

Saving the Far South Coast's koalas; impacts on logging

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TWO projects aimed at protecting remnant koala populations in south coast forests, worth more than \$4.7 million, have been dismissed as “not good enough” by conservation groups and The Greens.

At the same time, local loggers and timber industry representatives have questioned both the value of the projects in ensuring a future for the region's koalas, and the industry's ability to handle the changes.

Grants supporting the two projects were announced last week under the Federal Biodiversity Fund, and follow the listing of koalas as a vulnerable species by the federal minister for the environment, Tony Burke.

The first grant of \$1.935 million will support a landscape management project to protect, enhance and connect habitat sustaining the last known koala populations in NSW far south coast forests.

It will create harvest exclusion zones in State Forest over 2800ha of core koala habitat the Murrumbidgee, Mumbulla and Bermagui State Forests, support initiatives to locate alternative timber resources, establish partnerships with indigenous communities and introduce integrated monitoring and management actions to improve the recovery potential of the koala population.

Second tree-planting grant

A second grant of \$2.821 million will rehabilitate strategic reaches of the Bega River valley, help return koalas to the valley by building a connected private land network of koala habitats using “koala carbon forests”, enhance remnant grassy woodlands, and employ a local Koori ranger crew to maintain habitat corridors and support landholders managing for biodiversity.

NSW environment minister Robyn Parker said the funding would support a six-year program linking national parks and reserves, state forests, Aboriginal lands and some privately held properties.

“It will help strike a balance between koala conservation and a sustainable native timber industry for the region,” Ms Parker said.

Forests NSW would receive assistance identifying alternative timber supplies from suitable areas of state forests.

She said forestry harvest exclusion zones would particularly help one small koala population of about 50 adults to stabilise and recover. This was the last known significant population in the far south coast region.

But Greens forest spokesperson Senator Lee Rhiannon said Ms Parker's comments about achieving a “balance” between native forest logging in south east NSW and saving koalas missed the point.

“Protecting local koala populations can only be achieved by a complete end to logging in the south east forests – a dying industry doggedly propped up by the NSW Coalition and former Labor governments,” Senator Rhiannon said.

“Public money is now being spent on a misguided biodiversity project which includes a proposal to support initiatives to locate alternative timber resources in exchange for creating tiny logging exclusion zones in state forests,” Senator Rhiannon said.

The allocation also has been challenged by the South East Region Conservation Alliance (SERCA).

“Putting Forests NSW in charge of a significant far south coast biodiversity grant is a recipe for disaster,” spokesperson Prue Acton said.

“The business of Forests NSW is to log forests, fulfil logging contracts and provide jobs for loggers, not protect the environment.”

Harriet Swift of SERCA said funding allocated to “identify further wood supplies” was “bureaucratic code for buying in sawlogs from another region.”

“This is to compensate for the sawlogs foregone from the moratorium areas during the moratorium period. To provide for woodchips foregone, there will inevitably be more intensive logging elsewhere,” Ms Swift said.

Finding alternate logs

However, Pambula logging contractor Norm Wilton said he doubted that alternative logging areas could be found.

Mr Wilton, who logged the Bermagui forest in the past 12 months, said that the forests nominated yielded a high proportion of saw logs (more than 50pc) and such areas were limited.

“We are cut to the bone now – there is just about nothing left,” Mr Wilton said.

“If this (exclusion zones) is a genuine attempt to help koalas I've got no problem, but if it's just to please the Greens then that's another matter.”

He also noted that in the 1970s koala surveys showed significant numbers in regrowth forest.

“I reckon they are a bit like humans – we like steak from a tender young beast rather than a tough old one,” Mr Wilton said.

Spokesman for South East Fibre Exports at Eden, Vince Phillips, did not think the new exclusions zones would affect woodchip supplies.

Like Norm Wilton, he doubted that alternative areas for saw logs could be readily found, pointing out that when the south east RFA was being negotiated many years ago the industry had asked for an “offset reserve” to be set aside in case more exclusion zones were declared in the future, but this had not occurred.

He also doubted whether the planned exclusions zones would have a significant effect on koala numbers.

“I’ve been here 28 years and I can’t remember a koala being killed as a result of logging operations,” he said.

“It’s not a management issue for us. Most koalas are killed by fire or feral predators, and it is management of those within national parks that is the issue,” Mr Phillips said.

Corporatisation concerns

A proposal by the NSW government to corporatise Forests NSW has been attacked by both conservationists and unions on the south coast.

Vice-president of the NSW branch of the AWU, Robert O’Neill, told a timber workers meeting in Bombala last week that Forests NSW was a key employer in the Bombala district, and the union would be doing everything in its power to see that members did not lose wages or current work conditions.

The union’s NSW state secretary, Russ Collison, said corporatisation of Forests NSW would affect the way people used public forests, as well as potentially leading to job losses in regional communities.

"Forest NSW manages a vital public resource, and should not be treated as merely a cash cow by the state government or for private interests," Mr Collison said.

“At present, Forests NSW works under a triple bottom line approach, meeting a set of social, environmental and economic objectives.

“It not only manages logging operations, it also manages forests for recreation, environmental protection, and fire prevention.”

He said Forests NSW employed 401 front-line workers, who maintained 540 state forests covering 2.2 million ha.

According to Greens NSW forestry spokesperson David Shoebridge, the plan was likely to be the first step to eventual privatisation of the publicly owned body,

"The O’Farrell Government is already failing to hold Forests NSW accountable for its damage to state forests and its many breaches of environmental regulations," he said.

“This lack of accountability will only worsen after corporatisation.

"State forests in NSW are an important repository of biodiversity and must be protected from this government's anti-science, anti-jobs and anti-environment agenda," Mr Shoebridge said.

Assistant secretary of the Public Service Association of NSW (PSA), Shane O’Brien, said the union feared up to 600 forestry workers could lose their jobs if Forests NSW was privatised, with significant impacts on families and rural communities.

“We have to see the wood for the trees in the announcement. The changes to Forest NSW are not simply about corporatisation but a step towards privatisation of forest management in our state forests,” Mr O’Brien said today.

South East Region Conservation Alliance (SERCA) spokesperson Harriet Swift said corporatising Forests NSW would make it less accountable to taxpayers and the environment and more secretive about-loss making areas such as native forest woodchipping.

"The announcement by primary industries minister Katrina Hodgkinson is bad for forest dwelling animals, bad for workers and bad for transparency of forestry operations," Ms Swift said.

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