SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

HVP Plantations' response to questions taken on notice
from proceedings in Melbourne, 1 August 2011

1. *Request from Senator Cameron: Qualifications and numbers of people employed by HVP Plantations doing environmental work.*

Every operational staff member at HVP Plantations (HVP) has an environmental component to their role. All operational staff have received some level of environmental training ranging from Bachelor degrees, diplomas, and certificates, to in-house training programs. More than 40 staff have Bachelor level science degrees with an environmental component. Three staff are employed full time on environmental work. HVP also regularly draws on the advice of third party experts for a range of environmental subjects requiring specialist knowledge.

2. *Request from Senator Cameron: Staff expertise and knowledge of koalas.*

HVP's Stewardship Forester in Gippsland coordinates the company's Koala Management Plan and is known for having a high degree of knowledge in regard to the koala. While this person has no formal qualifications, he has been part of forestry research programs for more than 30 years, has lived in the Strzelecki Ranges all his life and has outstanding ecological nous, detailed knowledge of local flora and fauna, and great ability as a field naturalist, including his understanding of animal behaviour.

Two other staff members are involved in implementing the company's Koala Management Plan. Both members have Bachelor's degrees in Forest Science. Continuing interaction with third party experts, means they have considerable knowledge of the koala.

HVP also draws on the advice of third party experts including Peter Menkhorst (Ecological consultant and author), Colleen Wood (Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter), Dr Wendy Wright (Senior lecturer, Monash University) and the Australian Koala Foundation.

3. *Request from Senator Brown: nature of the establishment technique of plantations in the Strzelecki Ranges.*

HVP's mapping database does not delineate between planted and seeded plantations. However, the company does hold old maps and photos in archive that indicate different techniques utilised in the past. Manual planting is by far the most common. We do know that the Forest Commission Victoria relied on local prison labour to plant many plantation areas in the Strzelecki Ranges from the 1960s to the 1980s, with some manual and aerial seeding also undertaken. We know APM Forests aerially seeded some of its plantations in the 1960s. More recently, HVP has trialled some aerial seeding of plantations following the 2009 Black Saturday fires.

4. *Request from Senator Brown: the nature of research work undertaken by Monash University in association with HVP*

Multiple questions were asked in regard to the work undertaken by Monash University in association with HVP Plantations. With permission from Monash University we have provided here a copy of the grant application submitted by Monash University to the Australian Research Council. This application outlines the details of previous collaborations as well as proposed collaboration.

The Summary of Project for Public Release states: "Koalas in the Strzelecki Ranges may be genetically more diverse than other Koalas and could be an important population for Koala conservation and management. The research will establish the genetic distinctiveness and the viability of the Strzelecki Koala; and facilitate evidence based management of this and other Koala populations in Australia."

HVP has supported several past student research projects at Monash that have an environmental focus. In 2007, HVP provided funds for the pilot study that established the methodology for recovery of DNA from koala pellets. This technique provides an opportunity to obtain genetic material from free-ranging animals in their natural environment without having to catch, handle or even observe them. This technique has been used to assess the genetic structure, breeding behaviour, habitat use and home range of other mammals.

In 2010, Monash University and HVP - in collaboration with a number of other parties - applied for funding through the Australian Research Council (ARC) to undertake an extensive sample in the Strzelecki Ranges using the newly established methodology. Total funding requested from ARC was $163,000 of a total project cost estimated at about $350,000. Of this HVP committed to contributing $112,000.

HVP received notification in October 2010 that the Federal Government had declined to support this project. In response, HVP commenced its own koala census. With the aid of Monash University and Parks Victoria, a sampling technique was devised that would provide statistically robust data. HVP began this koala census in autumn 2011. The census was disrupted due to bad weather, and HVP has again committed its own funds to continue the census this financial year.

5. *Request from Senator Brown: Provide maps that relate to the presence of koalas without the commercial considerations that may need to be kept in confidence*

The attached map addresses this request. Should further interpretation of this map be required, in light of the fact that commercial information has been excluded, we would consider providing this to the Committee in confidence.

6. *Request from Senator Brown: Koala Operating Standard*

Attached is a copy of the company's *Policy and Procedure for the Management and Protection of Koalas* and the company's *Operating Standard for Management and Protection of Koalas.*

7. *Request from Senator Cameron: HVP koala training workshop*

An itinerary for HVP's koala training workshop is attached. This details presenters and content. Also attached is the component of the course delivered by HVP staff. Copies of content delivered by Peter Menkhorst and Colleen Wood are not provided to HVP.

8. *Request from Senator Cameron: 11 ways to protect the koala according to HVP's brochure "The Strzelecki Koala".*

A copy of this brochure is attached.

- *The identification of the koala habitat within the HVP estate and the creation or improvement of the links between priority habitat areas.*

HVP uses its koala atlas to improve bio-links connecting isolated patches of koala habitat both within HVP property and adjoining land. Koala habitat can be separated by plantations and farm land. Bio-links are designed to allow the free movement of species between habitats.

For example, with the help of a "Caring For our Country" grant administered under the Victorian Bushfire Recovery Program through GippsLandcare in conjunction with the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, HVP has commenced restoring gully vegetation within the Darlimurla area. This work consists of removing weeds from gullies and planting native species where required. These bio-links connect a nature reserve owned by Trust for Nature with a Strzelecki Gum reserve on HVP property and also a number of patches of prime koala habitat. Over 35 ha and 8 km of gully vegetation is to be restored over two years.

- *Restoration of priority native forest sites, including the removal of impenetrable weeds such as blackberry.*

Blackberries present a barrier for koala movement. Restoring native forest by removing blackberries allows koalas to move freely through these forests. Planting native trees increases the food and habitat for koalas.

- *Temporarily leaving some plantation trees standing after harvest in priority areas to act as minimal refuge and food sources.*

Leaving plantation trees standing reduces the impact of harvesting on koalas within the company's plantations. Retaining plantation trees allows the koala time to move away from the harvest area.

- *Retention of all E. viminalis plantations for koala habitat.*

E. viminalis (Manna Gum) is a primary koala food species.

- *Over time, the replacement of pine plantations within close proximity to sensitive streams with indigenous species.*

These riparian 'corridors' create refuges for koalas and provide a link to native forest habitats. Replacing pine with native species increases and improves koala food and habitat.

- *Preservation of eucalypt plantation trees within close proximity to permanent and temporary streams.*

These riparian 'corridors' of plantation trees create refuges for koalas and provide a link to native forest habitats.

- *Replacement of non-viable pockets of plantation with indigenous species including primary koala food sources where appropriate.*

Replacing pine with native species increases and improves koala food and habitat.

- *Replacement of pine trees within selected road reserves with indigenous species including primary koala food sources where appropriate.*

Replacing pine with native species increases and improves koala food and habitat.

- *Participation in cooperative pest animal control programs with other land managers that are aimed at protecting the koala.*

Controlling wild dogs and foxes which may otherwise prey on koalas.

- *The training of field staff to look for signs of koalas during planning and operational activities.*

This reduces the chance of koalas being adversely affected by operational activities within the plantation.

- *Arrangements with a wildlife shelter that specialises in koala welfare should our field staff find an injured animal.*

Ensures any injured koalas found by staff or contractors receive appropriate care.

In summary, HVP undertakes multiple activities that collectively enhance koala habitat.

9. *Request from Senator Cameron: provide the details of the qualifications and experience of Mr Peter Menkhorst*

We understand that Mr Menkhorst has since provided the committee with these details.

10. *Request from the Senate Committee post hearing: replanting E. regnans plantations after harvesting with E. nitens plantations*

The current preferred softwood species planted by HVP is *Pinus radiata* (Radiata Pine). The current preferred hardwood species planted by HVP is *Eucalyptus nitens* (Shining

Gum). Harvested plantations will be replanted with one of these two species. Plantation species selection is a commercial decision for HVP.

In the context of its brochure, HVP believes any species of tree plantation affords the koala enhanced protection in comparison with tree-less land uses. Plantation trees provide shelter and a safer passage for koalas than pasture sites and urban developments. Koalas have been observed in all species of plantations in the Strzelecki Ranges including Radiata Pine and Shining Gum.