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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and
Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the *Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population*. Please accept the following information to be considered for the next Senate Inquiry session on this issue to be held in Melbourne.

Summary of submission content

The Moreton Bay Region Council (MBRC) local government area is considered one of the two most populous areas of koalas in south-east Queensland and has been identified specifically in Queensland Government policy regulations as containing a priority koala habitat area.

Surveys on koalas undertaken throughout the region indicate declines have been observed in all areas, most notably where koala habitat coexists with urban densification.

Future projections of urban growth and associated infrastructure are likely to increase the threatening processes on the remaining koala habitat in the region. This is due to a combination of regional designations for urban development areas overlapping with geologically defined preferred koala habitat.

Status of the Koala and the History of its Management

The Moreton Bay Region local government area is approximately 2037km² in size and located directly north of the city of Brisbane in south-east Queensland. The proximity to Brisbane has seen increases in urban growth in areas that overlap the highest koala densities of the region.

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In 2001, Council engaged Queensland Government koala researchers to conduct research into its koala population to replicate the research of the koala habitat area south of Brisbane known as 'The Koala Coast'. The research found that the region's koala population was 'significant, healthy and robust' yet under significant threat from habitat loss, disease, dog attacks and car strikes.

The recognition of threats facing the significant populations of the Moreton Bay Region and that of the Koala Coast led to the creation of the Queensland Government's *Nature Conservation (Koala) Conservation Plan 2006 and Management Program 2006-2016*. In addition, local planning scheme measures were instated to provide the delivery mechanism for these management measures.

However, another population survey in 2007 found that the average percentage decline in observed koala density was in the order of 45% in urban areas and 15% at bushland sites.

The significant decline in population densities, combined with the inefficiencies recognised by the Queensland Government regarding its Koala Conservation Plan prompted the formation of the Queensland Premier's Koala Taskforce and the Koala Response Strategy.

This Strategy recommended new legislation in the form of State Planning Policy 2/10 *Koala Conservation in South East Queensland*, as well as State Planning Regulatory Provisions specifically created to target the State's most vulnerable koala populations, including the populations within the Moreton Bay Region.

The Moreton Bay Region's most recent scientific koala population survey was conducted in 2009. The consultant's report stated that since the 2007 survey, population densities declined by up to 49% on average.

Presently, koala populations in our region are managed by a combination of local laws, planning scheme regulations and state government policies. Monitoring of populations to determine the effectiveness of the various management strategies is projected to occur every two years.

In 2009, Moreton Bay Regional Council commenced a new koala conservation partnership program to unite the different koala management stakeholders in the region. Its aim is to coordinate the activities between community, government and research bodies to improve our collective knowledge, leading to the creation of effective local policy responses and koala protection initiatives.

Knowledge of Koala Habitat

The various research studies conducted in the region over the years have noted correlations between preferred tree species and koala densities.

Data analysis of the locations of these preferred tree species indicate that three specifically koala-preferred ecosystems *only* occur in the urban development footprint, and are recognised as endangered under state vegetation legislation.

The location of these preferred ecosystems relies upon the location of geological soils on which the preferred trees grow. There is a very high correlation between these soil types and areas of intense urban development.

Koalas in our region utilise habitat trees in which most other vegetation is absent as well as in intact regional ecosystems. This observation has given weight to the importance of safe areas for koala movement through 'corridors' to larger habitat areas where they can be safe from predators and cars.

Some habitat loss has been offset by various developments. Observations of these revegetated areas have noted the presence of koalas, yet it takes approximately 6 to 10 years of tree growth before this happens.

Threats to Koala Habitat

Data records from the Australian Wildlife Hospital in Beerwah, at which many of the sick and injured koalas from Moreton Bay are treated, have indicated (data range: 2004 to 2008) that the prime causes of koala deaths in the region have been from disease (40%), car strikes (35%), dog attacks (15%) and displacement from habitat loss (10%).

Programs to address dog attacks and car strikes are currently underway. Koala monitoring is occurring in these areas to gauge the effectiveness of the measures.

Four community driven koala care groups exist in the region to assist other residents by caring and transporting sick and injured wildlife. Council recognises the importance of their work and the concern they have for this iconic species which is increasingly being expressed through various media outlets. Each group contributes towards our information knowledge base regarding the threats.

It is recognised that the local koala populations face an increasing threat from the Koala Retrovirus and other stress related diseases. Council believes that it is important for research groups to be adequately funded in these areas for the research to continue.

Future Regulation for the Protection of Koala Habitat

The combination of protecting koala habitat and urban development management has presented many conflicts for the local governments in south-east Queensland with significant koala populations.

Various changes to both local and state regulations are in process; however, it is certain that the effects of these changes won't be seen for many years.

Legislation governing koala management has changed considerably over the last five years and is an indication of the difficulty governments at all levels face in trying to manage the conflicts of effective koala management and land use.

Council intends to continue to improve on these regulations through its own available mechanisms yet requests the assistance of the Commonwealth Government via funding and management opportunities towards improving the chances of successful koala management.

Yours sincerely

ALLAN SUTHERLAND

Mayor

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