

Review of NSW Koala Strategy

Dailan Pugh, North East Forest Alliance, April 2022

On Saturday 9 April the NSW Government released its NSW Koala Strategy, strategically timed to avoid scrutiny by being sandwiched between the launch of the Federal Government's Koala Recovery Plan and announcement of the federal election.

Despite a promise to double Koala populations by 2050, with \$193.3 million for the next 5 years, the strategy is set to fail because it does not fulfill the most fundamental requirement of stopping existing Koala habitat from being cleared and degraded, and lacks a strategic approach to identify the highest priority lands for protection and revegetation.

The NSW Koala Strategy affirms habitat loss and climate change as the most serious threats to koala populations.

The strategy claims to be the first 5 year stage of a goal to double koala numbers by 2050. It identifies a total NSW Koala population of 15,000-30,000 Koalas, adopting 20,000 as the target to double, distributed over 50 koala populations based on the Areas of Regional Koala Significance (ARKS).

The strategy commits \$193.3 million to various actions over the next 5 years. Over the course of this next stage, investment and conservation action will focus on 19 of these koala populations (ARKS). Within these populations, ten focus areas have been identified for 'immediate investment', on the north coast these are Northern Rivers, Tweed Ranges, Coffs Harbour, Crescent Head, Port Macquarie and Comboyne.

Over the next 5 years \$107.1 million is being invested to fund the protection, restoration, and improved management of more than 47,000 hectares of koala habitat. Instead of requiring protection for Koala habitat from clearing and logging, it proposes spending \$50.3m million buying 15,000 hectares of private properties, \$20.3m implementing conservation agreements over 7000 hectares, \$15.5m planting 20,000 hectares of koala habitat, \$16m restoring 5,000 hectares of box-gum woodland, and \$5m to leverage private investment.

Throwing money around in a piecemeal fashion will not compensate for the Liberal's promises to the Nationals, as peace terms in the 2020 Koala Wars, to remove the requirement to obtain permission before clearing core Koala habitat, to end the prohibition on logging core Koala habitat, to open up all environmental zones for logging, and to stop core Koala habitat being added to environmental zones. Currently Council's zoning on the north-coast prohibits logging of 167,000 ha and requires Council consent for logging in 603,000 ha, so removing these constraints will mean a lot of koala habitat opened up for logging or removed from Council oversight.

While it is good to give some landowners with Koala habitat the option of selling their land to national parks or getting paid to enter conservation agreements to protect Koala habitat, the removal of legislative constraints on clearing and logging Koala habitat on private lands is a significant net loss for Koalas. According to DPI Forestry's Koala model there is 688,000ha of medium-high quality Koala habitat on private lands in north-east NSW, so protecting 22,000 ha of existing Koala habitat across NSW, represents just 3% of good Koala habitat in north-east NSW alone. We need to increase landscape protections for Koalas, not reduce them.

What we need for private lands is for the Government to fund Councils to prepare Comprehensive Koala Plans of Management that identify where the core Koala habitat and important linkages are, and then to apply development constraints, and direct funding, to best protect those lands. The strategy does include \$3.9m to help some 10 Councils map Koala habitat, though it is likely they won't be allowed to protect it.

State forests are exempt from the Koala Strategy. DPI Forestry's Koala model identifies 287,000ha of medium-high quality Koala habitat on State forests in north-east NSW, and yet nothing is being done to protect it. At best 5-10 small potential Koala feed trees per hectare need to be protected in

this Koala habitat, with the only other requirement being to wait for a Koala to leave before cutting down its tree.

We know that Koalas preferentially choose larger individuals of a limited variety of tree species for feeding, and get attached to them. It is self-evident that cutting down these key feed trees will result in less Koalas. Protecting and restoring Koala feed and roost trees is a prerequisite for allowing populations to recover and grow on public lands.

The most important and extensive Koala habitat we know of in NSW is in the proposed Great Koala National Park, encompassing 175,000 hectares of State Forests south of Grafton and west of Coffs Harbour. Similarly on the Richmond River lowlands the most important and extensive area known is the proposed Sandy Creek Koala Park, encompassing 7,000 ha of State Forests south of Casino.

In 2017 the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) analysed Koala records *"to delineate highly significant local scale areas of koala occupancy currently known for protection"*, with 19,785 ha of these "Koala Hubs" identified on State Forests. Protecting these has to be a high priority.

The protection of these, and other core Koala populations on State forests, are the essential first step if there is a real intent to recover Koala populations.

In 2020-21 the Forestry Corporation lost \$20m on its logging of 13,600 ha of native forest, meaning it cost taxpayers \$1,470 per ha to log public native forests, including Koala habitat. Rather than saving \$1,470 per ha by protecting public forests, the intent is to spend \$3,353 per ha buying private forests.

The \$107.1 million allocated in the Strategy for habitat protection and restoration is intended to protect just 22,000 ha of Koala habitat, and create 25,000 ha of new habitat. It would be far more cost-effective to allocate this funding as a timber industry transition strategy, enabling the protection from logging of 2 million ha of native forest on State forests, including over 287,000 of existing medium-high quality Koala habitat encompassing 20,000ha of "Koala Hubs". If there was a genuine intent to save Koalas the Government would not ignore State forests.

The Koala Strategy also commits:

- \$15.7 million for up to 8 regional partnerships with local councils, conservation groups and Aboriginal communities to deliver coordinated on-ground actions (incl. Northern Rivers, Port Macquarie, Northern Tablelands)
- \$9.1 million to for 8 projects to translocate koalas into unoccupied habitat, to improve koala genetic diversity and increase the viability of koala populations
- \$10.6 million to address some 10 vehicle strike hotspots
- \$3.5 million to deliver programs to support the wildlife rehabilitation sector
- \$43.4 million on surveys and research, including baseline surveys in up to 50 populations, ongoing monitoring at a minimum of 20 sites and Koala genetic diversity mapping

The National Party is also generously going to allow the Minister for Environment and Heritage to establish **one** Area of Outstanding Biodiversity Value for koalas (out of the 50 populations) under the Biodiversity Conservation Act. This will help management of just one area (likely a national park) that makes a significant contribution to the persistence of koalas.

While it is good to see funds being directed to Koala conservation, what we need most is immediate protection of core Koala habitat and linkages on public lands, and the mapping of core habitat and linkages on private lands to enable the most effective targeting of regulatory instruments and funding to protect it.