

# **The Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala**

## **Submission by David Stephen, Chairman, FAIR GO Committee**

### **Introduction**

FAIR GO Committee was a committee nominated at a public meeting of over 300 residents from 105 properties directly affected by the announcement by then Transport Minister Paul Lucas on October 1 2007 of the Southern Freight Rail Corridor study (SFRC) south-west of Brisbane. Residents were concerned about its effect on destroying local small farms vital in food production and the environment, particularly in the Peak Crossing-Washpool-Woollaman-Undullah region, where the SFRC traverses and bisects a Koala Conservation Area and a largely untouched bushland koala habitat within remote properties used for intensive beef cattle production.

The SFRC which is a dedicated rail freight line will carry 2 km long coal freight trains and double stacked container freight. It also forms part of the proposed Melbourne-Brisbane Inland Rail. The SFRC is not intended to be built until after 2031 **and no EIS will be undertaken until construction is due to start after 2031**. By then, at the rate of decimation and decline of the koala and its habitat in SE Queensland, this essentially untouched koala habitat and biodiverse region may well be the last remaining habitat left at the current rate of urban development in SEQ.

This region, in the Flinders-Goolman Range, is immediately surrounded by the proposed Ripley Valley Structure Plan to the north, the Greater Flagstone Structure Plan to the north-east, The Bromelton SDA industrial development to the east, the newly completed Wyralong Dam to the south, and the Ipswich environs to the west. The SFRC then dissects what is left of this remote habitat, which is one hour from Brisbane by car.

### **Purpose of this Submission**

FAIR GO Committee believes that this Queensland Government has not acted in the best interest of this iconic animal in its quest for development at all cost. This is evidenced by the recently documented drastic decline in numbers in the urban environment in SEQ.

The location of the SFRC, we are told by a member of the consulting team to the project (and since denied), was a political decision, and "*they were told to make it work*". The corridor passed through a Koala Conservation Area which was then later removed out of the SEQ Regional Plan 2009-31.

The Government later employed GHD consultants (no tender process involved) to do a study into koala habitat value mapping in all the local government areas in SEQ except for the Scenic Rim Regional Council where the SFRC is located. This area was conveniently identified only as "*bushland areas*" and "*areas suitable for rehabilitation*".

FAIR GO Committee undertook a study to sight koalas along the proposed SFRC. Sightings were documented, located on Google Earth, with dates and names of those who did the sighting. These were then put on CD, shown to the Australian Koala Foundation, who

subsequently identified this area as *Primary Habitat*. At complete odds with the GHD mapping result.

Along this corridor, there appears to be collusion with developers ahead of the announcement of the SFRC study on October 1 2007. FAIR GO was told that a high ranking Government member had purchased land along the proposed study area. We studied land purchases and discovered that the Government had purchased 2 adjacent blocks along with another block purchased by a developer in between, all prior to the SFRC announcement. We later found a concept industrial subdivision plan drawn by that developer incorporating the block with the Government's 2 blocks and **including a rail corridor, dated 2 October 2007, the day after the announcement of the study**. The preferred alignment was announced one year later on 26 September 2008 and the corridor was 'amazingly' in the same location on these blocks as shown on the earlier plan, and the report identified these lots as suitable for an intermodal site!.

We learned that the developer's block had jumped in value through a series of sales from \$600,000 in 7/02, to \$2,250,000 in 12/04, to \$15,460,000 in 11/06. On 2 October 2007, the day after the announcement of the SFRC study, a major development company announced an agreement to purchase 5 of the developer's industrial properties for \$255,000,000, including the above mentioned block. We estimated that the block in question was then valued at \$85,000,000 within that contract.

As a result of the GFC, construction of the corridor was put off until after 2031. As the corridor was to be designated under the Integrated Planning Act 1997 and then gazetted, this meant that this corridor was protected from all development, and construction of this concept plan on these lots could not proceed, (as well as with every other property along the corridor).

In October 2009, the Government announced a revision to the corridor alignment away from these lots, citing the reason as preservation of koala habitat, thus enabling development of these 3 lots to now proceed uninhibited. Where it was moved to, I understand there were more koala sightings there than where it was moved from. Using the excuse of *preservation of koala habitat* was a cynical gesture as we found another revised drawing by the developer incorporating the Government blocks dated 17 April 2009, **without the rail corridor,.... 6 months before the Government announced the revised corridor** away from the above mentioned 3 blocks.

FAIR GO Committee proposed an alternate corridor, which not only saved approximately 60 farms from desecration, at a time when farming land and food production is under threat, but would have preserved this prime koala habitat. It was rejected in a report by the consultants, and the reasons given were all contested and rejected by FAIRGO. This report was sat on by the Minister for a month and FAIR GO was only notified of the existence of this report directly after the Minister announced the final corridor in Parliament, thus totally ruling out our proposal. We were not given an opportunity to respond to the report's conclusions. When we pointed out the anomalies with the consultant's conclusions to senior government bureaucrats associated with the SFRC, they then requested a meeting between the consultants, a third party review consultant (named in the Nuttall Enquiry), the SFRC project team and FAIR GO. This took three weeks to organise and 2 days before it was due to take place, it was cancelled by the Director General without any reason given.

What has this got to do with the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koalas? The conveniently doing away with the Koala Conservation Area, the cynical mapping project in the Scenic Rim Regional Council area conducted by GHD, the involvement with developers, and the cancelling of our meeting, all point to a pattern of behaviour of this Queensland Government, which at the end of the day, shows their underlying disregard for the fate of the koala in SEQ.

This Government has spent millions of dollars these last few years publicly promoting and trying to show their koala credentials with their "apparent concern" for saving koalas from past planning mistakes, yet when we try to rectify in advance a future calamity they are not at all interested. WHY?

### **Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee**

This is why the koala must be given the "vulnerable" status and so that its current bleak future in SEQ is taken out of the hands of the Queensland Government, and only then hopefully this icon's future may be sustained in this state.

Documentation supporting our claims are available for scrutiny.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission to you for consideration by the Committee. We would be pleased to discuss these matters with the Committee further.

Yours faithfully,

David Stephen  
Chairman  
FAIR GO Committee