on the advice of the Government's expert panel (using their inaccurate models), the EPA (NRC 2016) proposed a retention rate of "*25 trees per hectare in High/high quality habitat, 20 trees per hectare in High/moderate quality habitat, and 15 trees per hectare in Moderate/moderate quality habitat*". The NRC over-rode the EPA to support a retention rate proposed by the Forestry Corporation of 10 trees per hectare in High/high quality habitat and 5 trees per hectare in compartments with more than 25 percent High/moderate or moderate/moderate habitat.

Not only are they retaining a third to half the number of trees recommended by the EPA, they are far smaller. The EPA (NRC 2016) proposed to "*retain trees with minimum 25 centimetre diameter*

DBHOB, prioritising primary browse species, then secondary browse species". The NRC over-rode the EPA to support the Forestry Corporation, deciding "*retain trees with minimum 20 centimetre diameter DBHOB, retaining trees where available with 50 percent primary browse species*". So smaller trees, with less preferred feed species.

The EPA's size was already a compromise. At the Koala inquiry you were presented with evidence from me and independent experts that Koalas preferentially choose trees >30 cm diameter at breast height (DBH) of select species for feeding. Tree size has been found to be the most significant variable after tree species in a number of studies (i.e. Hindell and Lee 1987, Sullivan *et. al.* 2002, Moore *et. al.* 2004b, Smith 2004, Moore and Foley 2005, Matthews *et. al.* 2007, Ellis 2009, Radford Miller 2012, EPA 2016, Gallahar *et. al.* 2021, Law *et. al.* 2022).

A 20cm DBH tree has about 37% of the foliage of a 30 cm DBH tree, and just 14% of the foliage of a 60 cm DBH tree, so it is no wonder Koalas need bigger trees. From transects in occupied Koala habitat, I estimate the cutting down of 7,700 (42 per ha) preferred Koala feed trees >30cm DBH in compartments 6&7 of Braemar SF and 39,800 (54 per ha) in compartments 3-7 of Cherry Tree SF. These are just 2 of the many areas of Koala habitat intended to be logged this year.

In their submission to the CIFOA, the Office of Environment and Heritage (2018) complained that the new Koala feed tree retention rates are less than half the number and of a smaller size than proposed by the Expert Fauna Panel, concluding that the increased logging intensity proposed under the new rules is expected to impact Koalas through diminished feed and shelter tree resources.

Do you think that the EPA can now justify the claim that the Government is *retaining important feed trees*, when, when contrary to the advice of the EPA and OEHL, the rules allow the vast majority of them to be logged?

Excluding forestry activities from areas of active koala use

The claim that logging is excluded from areas of active koala use is the most outrageous of the EPA's lies. The EPA know full well that there are no requirements to look for Koalas, and that occupied Koala habitat is routinely logged. NEFA can take you to numerous places where areas of active koala use are being logged right now.

The only requirement for real (rather than modelled) Koalas, is that if a logger happens to see a Koala in a tree before they fell it, they have to wait for the Koala to leave its tree before they can cut it down.

Do you think that waiting for a Koala to leave a tree (if it happens to be seen and hasn't already fled), while those all around it are logged, qualifies as ***excluding forestry activities from areas of active koala use?***

NEFA looks forward to your response to the issues we have raised with you in this and our previous letters. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss Koala management with you at your convenience. Another forest visit would be welcomed.

Yours sincerely,



Dailan Pugh OAM

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