

## ⌘ THREATENED SPECIES SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ⌘

The Hon Tony Burke MP  
Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee reports its considerations of the conservation status of the koala in the formal advice that accompanies this letter. We advise that the koala population has undergone a marked decline over three generations, due to the combination of a range of factors. The Committee therefore considers the koala to be potentially eligible for listing as vulnerable. However, better demographic data are needed to make this judgement with confidence.

In addition to its formal advice, the Committee wishes to draw the following to your attention.

This is the third such statement that the Committee has provided in 10 years. It is made because of the data-interpretation challenges that the Committee has faced in considering a species that lacks precise population trend data in significant parts of its range.

This consideration of the status of the koala under the EPBC Act arose as a direct request from the then Minister, based on a 2007 election promise that an evaluation of the status of the koala would be undertaken by the Committee. This follows previous assessments of the koala by this Committee and its predecessor in 2004 and 1996.

The Committee and Department committed considerable time and effort to the collation of relevant information in the format required to assess eligibility for listing. Expert and public consultation on the nomination and the subsequent preparation of the Listing Advice followed. The process of preparing the advice coincided with a public campaign by the Australian Koala Foundation which, although requiring responses by the Minister and the Committee Chair, in no way influenced the Committee in its consideration of the nomination.

The Committee considered the status of the koala over three meetings, held a national workshop of experts on its distribution and abundance, and convened a special Committee meeting by teleconference to consider public comment on the nomination. A teleconference was held to finalise this advice. The Committee's final recommendation is based on all available information.

The eligibility for listing of the koala is totally dependent on criterion 1, relating to the extent of recent population decline. The assessment by the Committee against this criterion was an extremely difficult one due to a lack of consistent high quality demographic data across the geographic range of the koala. Consequently, the listing recommendation is based on the

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Committee's considered interpretation of the available data and views of acknowledged experts. In this statement the Committee provides the rationale for its advice and indicates the caveats it wishes to place on its advice and the implications for management of the koala in Australia.

The body of data on the status of koala populations is patchy, often sparse and not nationally comprehensive or coordinated. The data quality is also variable. There has been only limited improvement in quality, relevance and integration of these data over the 15 years that the koala has been considered by this Committee and its predecessor. This situation is not unusual for the Committee but what is unusual is the huge area of occurrence and variability that the koala demonstrates. In addition there is a lack of any consistent reliable methodology for population monitoring of the koala.

There are some regions, such as south eastern Queensland and some areas of coastal New South Wales, for which there are high quality population data covering significant areas. However, for many bioregions, population estimates are based on anecdotes or opinions, or are extrapolated from adjoining areas. For others, they are based on a small number of data points that invariably involve a very small sample of the total area in question. In view of the deficiencies in data, the Committee has been obliged to exercise professional judgment.

Some populations in southern Australia are increasing and require management to prevent habitat destruction resulting from overpopulation. For most of the New South Wales and Queensland populations for which data are available, there is a generally consistent pattern of decline in recent years. In some areas this decline is directly attributable to habitat loss and disruption resulting from land development together with associated impacts of cars, dogs and disease. In other areas, especially in more inland areas of New South Wales and Queensland the recent long drought has also been a major contributor to this decline.

The Committee based its judgement of the koala's status on a systematic evaluation of all available data by bioregions, and some other defined areas for which data exist. In addition to the patchy data on population size and trends, the other area of uncertainty for the Committee was the koala's capacity to recover from drought. The species' propensity to undergo population decline in severe drought followed by recovery is well established. What is unknown is its current capacity for recovery, and the extent to which such recovery may be compromised by the degree of land clearing and habitat fragmentation that has occurred over recent decades, and by the potential medium-term impacts of unknown numbers of tree deaths caused by drought.

In its deliberations, the Committee concluded that a Conservation Dependent listing for the koala could not be justified at this time. It was the Committee's view that the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014 (the Strategy) and its proposed implementation plan do not, in their current state of development, meet the requirements for Conservation Dependent listing under the Act.

The Committee's recommendations in its advice suggest an approach that would allow a more informed listing decision. In addition, if better data were available and an adequate plan in place for the NKCMS then serious consideration could be given to a Conservation

Dependent listing. The Committee would welcome such a situation as it considers that the koala could be better conserved under effective Conservation Dependent status.

The Committee draws the following additional matters to your attention, recognising that these could be subsumed into the NKCMS implementation plan:

1. Management priorities differ across the range of the koala and its listing as nationally Vulnerable will create challenges for the administration of the Act. One option that the Committee considered for resolving this conundrum was to constrain listing to only circumscribed, distinguishable regional populations of koalas. However, this option was not justifiable based on the evidence before the Committee.
2. A properly designed, funded and implemented national koala monitoring and evaluation program across the full range of the koala is imperative. This should be part of the proposed *National Environmental Reporting System* and would coincidentally provide valuable data on a number of other important species, and areas of key habitat for achieving conservation objectives.
3. The design and implementation of a nationwide development planning protocol to prevent habitat loss and manage threats in areas of significant koala populations.
4. The implementation of targeted threat management strategies.

Success in achieving the above would support the conservation of the koala and its ongoing management as a Conservation Dependent species. With this in mind, the Committee does not recommend a Recovery Plan at this time. Rather, it strongly advocates a genuine national effort to rapidly implement the Strategy through an effective action plan. If this cannot be done, our advice warrants the listing of the koala. Should this be done a National Recovery Plan would be needed that in effect would duplicate the plan required to support Conservation Dependent status.

The Committee also wishes to draw to your attention, that the interpretative challenge of determining the status of the koala is a symptom of a more general problem. Biodiversity in Australia is in decline but the available data to inform priorities and actions are generally inadequate, being both insufficient and uncoordinated. A consequence is that we are not making well informed investment decisions. The Committee would welcome a formal request from you to provide an advice on this critical issue.

Yours sincerely

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Chair  
Threatened Species Scientific Committee

30 September 2010