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Chair
NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry
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SYDNEY NSW 2001 (by email)

Friends of the Koala (FOK) is licensed by National Parks & Wildlife (NPWS) to rescue, rehabilitate and release koalas into the wild in the Ballina, Byron, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Tweed local government areas (LGAs) in the Northern Rivers Region. We typically rescue 400 koalas each year, and although our release rate has been improving recently, previously only 15% were released to the wild with the others dying or being euthanased.

Our Region – and our koalas and wildlife - had already been affected substantially by the 2 year drought preceding the 2019/2020 fires, with many of the rescued koalas suffering from dehydration and malnutrition and so affected that they could not be rehabilitated. However, the impact of the removal of koala habitat over the years is the underlying cause of the current situation where koalas are almost at the tipping point which, if breached, would result in a decline from which there can be no recovery. Koalas know their ranges and trees, and when they are removed it causes stress which activates diseases such as Retrovirus and Chlamydia that are often fatal.

The bushfires affected predominantly the Richmond Valley LGA, where 50% of their land mass was burnt, with the loss of an estimated 2,000 koalas. Small areas in the Ballina LGA at and around Wardell, which had a peat fire as well as a bushfire and affected a number of koalas, and in the Tweed, Kyogle and Lismore LGAs were affected by the Mt. Nardi fire. To date we have no information in regard to the number of koalas impacted by that fire.

From September to January we rescued 27 koalas affected by the fires, and of those, we released 8 (one only recently) to the wild but the remainder either died or were too severely burnt and had to be euthanased. When one adult male we thought had been singed, but was otherwise in a good state was ultra-sounded, it was found that his organs had been baked by the radiant heat and he could not survive.

No doubt there will be submissions from experts and other organisations which address the broad range of issues being considered by the Inquiry, so I will comment only on those that FOK experienced directly in regard to koalas.

1. The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.

As mentioned above, from our perspective and experience in regard to koalas, the preceding 2 year drought had a significant impact across the Region, particularly in State Forests and National Parks but also on private property, Crown, State and local government land generally. When the fires started, koala habitat was already compromised with many smaller trees dying, little moisture in the surviving trees, and a significant fuel load from the trees dropping their leaves.

This Region has experienced drought before, however the droughts have usually been 'green' droughts, typified by a significant lack of water as well as feed for cattle and wildlife, but with the rainforests, National Parks and general vegetation retaining moisture and the green appearance that has typified the Region. The recent (possibly still current) drought was a 'brown' drought, with no grass left for wildlife or cattle, dead and dying trees, and insufficient time between the end of the 2019 hot summer and the arrival of an early warm,

dry spring for hazard reduction to occur. I was advised by the local NPWS director in September that since August 2018 their staff had attended at least 1 fire every month and that was before the recent bushfires started.

There is no doubt that the increasingly hot and dry weather experienced in the Region is due to climate change, and all the scientific projections are for this to only get worse. Koalas in NSW are generally smaller and less furry than those in the Southern states, as over time they have adapted to the warmer conditions, however it is likely that they are reaching the limit of their capacity to survive extreme heat and more frequent and intense bushfires. This, together with the continued removal of their habitat for human activities and infrastructure, paints a dismal future for koalas, despite the significant funding under the NSW Koala Strategy unless their habitat is protected and the imperatives of climate change are addressed.

2. The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect.

Friends of the Koala was ill-prepared for the fires as, although members had over the past completed Bushfire Awareness training, the absence of significant recent bushfires across the Region led to us making inadequate preparation for what happened. When the fires arrived our permits from the Rural Fire Service (RFS) had lapsed, we had inadequate equipment and PPE, and we had not established the close relationships with the RFS, NPWS and Forestry that are essential in building the trust that would enable our volunteers to have earlier access to the firegrounds. Despite this, we had good support from those agencies, including the Forestry Department organising and funding on-line Bushfire Awareness Training and the RFS and NPWS assisting us in getting access to the firegrounds, but frankly too late to do any good for koalas. There were unfortunately a number of examples of RFS fire-fighters across the country encountering them and doing what they thought was the right thing that in fact led to leaving or moving them on in ways which left them exposed to even greater danger.

We have over the past year received significant state government funding for equipment and PPE, including an emergency response trailer that will be ready to go when bushfires or floods recur. We are ensuring that our volunteers are well-trained and when COVID-19 permits, will continue to work on our relationships with the emergency services so that we can have earlier access to the firegrounds. Nevertheless, one of the significant problems from our perspective is that the responsibility of the emergency services is naturally to protect life and property, but whilst individual fire-fighters may encounter koalas and sometimes let us know so that we can rescue them, they lack knowledge about koalas (and other wildlife) and what to do when they locate them in a fire.

We believe that threatened species such as the koala should be included as environmental assets in an inventory in Bush Fire Risk Management Plans that include the location of threatened species and endangered ecological communities. These Plans should address post fire restoration and rehabilitation guidelines, especially for threatened species, communities and refugia. Furthermore, post bushfires in State Forests and National Parks – and indeed generally - no removal of any burnt trees apart from those that are identified as an immediate safety hazard should be permitted until they have been given the time to regenerate naturally. The evidence is clear that waiting for that to occur is the most effective way of approaching reforestation.

3. Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment

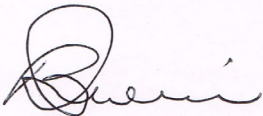
From our perspective, conventional methods of hazard reduction, and the requirement for agencies such as the NPWS to undertake set hectares of hazard reduction regardless of whether or not there have been recent bushfires, needs to be reviewed, and when substantial areas have been burnt by fires, further hazard reduction should not occur until well after the fires have been extinguished.

One of the major problems for koalas in bushfires is that they generally retreat to the canopies and when there's a crown or an intense surface fire their chances of surviving are reduced as they are either incinerated, burnt severely or impacted by the radiant heat which is also often fatal. Hazard reduction can cause more extensive hot bushfires and should be undertaken strategically with Asset Protection Zones identified in Bush Fire Risk Management Plans with the focus on reducing fuel loads, rather than undertaking hazard reduction

burning in natural areas located far from built assets. Forestry has already been trialling the effectiveness of fire-stick burning with Indigenous Rangers, and it is clear such methods produce 'cool' fires which do not impact on the canopy, therefore reducing the likelihood of arboreal mammals such as the koala being incinerated or suffering the radiant heat that can kill them. They also leave unburnt the foliage that is essential food for koalas.

Finally, we urge the government not to allow logging or grazing in National Parks, as apart from the removal of precious wildlife habitat caused by logging, cattle add another risk for koalas. There is ample evidence of koalas being killed as a result of being stamped on or butted by cows. Adding this potential into areas that are generally far safer for koalas as they are located well away from areas with built assets would hasten their decline.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roslyn Irwin', is centered within a light pink rectangular background.

Dr. Roslyn Irwin
President

17 April 2020