



Submission on the Draft Victorian Koala Management Strategy 2022

The Victorian Branch of Forestry Australia (previously the Institute of Foresters of Australia and Australian Forest Growers) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission on the draft Koala Management Strategy.

Who we are

[Forestry Australia](#) is an independent professional association of forest scientists, managers and growers who work in native forests, plantations and in the provision of environmental services across both public and private land. Forestry Australia members have extensive experience in forest and fire management through roles as land managers, employees of emergency service agencies, and as volunteer fire fighters. Forestry is the science and craft of creating, managing, conserving, using and caring for forests, regardless of tenure. It is this perspective that we bring to this submission. We acknowledge Traditional Owners, as Australia's 'first foresters' and their long-term custodianship of Country. Forestry professionals now work in the public and private sectors, including with Traditional Owner groups and in the management of parks and reserves.

Forestry Australia is committed to the principles of sustainable forest management and applying these principles to generate environmental, economic and social outcomes in all types of forests, on all tenures. When we refer to forests, we are applying the definition applied through the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs), which includes the land and forest environment within parks and reserves as well as the private and public land forest estate.

Key points

- The koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) is an iconic wildlife species and an important part of Australia's biodiversity that we need to maintain and conserve healthy and sustainable populations. Our view is that this can best be achieved through active management of these populations and their forest habitats.
- We acknowledge the effort that has gone into preparation of the draft Strategy, also the value of the knowledge held by the Traditional Owners, and the desire to work with partners in the forest management sector and the community to achieve the broad goals for koala populations.
- We also agree that it is important to raise community awareness of the relatively secure status of koalas in Victoria compared to other states. It is also important the community understand the need for populations and habitats to be actively managed to achieve agreed objectives for managing koalas.
- While the draft strategy provides a good information base for strategy development, in its current form it is inadequate as a conservation strategy. The goals are poorly defined, the strategy does not set clear, measurable, timebound targets and it does not indicate investment in management or in monitoring to determine whether goals are being achieved.
- Maintaining viable and healthy populations of koalas in Victoria will require a **whole of landscape approach**. The strategy needs to clearly recognize that all the land tenures on which koalas need to be actively managed to address threats to koalas and the challenges facing our forests more broadly.



- In that context, the strategy does not sufficiently highlight the increases stresses on our forests due to more high intensity and repeated bushfires, extended droughts, introduced plant and animal pests, and others impacts of a warming and drying climate. These factors have had immense impacts on all conservation values. These impacts will continue unless we commit strongly to changing the current forest management approach.
- For example, current forest management approaches on the conservation estate managed by Parks Victoria estate are not adequately protecting environmental values, including koalas. The estate is continuing to be degraded due to unnatural fire regimes, diseases, and a lack of active management to mitigate their impacts. As climate change increases these risks, active landscape-scale management is becoming more urgent to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem functions.
- Greater investment in management of all our forests can support koalas and the host of other native fauna and flora that depend on these forests. This process needs to build stronger links with the regional and local community. There is a wealth of knowledge of the bush within local communities, and this must be appreciated and used to improve forest and park management in general, and to manage for species like koalas.
- The role of Traditional Owner management is very important. This knowledge and traditional approaches to managing koala populations need to be fully integrated into the strategy, not just as a stand-alone component. This could include traditional options for active population control strategies.

More specific time bound goals

- The goals in the strategy are mostly vague and ill-defined. For example, in Theme 2 (koala overabundance) the goal 'the impacts associated with overabundant koala populations are reduced and their welfare is protected'. However, this does not identify a clear baseline against which change can be measured or specify acceptable thresholds of koala population numbers (either high or low), their health or habitat quality.
- Most other goals for different themes are similarly lacking in clear and timebound targets. Consequently, it will be difficult in 5- or 10-years time to review the strategy and assess whether it has been successful.
- We recommend the vision and the goals be reviewed to provide measurable targets.

Recognise assessment new methods

- A widespread range of methods can be used to assess koala populations and habitat (Youngentob, Marsh, & Skewes, 2021). Using different methods can give a different picture of populations and their distribution. The assessment by Heard and Ramsey (2020) uses a habitat modelling approach. This may not necessarily provide a full picture of population status, including where over-population may be a problem. For example, Law et al. (2018) found that using acoustic survey approaches in koala habitat areas in NSW generated estimates at least five times more than expected based on previous surveys using alternative methods. They also found occupancy rate was not influenced by timber harvesting intensity, time since harvesting or local landscape extent of harvesting or old growth. This indicates that koalas can tolerate and perhaps even benefit from certain types of habitat disturbance such as selective timber harvesting and low intensity fire.



Koalas and plantations

- The study by Heard and Ramsey (2020) indicated that about 10% of koala population in Victoria may live in plantations. The focus is on blue gum plantations, but plantations of other eucalypt tree species may also be important, noting the wide range of eucalypt species used by koalas.
- The Plantations Theme does not properly recognise the efforts by the plantation industry to avoid impacts, its strong adherence to regulations set by the Office for the Conservation Regulator, and the costs incurred in doing so. While in the past, timber harvesting resulted in impacts on koala welfare and some were injured or killed, these impacts have largely been mitigated due to industry compliance with regulations and standards.
- This section of the Strategy should be revised to reflect the positive role of the plantation sector in providing and improving koala habitat compared with other land uses such as agriculture or urban development. It should also reflect the positive engagement by the plantation companies in the challenge of managing koalas, their compliance with regulatory requirements and in developing new approaches to managing koala populations on their properties.
- To address this challenge, the Strategy should include development of a landscape-level approach for western Victoria. This should involve specific reserves, habitat restoration, impact mitigation methods, active population control, and relocation. This will also be important in other parts of Victoria as trees on farms and plantations expand in different regions.

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References

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