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NSW Independent Planning Commission

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Public meeting. I speak on behalf of Friends of the Koala Inc. (FOK), which is a voluntary organisation widely acknowledged as the lead koala conservation group in the Northern Rivers of NSW covering the Ballina, Byron Bay, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Tweed local government areas. We're licensed by the NSW Office of Environment & Heritage (OEH) to rescue, rehabilitate and release koalas into the wild. Our mission, which we have been pursuing since 1986, is conserving koalas in recognition of the contribution the species makes to Australia's biodiversity. In addition to our licensed activities, our core business encompasses habitat protection and regeneration, community education, advocacy and research. We maintain a regional Koala Care and Education Centre in East Lismore.

Koalas in our Region are in dire straits and, according to koala experts (and reflecting our experience), on the verge of the tipping point which leads inevitably into extinction. We generally rescue about 300 koalas a year, but in 2016/2017 we rescued 429 and last year 368, with 2018/2019 shaping up to be just as bad. We rescue more koalas each year than any other koala group in NSW and possibly nationally, but generally only 15% of those rescued survive to be released to the wild each year. Whilst disease is the major direct cause of those deaths, followed by car hits and dog attacks, we know that habitat loss is the core driver of the koala's march to extinction. Koalas are attached to their ranges and their food trees, and when that habitat is removed it causes stress for the animals which, in turn, stimulates diseases such as chlamydia and retrovirus which are often fatal. Although koalas are impacted by deforestation in State Forests and National Parks, the removal of habitat for infrastructure and residential, commercial and industrial development, including removal of paddock trees, are a major contributor to the dire situation that koalas are facing.

In regard to proposed modification 4 of the Kings Forest Development Koala Plan of Management, first I would like to acknowledge that the Department of Planning has been keeping to the original Concept Plan requirements and I sincerely hope that it will continue to do so. However, there are three issues that cause me concern in this proposed modification.

The first is the issue of offset planting which is a major concern, particularly bearing in mind the point I made earlier about koalas being attached to their ranges. Whilst offset planting sounds reasonable, in reality it is likely to be on a site at some distance from the current koala food trees and ranges, and it takes years for the trees to grow to a height that's useful for koalas. Furthermore, when their habitat has been removed, koalas are on the ground much longer searching for food and are far more vulnerable to dogs, vehicles, swimming pools and either death or disease caused by stress. Their chances of surviving are reduced. If there is to be offset planting then there must be a binding agreement or legal arrangement in place well before any construction commences.

The second is in regard to a koala's ability to move through their corridors, and in particular move safely across roads on the development. Experience with other developments such as Skyline Road in Lismore and more recently the upgrade of the Pacific Highway from Woolgoolga to Ballina has demonstrated that koala fences on their own prevent koalas from accessing their natural corridors, whereas underpasses used in conjunction with koala-proof fencing do provide that access. But again, based on experience in other places, they should be constructed prior to Construction Certificates being issued, otherwise koalas may be locked out from their corridors for years. From an engineering perspective, it's much more efficient to install underpasses as part of the road construction.

The third is the proposed fencing of the Cudgen Paddock or golf course, which was intended to remain as a wildlife corridor. Fencing the golf course would further impede koalas in the Environmental Protection Zones adjoining the golf course from accessing their natural corridor. Where golf courses forming a natural corridor for koalas are left unfenced as in Lismore and Suffolk Park, koalas move freely through those corridors and delight golfers who spot them either in trees on the golf course or moving through. Indeed golfers become our eyes on koalas on their golf courses and contact us routinely if a koala needs to be treated for injury or disease.

Finally, whilst this huge development will certainly impact significantly on koalas and other wildlife regardless of conditions imposed on it through the Koala Plan of Management, adhering to the original Concept Plan will to some extent mitigate against those impacts. If these proposed modifications are approved, their impact on Tweed's koalas will be considerably worse.