

Submission on Draft SEQ Koala Conservation Strategy

Good morning

This summer of 2019-2020 has been a devastating one for many in our community. Drought and bushfires have devastated much of our lands and vegetation and have put many vulnerable species such as the Koala under more stress and danger. And if rains do come, much of our fragile landscapes and waterways could easily become more eroded and impacted. As a people in South East Queensland it has also taken a toll. Many now fragile and confused as to what actions to take to move forward.

In endeavouring to make any comments on the Draft South East Queensland Koala Conservation Strategy 2019-2024 we need to have this context in our minds.

SEQ Catchments Members Association is a wide church of organisations and groups within SEQ. Membership covers local government, commercial industry, agriculture, landcare and catchment associations, traditional owners, research organisations and environmental groups. Our focus has been on promoting good land and water management to meet the targets set out in the South East Queensland Natural Resource Management Plan 2009-2031.

The targets set around koalas are under nature conservation and were linked to the SEQ Regional Plan desired outcomes and principles for our natural environment. These outcomes were described as to have a healthy and resilient natural environment that is protected, maintained and restored to sustainably support the region's rich biodiversity and ecosystem services including clear air and water, outdoor lifestyles and other community needs that critically underpin economic and social development. The principle under the heading Biodiversity that was to be achieved by 2031 was to protect, manage and enhance the region's biodiversity values and associated ecosystem services and maximise the resilience of ecosystems to the impacts of climate change.

The nature conservation targets set around this were:

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| NC1 – remnant and woody vegetation | By 2031, the extent of regional vegetation cover – including remnant vegetation – including remnant vegetation (35%) and additional non-remnant vegetation (22%) will be maintained or increased |
| NC2 – vegetation fragmentation and connectivity | By 2031, there will be no net fragmentation of larger tracts (greater than 5000 ha) and 20% of priority smaller tracts (less than 5000 ha) will be better connected than the 2003 baseline |
| NC 5 – native species | By 2031, the 2008 conservation status of native species will be maintained or improved |
| NC6 – habitat for priority species | By 2031, the 2001 extent and condition of habitat for priority taxa will be maintained or increased. |

A review conducted in 2015 by the SEQ Regional Coordination Group and led by the SEQ Catchments Mapping Team produced an update of the SEQ Atlas and then released a South East Queensland Natural Assets Status Report in November 2015. This review showed that for:

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| NC 1 - remnant and woody vegetation | For remnant vegetation in 2001 the extent was 911,183 ha and in 2011 was 900,204 ha – a loss of 10,979 ha For woody vegetation in 2001 the extent was 646,128 ha and in 2010 it was 456,503 ha – a loss of 43,888 ha |
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| NC2 - vegetation fragmentation and connectivity | The work in analysing tract sizes of various classes from <1 ha to >5000 in the years 2001 and then 2009 has showed that fragmentation of the core tracts primarily occurred around the edges, gradually reducing their integrity. Some core tracts were completely bisected by linear infrastructure. Smaller tracks were further completely fragmented. The trend was for greater vegetation fragmentation and less connectives across the landscape. |
| NC5 – native species | In the work conducted under SEQ Atlas Update priority species were identified from the Back on Tract Species Prioritisation Framework and 4 were found to have improved and 22 were in decline |
| NC6 – habitat for priority species | From the benchmark year to the year of reporting for the SEQ Atlas Update priority habitat areas had fallen from 686,666 has to 493,793 has which was a loss of 194,874 has |

The Draft SEQ Koala Conservation Strategy 2019-2024 reports that 74% of core koala habitat has already been cleared in SEQ since 1960 and that the species is now listed as vulnerable. This finding would be in sync with the findings of the previous studies noted above.

In the situation we now face in early 2020 coordinated planning, action, monitoring and resourcing is urgently required. It is now just over a decade until 2031 – the end date for the current SEQ Natural Resource Management Plan.

The release of the Draft SEQ Koala Conservation Strategy 2019-2024 and this period for public feedback is not ideal. Many of our groups and organisations – a majority who are volunteer run entities - like to take a period away from meetings over the summer period and do not start to hold their own meetings until February. Your 31 January 2020 deadline means that many SEQCMA member groups who would have wanted to respond had no time to see, discuss and meet or form comments on this strategy document. What can be said at this time is that the members of SEQCMA are committed to the targets of the SEQ NRM Plan which would we hope to align with the targets set in this draft conservation strategy.

Activity around the development of the SEQ Koala Conservation Strategy had not gone unnoticed. The SEQCMA Board has been interested in the progress of the strategy and in March 2019 had a presentation from senior staff from the Department of Environment and Science who were working on the its development. Our minutes note that from that presentation any feedback from the board or members would be provided back to the Koala Advisory Council.

Whatever strategies are now agreed upon need to note that all land and waterways must be managed holistically within SEQ. Koalas are not a long species – their survival hinges on all other parts of the ecosystem working as well. We need to get our basics right – we need healthy soils, well hydrated landscapes, vibrant and diverse ranges of plants, animals and microbial organisms to have functioning ecosystems. This means real engagement with all landowners - government agencies covering federal, state, local and utilities, plus private land owners, commercial operators and volunteer groups who give their time and resources to enhance the lands and waterways of SEQ. What is now needed is strong leadership and dedicated funding to make real engagement and action happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to humbly make these comments on behalf of our membership.

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SEQ Catchments Members Association (SEQCMA) is a community-based, not-for-profit business that works to protect and restore South East Queensland's natural assets and biodiversity. To learn more please visit www.hlw.org.au

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