

Public submission

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SUBMISSION TO THE INDEPENDENT FORESTRY PANEL

Thankyou for this opportunity to voice my concerns re the unsustainability of forestry and deep concern for endangered species such as koalas and greater gliders that depend on these forests for their survival, and many other issues to do with logging our native forests. As a bush regenerator and a wildlife rescuer, including of koalas, and an environmentalist I am extremely aware and concerned about the many negative impacts of logging native forests both on the animals that inhabit these forests, and the structure and integrity of these forests as well as the greater impact on the climate crisis and our society.

To know that Forestry NSW is losing money in the tens of millions and that all these negative impacts are actually being paid for by taxpayers is scandalous. Our treasured koalas and greater gliders are cherished the world over and our Government should be using taxpayer dollars to protect them and the forests they call home at every turn, not using tax payer dollars to annihilate them to extinction and trash the environment in the process. I have witnessed the devastation left behind by both logging on public land and in private native forestry and I was left with no doubt that the desire for a quick buck overruled any consideration for wildlife or nature, and sadly regulatory functions by various state government agencies were totally missing in action.

Forestry operations are not sustainable

Forestry operations in NSW are simply not sustainable and have also been proven to be grossly over-estimated. Since 2010 yields from state forests have declined by 40% from 1.3 million tonnes down to 0.8 million tonnes in 2023, and are currently only 61% of claimed sustained yields. And astoundingly the massive loss of resources in the 2019/20 fires have yet to be even factored in. NSW Forestry is basically industrially mining trees, with special exemptions from environmental laws and with any meaningful protections for wildlife and their habitat being reduced to a bare minimum. And all this is being done at a cost to taxpayers, destroying our public forests in the process and driving species to extinction.

In 2023 Forestry Corporation lost \$15 million on their hardwood operations, which equates to a cost of \$1,281 per hectare logged. This is despite being paid \$31 million that year, and obtaining tens of millions in regular equity injections. I find it abhorrent that taxpayers are paying to degrade our forests and log the homes of threatened species.

Logging of native forests also reduces biomass and carbon storage, removes mature trees essential for many species, depletes old growth trees and their hollows also essential to many species, increases not only the fire threat but also the intensity of fires, reduces stream flows, promotes weeds and also dieback, and increases erosion and water pollution. It makes absolutely no sense from an environmental or economical perspective to be continuing with forestry operations. Any jobs that are currently held can easily be transitioned to improving the health of our forests, benefitting our wildlife and our biodiversity and also increasing tourism, such as the huge benefits that the proposed Great Koala National Park can provide.

Forests are essential for our wildlife and our own environment

Forestry NSW call these forests resources but in fact they are the home and food of our wildlife and endangered species, and species such as the koala heading towards extinction are being driven out of their forest homes or being injured, killed or stressed from the industrial logging operations. When animals such as koalas and macropods are stressed they often succumb to disease and the result is usually death. As a wildlife rescuer I see way too many of our treasured wildlife having to be euthanased due to disease caused by stress. Koalas get chlamydia, various marsupials get toxoplasmosis, macropods get stress myopathy, wombats and also possums get mange, amphibians get chytridimycosis, bats get zoonotic viruses including Ebola and Hendra virus, and as we are seeing at the moment migratory birds with avian influenza. In the majority of cases it is because these poor animals have been driven out of their habitat, their habitat has been totally destroyed or populations have been disturbed. And on top of land clearing for animal agriculture, mining and development, logging of our native forests is driving this habitat loss at the same time as contributing to the climate crisis.

The environmental values of our forests are immense, mature trees specifically targeted by logging provide nectar and browse essential for many species. Old growth trees provide hollows that are essential as dens and nests for 174 of NSW's species. If the Australian and NSW Government truly cares about the 269 nationally listed threatened forest species, including the endangered Koala and the Greater Glider, it is essential that we stop logging their homes.

Forests generate rainfall, provide shade and cool the land. Our forests clean the air, filters and regulates water flows and removes carbon dioxide from the air, storing it in their wood and in the soil. Our forests provide homes for our unique wildlife and many threatened species. Our forests are important for our own recreation and subsequent health benefits. Our forests also have vast cultural values and Aboriginal cultural heritage values which need to be retained.

Demand for timber products

Native hardwoods comprised 2.4 million (9%) of Australia's log production of 25 million cubic metres in 2023, and half of this was exported as woodchips. Saw and veneer logs made up just 8% of the 8.5 million cubic metres of logs obtained from hardwood plantations, and 87% of this was exported as woodchips. There simply is not the need to log public native forests to build houses. Our hardwood needs could be satisfied with sawn timber and composite timber products from existing plantations. Bamboo is also a great and sustainable alternative for many building products.

Hardwood and softwood plantations already provide 91% of Australia's log production. The proportion of saw and veneer logs obtained from hardwood plantations should be increased, instead of being `` exported as woodchips. We can meet our timber needs from existing plantations.

The importance of State forests

State Forests in NSW comprise 2 million hectares of public land that provide water for town reservoirs, contributes to tourism, capture and stores carbon and provides homes to endangered wildlife. If logging is stopped all these benefits will improve and will also provide

greater economic gains, rather than the current loss to taxpayers from logging of public native forests.

Native forest logging in NSW releases 3.6 million tonnes of carbon per year, which is equivalent to the emissions of 840,000 cars annually. The volume of carbon stored in logged forests has been reduced by more than 50%, so ending logging in our public forests can make a significant contribution to meeting our climate targets. As shown by the 2019/20 wildfires, increasing droughts and fires due to climate heating are already having a significant impact, not only on our forests, including rainforests but the huge loss of native species, sending some on a trajectory to extinction. It is essential that logging ends to allow forests to recover and to reduce the impacts of climate heating by removing CO2 from the atmosphere, and helping us to better withstand future climate disasters. It is also imperative to end native forest logging for our own benefit as it only increases the risk and intensity of fires.

I live in the Tweed and the success of the recently opened Northern Rivers Rail Trail has surpassed expectations, boosting the Tweed economy by more than \$3.7 million in its first year of operation. People are keen to get out in the fresh air and enjoy our natural assets and appreciate the environment and our public forests can be a great boon for tourism. The proposed Great Koala National Park is a perfect example and should already be protected and forestry jobs could be transitioned to here. I find it appalling that instead, parts of this proposed park are currently being logged to death right now, including important habitat for koalas. Shame, shame, shame on the Government for this travesty.

Koalas being driven to extinction

Koalas on the north coast of NSW where I live, are listed as Endangered at both the state and federal levels but the logging of their habitat continues. Our Government has a choice as to whether they want koalas to survive in the wild or to carry on driving their extinction and only be able to see koalas in zoos in the very near future. What a horrific legacy that would be to leave, wiping out the most loved and uniquely Australian animal on the planet.

Whilst logging of their habitat is a key threatening process koalas face many threats. Loss and degradation of habitat by land clearing for agriculture, mining, infrastructure, developments and logging are the koalas greatest threats. The primary threats in their forest homes is loss of food trees and death by logging and wildfires. In urban areas car strike, disease and attacks by dogs are common and often because they are forced to live in urban areas and cross roads due to clearing of their habitat, and lack of wildlife corridors to safely cross the landscape. In more rural areas clearing for agriculture, lack of corridors and stomping by cows is common. Threats from Climate change are escalating making some areas now unsuitable habitat, increasing drought intensity and incidence, increasing heatwaves and wildfires. Koalas are greatly affected by droughts, moving to more moist areas with high leaf moisture, sometimes also having to drink water. As a wildlife rescuer we see about two thirds of koalas rescued either dying or having to be euthanased, many due to disease such as chlamydia which is caused by stress. There is no doubt that the biggest cause of stress to koalas is the loss of their homes by destruction of their habitat and the lack of wildlife corridors.

During the 'Koala wars' the Liberal-National Party Coalition stripped back protections of habitat on public land and constraints on logging and introduced voluntary stewardship of

private land, where over 60% of koalas live. However for over a year now the new ALP government has done nothing to reverse these actions and instead are even allowing logging of the last remaining koala habitat in areas that were severely burnt in the 2019/20 fires. The NSW Government continues to log and clear Koala habitat indiscriminately, without any requirements even for surveys. And during logging the only requirement is that if a logger sees a Koala in a tree they need to wait until it leaves before they log their tree. Imagine ducking down to the shops to return to your home being obliterated and no emergency accommodation or alternative either. Koalas have home ranges, they can't simply just move somewhere else without severe consequences to their health. In effect the Government is driving the extinction of our koalas, despite that they are classified as endangered. Koalas utilise all their preferred feed trees within their home ranges, yet astoundingly over 70% of these can be logged. Hundreds of thousands of Koala feed trees are being logged from tens of thousands of hectares every year despite the Government making the fantastical statement that they wanted to double koala numbers by 2050. This is impossible with the current lack of protections and intensity of logging of important koala habitat. The proposed Great Koala National Park is not even exempt with logging being ramped up instead for Forestry NSW to get their hands on the exact same trees preferred by koalas before any protections are put in place. Protection of some of the Koalas within the proposed Great Koala National Park will benefit those particular populations, but will do nothing to protect other populations where their homes continue to be indiscriminately logged and cleared. If the Government really wanted to save Koalas from extinction in the wild by 2050, the easiest, most effective, immediate and cost-effective action would be to save Koalas' homes from logging on State forests. A lot of habitat and the koalas that live there could very swiftly be protected and their path to extinction at the least slowed. And by protecting koala habitat you will also be protecting other wildlife also.

Koalas need their preferred Koala Feed Trees (PKFTs). Only a few of the available Eucalyptus species in an area will be their preferred feed trees, while others, including some non-eucalyptus species, may be incorporated into their diet as supplementary feed trees or used as medicine or for shelter. The second most important thing for Koalas is the size of the tree, with Koalas found to prefer trees >30 cm DBH (Diameter at Breast Height). This has been documented in many studies, yet these are the exact same trees which the loggers target and take and at a cost to taxpayers.

Taxpayers are actually funding the destruction of the homes of koalas, which is driving their extinction. The NSW Government certainly does not have a social licence to do that and I would go further and say they have also mislaid their moral compass. Last year the NSW Forestry Corporation lost \$15 million logging 11,709 ha native forests, a loss of \$1,281 per hectare. In addition there was a Government grant of \$31 million for its Community Service Obligations, and other sporadic payments. On top of that there are the environmental costs of forest degradation, species losses, weeds, erosion, streamflow reductions, pollution and carbon releases. Under the Koala Strategy the NSW Government has so far purchased 10,069 hectares for addition to the national park estate at a cost of \$25,495,480, or \$2,532 per hectare. The maths or commonsense simply does not add up.

Climate refugia

Approximately 73,000 sq kilometres of forest were burned in the east and south of Australia during the 2019/20 fires, called the black summer fires, which scorched the habitat and lives of about 3 billion native animals. In those fires we also saw the burning of rainforest in the Nightcap National Park where Dr Robert Kooyman, an evolutionary ecologist has been undertaking studies since the fires. He has discovered that the decline and deaths of trees is still happening, stating “It can take a lot of these trees a long time to die, It is a long slow death”. The rainforest has also drastically changed with wattles emerging everywhere making the forest even more fire prone. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/oct/13/nightcap-national-park-rainforest-trees-age-bushfires-impact>

Koalas are primarily reliant on moisture they obtain from leaves, which means that they often retreat to areas with higher soil moisture during dry periods and droughts, and in extreme conditions require access to water to drink. As the climate crisis progresses the areas considered as suitable habitat for Koalas is projected to reduce, as the growing intensity and frequency of droughts, heatwaves and wildfires put Koala populations under increasing stress. As the climate crisis progresses it will be crucial to retain and rehabilitate moist areas, such as eucalypt dominated wet sclerophyll forests, riparian habitat, and forests above high water tables, as drought and wildfire refuges for Koalas. Long-term climate refugia needs to be identified, restored and protected now to ensure that Koalas do indeed have a future. And access to these identified areas needs to be prioritised with the creation of wildlife corridors if they do not exist now. Another job which could be filled by current forest workers. There is simply no excuse for saying jobs are the reason for continuing the ecocide of our environment and the driving of the extinction of koalas.

2019/20 Black Summer Fires

86% of the State Forests were burnt in the 2019/20 wildfires. Living in the Northern Rivers I witnessed the devastation to forests and the wildlife that used to live in these forests. It was abhorrent to see logging trucks active immediately after the fires, even when Wildlife rescuers were not allowed into the forests to look for survivors.

Looking to help wildlife in the aftermath of the fires it was clear that the majority of koalas and other wildlife were literally incinerated. There were miraculously koala scats suggesting that some had somehow survived and might be able to find sections of the forest which had not been burned. However within days of this Government being elected I was horrified to learn that the Forestry Corporation announced that they intended to log known koala hotspots such as in Braemar and Myrtle State Forests, which had been severely burnt in the fires. North East Forest Alliance commenced legal action in July to stop the Forestry Corporation logging nationally important Koala habitat in Braemar and Myrtle State Forests which was sadly not successful and logging commenced in Braemar State Forest in December 2023, after a stay on logging ended. This logging commenced despite the heavy impact of the fires on the koalas and other fauna living in this forest and with no consideration for the devastating impacts of the fires and subsequent risk of driving these koala populations to extinction.

Private Native Forestry (PNF)

Most landholders have little understanding of the environmental values of the vegetation on their properties or the needs of koalas and other wildlife. Sadly as a wildlife rescuer I see this on a daily basis where wildlife are trapped on barbed wire fences or vegetation is destroyed without a care for the wildlife who call it home, including in the spring breeding season when babies are in nests. Their focus and attention is usually to maximise income from their land and any forest. And most landholders have little or no knowledge of sustainable forest management or the importance of protecting riparian zones and wildlife habitat. As koalas are so hard to see and find, many landholders would be oblivious to the fact they even have koalas living on their property and their need for safety and protection, and some simply don't care. Sadly as a wildlife rescuer I also see this a lot.

I live in the most biodiverse region of NSW on a rural property rich with wildlife including koalas and platypus. I have devoted over 3 decades to restoring the natural values of the property and protected 90% of the property with a covenant to protect its high conservation values into the future. I treasure and do everything I can to protect the koalas and other wildlife on my property but sadly that cannot be said about adjoining property owners. My personal experience of PNF on a large landholding adjoining my own property was one of horror and devastation, not only to koala habitat and to ecological zones but also to creeks and rivers with heavy sediment loads coming from the shoddily built snig tracks and roads. Koala food trees were legally and illegally logged, with koalas fleeing the logging onto my property. Logging and log dumps occurred in supposedly protected environmental zones, cleared riparian zones, adjoining properties were destroyed along with kilometres of crown roads unlawfully bulldozed and huge pollution to 2 water catchments, which continues years later in rain events, including destroying platypus habitat, and despite being reported, numerous state agencies simply turned a blind eye. This large property is mapped as likely to having significant Aboriginal Heritage values, yet this too was ignored. This same landholder/developer moves from property to new property continuing to destroy koala habitat and the environment without any constraints. I have seen other PNF operations locally, also with devastating impacts on the environment and koalas. And there are many more PNF agreements in place in this biodiversity hotspot of NSW, including land that adjoins World Heritage Listed National Parks. Sadly it is always our precious wildlife, including aquatic wildlife that loses, and animals like the koala and the platypus just quietly disappear and go extinct. Our wildlife don't understand property boundaries and need to safely traverse the landscape and increasingly more with needing to seek out climate refugia. We need to end all native forest logging and protect habitat and actually increase the connectivity for our precious wildlife.

State Environment Planning Policies

It is estimated that two thirds of koalas live on private properties, so if the Government actually care to protect koalas from extinction they need to protect koalas on private lands. The Koala Wars caused by the National Party in 2020 to 2022 led the Government of the day to abandon the State Environment Planning Policy (SEPP) and removed laws to protect koala habitat on private land. This has allowed indiscriminate clearing and logging of koala habitat on private land which continues to this day. Voluntary measures will never protect koalas and strong legislation needs to be implemented to protect koalas on private lands. Quite often when landholders clear native vegetation it just turns to weeds with no net gain anyway. Land clearing for agriculture is the biggest threat to the future of Koalas, followed

by logging of native forests. Koalas need their homes and wildlife corridors on private lands and this must be made a priority.

Recommendations

For the future of koalas, greater gliders and other wildlife as well as for our water catchments and climate security and safety I urge the Government to end all native forest logging. I also urge the Government to implement the Great Koala National Park and the Sandy Creek National Park immediately as well as creating other National Parks across NSW, especially in western Sydney.

I also endorse the recommendations of the North East Forest Alliance as per below:

1. Comprehensive reform of legislation and strategies to save Koalas from extinction in the wild by 2050.
2. The Koala Strategy needs to refocus on prioritising the protection and enhancement of core Koala habitat, and habitat linkages, across all tenures.
3. The priority must be to save Koalas from extinction and to protect all Koala habitat on State Forests. This is the quickest and cheapest way to improve the survival prospects of Koalas at the scale and urgency required.
4. A list of feed trees (both Primary and Secondary) needs to be developed by experts for each Koala Management Area and applied consistently across all processes. This needs to take into account additional information on localised preferences. Preferred Koala Feed Trees need to be recognised.
5. Koala's preferences for larger trees >30 cm DBH needs to be acknowledged and accounted for, particularly by specifying that retained trees need to be selected from the range of sizes >30 cm DBH.
6. Core Koala habitat needs to be redefined in accordance with SEPP 2019: a) an area of land where koalas are present, or b) an area of land— (1) which has been assessed by a suitably qualified and experienced person in accordance with the Guideline as being highly suitable koala habitat, and (2) where koalas have been recorded as being present in the previous 18 years.
7. Identified Koala Hubs need to be immediately protected as core Koala habitat, utilizing current records.
8. Urgently map core Koala habitat, secondary habitat, habitat linkages and climate refuges across all land tenures. Mapping needs to identify local climate refugia, and long-term regional climate refugia. State Government need to do this as Local Government lack the funding.
9. Until mapping of core Koala habitat is complete, the best Koala models and records need to be applied to identify potential Koala habitat within which surveys need to be undertaken to identify core Koala habitat before any proposed rezoning, development, clearing or logging.

10. Until comprehensive Koala Plans of Management (KPoMs) are finalised, require site specific KPoMs be prepared for any activity proposing significant removal of vegetation within high quality Koala habitat.

11. Barilaro's SEPP 2020 needs to be repealed. A new Koala SEPP is required, it needs to be focussed on: a) The Government mapping core Koala habitat, habitat linkages and climate refuges b) Restoring the intent to zone core koala habitat for environmental protection, and protecting it from logging and clearing. c) Requiring a Koala Plan of Management for any proposal to affect core Koala habitat and habitat linkages, not just Development Applications d) Removing the need for KPoMs to be approved by the Secretary of the Department of Regional NSW

12. Stewardship payments are needed to assist management of core Koala habitat on private lands.

In Conclusion

As a volunteer koala rescuer I see on a daily basis just how quickly we are losing our precious koalas. Every single koala found splattered on the road, often with their joey, or having to be euthanased due to disease is one more individual life and their breeding potential, fast-tracking their trajectory to extinction. Please come and experience the life of a volunteer koala rescuer and see the trauma for yourself. And sit with a koala carer as they try and nurse an orphaned joey after the traumatic experience of losing their mother, only to lose the battle weeks or months later. It would be unforgivable for our Government to stand by and not do everything in their power possible to stop the extinction of this gentle and much loved animal, who just need their trees to survive, from happening.

As a rural landholder I also see the devastation caused by logging on both public and private lands. Current forestry operations are driving the extinction of koalas and greater gliders and the taxpayer is footing the bill for their extinction on top of the environmental degradation caused by industrial logging of our native forests. On top of this forestry operations are contributing to our global emissions and the climate crisis. There is an entirely winnable situation to be had by transitioning the jobs from this destructive and unsustainable industry towards protecting our public forests and enhancing their conservation values at the same time giving koalas and greater gliders an immediate and real chance at survival in these forests. An injection of funds through the tourism industry by establishing national parks such as the Great Koala National Park, which would also provide jobs will be a bonus, as will the reduced risk of wildfires, improved water quality and a reduction in carbon emissions. With the protection of koala habitat on all private lands, where the majority of koalas live, and the end of all native forest logging, our precious koalas might just have a chance at surviving into the future, and if we are lucky enough thriving and continuing as the most loved and unique wild animal on the planet.