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Submission for Senate Inquiry into Status, Health and Sustainability of Australia's Koala Population

Dear Senators,

My submission is in regard to Koalas existing in urban areas and the lack of legislation and will power at both local and state government levels to protect these populations even in the presence of clear evidence of decline.

This submission relates to my own experience in dealing with both Brisbane City Council (BCC) and the Queensland State Government over the past 18 months in attempts to protect our local resident population.

I am lucky enough to live on the Western outskirts of Brisbane in an area that is still dominated by rural residential properties (outside the Urban footprint) and some concentrated areas of urbanisation (within the urban footprint). The area is essentially forms a large peninsula bordered by Brisbane Forest Park and State forest to the North and the Brisbane River to the South, East and West. Connectivity of vegetation corridors through the area is still quite good but there has been a decline in the Bellbowrie area with development. Regular Koala sightings have been reported to myself and to Dr Christine Hoskings (see attached map of sightings) and many have gone unreported. Given that a large portion of the vegetation in our area is mixed forest, the population density is assumed to be lower compared to the Eastern suburbs. However, in prime areas of *Eucalyptus tereticornis* growth, in waterways and their catchments, sightings are higher and on a more regular basis.

I have lived in the area for the past 25 years. As the Senators would appreciate Koalas can be notoriously difficult to see but I have been aware of the resident population that frequent the area since this time from reports from other locals and my own experience. It is my most recent sightings of healthy Koalas in my own backyard in the last 2-3 years that spurred me on to investigate how well this population was being protected. This was in the face of media reports of declining numbers in SE Queensland, proposed development on known Koala habitat in our area and the memory of previous statements made by the local Councillor that the local population was doomed to extinction. This comment was made at the time of the Beaufort Crest development which despite local concern - including those of the nearby Moggill Koala Hospital - occurred on a large parcel of known Koala habitat. This development occurred 10 - 15 years ago and yet we are fortunately still seeing koalas and progeny. A disturbing point is that the same claim was again made by

BCC Development Assessment Team West only last week when I made enquiries about assessments made in Koala habitats.

Major concerns in our area are:

State Koala Plan

In my opinion the State Koala plan is woefully inadequate as it has not accurately identified areas of koala habitation and its planning intent relies entirely on the activities of Councils.

I have reported local sightings to the initial study commissioned by DERM - supposedly the

basis for the state koala plan. I drew the attention of the then Director General of DERM to concerns with the planning process, particularly in relation to koala protection in our local area and specifically to the Moggill Country club site at a deputation of a Community Cabinet in November 2009. stated at the time that the focus was on the Koala Coast region, due to the slump in numbers in this previously prime location, and in areas where there is development pressure. The initial draft plan appeared to recognise large portions of our area, including the Moggill Country Club where a number of Koalas reside. However after a delay where Councils and developers had more input, the resulting plan of areas under legislation was greatly reduced. Ironically in our area the Moggill Country Club was not included and yet Priors Pocket Rd was - this is despite a known population occurring on the Club site and yet Priors Pocket suffering a reduction in sightings due to increased development, illegal tree removals and traffic.

I had a further discussion with DERM's Koala Unit in August last year about the lack of protected areas in our area in the final map as well as concerns with BCC activities in regard to development applications and tree removals. The response (see attached) from is in response to this meeting. I also raised the recent proposal of the State Government to Ministerial Designate land at 64 Vyner Rd, in the middle of mapped Koala habitat, for the location of a new QAS station. In this circumstance the Ministerial Designation will override any Koala legislation, but stated that DERM would be involved to minimise impacts. However, on perusing the Public Works assessment it has come to light that 136 non-juvenile Koala food trees of the 217 on site will need to be removed. It is stated that DERM has directed that payment per tree will be made as offsets. I have been unable to find out who and on what basis this was made given that there were opportunities for habitat offsets in the immediate area.

I also raised my concerns regarding the development and implementation of the Koala Plan with the local State member - however, this was a waste of time. Dr Bruce Flegg is a resident of Brookfield, where sightings have occurred. However he expressed the sentiment that he had never seen or heard them and therefore doubted their existence.

Our past Lord Mayor is also on record at a meeting about the sealing of Gap Creek Road through Brisbane Forest Park, that Koalas do not occur on Mt Cootha. My own correspondence to the past Lord Mayor of Brisbane enquiring on Brisbane City Councils input on the State Koala Plan and strategies on identifying/protecting koala populations resulted in a response that avoided the questions all together (see attached). A further meeting with my local Councillor Margaret de Wit regarding the local Koala population, the Moggill Country Club and illegal tree removals was had in July 2010 - to date I have received only a response regarding the Country Club.

Council Activities

As stated by DERM the intent of the Koala Plan relies heavily on the actions of councils. In my experience Brisbane City Council (BCC) are not pro-active in this area.

Correspondence from the Lord Mayors office stated that their existing vegetation mapping and development assessment would suffice the Koala regulations. Unlike Redlands Council there is no means to report Koala sightings and therefore no means to record them. The only option through the call centre was to be directed through to the Daisy Hill Koala Centre (in the Eastern suburbs) who were not interested.

Current examples of BCC handling of development applications where their mechanisms do not protect Koala habitat can readily be found on the Council's planning on-line website.

The Moggill Country Club (126 Weekes Rd Moggill Application number: A002171615) is a case in point. The original development application precedes the Koala Plan. However, the planning mechanisms used by council are the same as those that the Lord Mayor states ensures habitat is identified, protected or incorporated in planning.

If this is so, why on a site visit in March 2005 did BCC representatives agree that the River Corridor (where the developers own ecology report identifies the Koalas) could be reduced from 100 metres to 40 meters in width. This goes against their own City Plan where Brisbane River Precinct 1 (Kholo to Pinjarra Hills) states the setback to be 100 metres. Issues such as small block sizes in relation to existing mature trees and the road to adjoin parkland are also an issue. This development application has not proceeded to date.

An active development application also exists in a site at 3334 Moggill Rd Moggill (Application number A002844867), that is covered by the Koala Plan. It appears that Council do have reservations about development of the site but correspondence between Council and the Developer indicates confusion over its referral status to DERM. The most recent correspondence from the applicant to BCC dated 15/04/2011 requesting an extension states, that the applicant has been in discussions with DERM and the client and ecologist are currently finalising matters. However, my enquiries to Koala Policy in DERM) on 09/06/11 indicates that the Koala unit are not even aware of the application.

I also made enquires last week to the BCC Development Assessment Team West, regarding the Koala Plan. stated that the Sustainable Planning Act severely limits Councils ability to refuse/object to an application. Applications for removal of vegetation are now difficult to oppose as they are now limited by Fire Regulations (that states are now as robust as Victoria's). In addition, Houses are exempt in the Koala Plan and the enforcement of building envelopes is difficult.

I note a previous submission to the Senate Inquiry also discusses many of the same issues with BCC development assessment at a site at Fig Tree Pocket. Could the Senators please note that this site also forms part of the river corridor that extends upstream to my location providing significant habitat and connectivity.

Tree Removals

I believe another concern for Koala viability in our area is the number of food trees present. As the senators are aware Koalas are particularly fussy on what species, or even which tree of that species they will feed on.

In our area there is the insidious loss of these mature food trees - particularly along the river corridor where their prime habitat and primary feed tree *Eucalyptus teretricornis* occurs. This is occurring as a result of both legal and illegal tree removals.

Legal tree removals have occurred with the building of houses - as indicated above BCC have trouble enforcing building envelopes, even on large blocks in environmentally sensitive areas. This is a problem where a recent trend in the Rural Residential Zoning of the Western

Suburbs is the building of particularly large and sprawling houses with resulting loss of mature vegetation - one current application is for a house footprint of 10 000sqm. Legal tree removals have also occurred as part of residential developments - namely for access and in order to provide cheaper utilities, it is easier to clear fell. Planning of blocks too close to existing mature trees has also been a problem - these trees are usually removed during development or shortly after by the residents as they pose a threat.

Another problem arising from BCC is their new Tree Policy. A glaring example is the development of parkland in recent developments in our area. These large parks even though they are in proximity to koala habitat have been cleared of all native vegetation and had trees of a non-local basis replaced (eg Figs). On discussion with the BCC head arbourist for the Western suburbs as to why *Eucalyptus teretricornis* were not replaced it was stated that these trees were out of favour with the Council administration after The Gap storm (November 2009). He personally stated that he had no issues with species and that they were generally sound and that no tree would have survived the freak conditions that occurred in that particular storm.

In addition, illegal tree removals have been an ongoing problem in the area with many residents claiming they were not aware they had Vegetation Protection Orders (VPOs) on their land. Suggestions to both local Councillor de Wit and to that Council consider putting on individual rate notices the presence of protected vegetation on site appear to have fallen on deaf ears as no response has ever been received.

The new BCC Tree policy may also compound this problem as it is now ambiguous in the importance (or even the relevance) of VPOs. In correspondence received from BCC November 2010 (see attached) it states that in many circumstances you do not need Council permission to carry out work to protected trees on your land. However, previously Natural Assets and Local law states that vegetation in protected areas was not to be interfered with without Council permission.

Lastly, where infringements have occurred, prosecutions are few (other than one high profile case). Generally, residents are asked to replace each tree removed (legal or illegal) with 3 new ones (recently increased to 5 new ones). Previously the could be of any species but states that with the new Koala Plan if it is a Koala food tree, it must be replaced with same. However, from many personal experiences in the local area over a number of years, these trees are in fact never replaced and BCC does not police it in any manner. This is also a matter raised with my local Councillor in regards to Koala protection that remains unanswered. This results in a net loss of habitat and Koala food trees that are not accounted for when BCC spruiks its Bushland acquisitions and its 2 million trees policy as its contribution to gains in Koala habitat.

Myrtle Rust

Would the Senators please also consider and address the concern of the possible impacts on Koala habitat and food trees from the newly introduced fungus Myrtle Rust. This fungus affects plants belonging to the family Myrtaceae which includes Eucalyptus. It has already been identified in South-East Queensland and elsewhere and there is serious concern amongst horticulturists that it will continue to spread quickly. It has already been identified in National Parks.

Possible Suggestions to Consider

- I would strongly recommend the Koala to be listed as Vulnerable.
- I would also suggest that Senators give consideration to the listing of Primary Koala food trees, such as *Eucalyptus teretricornis* as protected. Especially in areas of known Koala habitat and populations.
- Planning schemes at both State and Local Government level need to be reviewed and strengthened so that Councils and States have legislated ability to limit or soften the impacts of developments in areas of Koala habitat and populations. In sensitive ecological areas, such as rural residential, this should extend to the Housing code.

As a member of the public, this submission may not be as sophisticated as some but I hope it conveys my concerns and indicates the difficulties I have encountered in getting meaningful responses from State and Local Governments to protecting my own local population. I am fairly certain that these experiences can be extrapolated out to many similar areas in Australia.

I feel very privileged to be able to share my environment with our wildlife and it would be shameful that we are not able to pass this on to our future generations. Thank-you for taking the time to consider my submission.

Yours sincerely,
Julie Cox