

Reviewing the NSW Koala Strategy

Discussion paper

Department of Climate Change,
Energy, the Environment and Water



Acknowledgement of Country

Country is at the centre of Aboriginal people's identity and sense of belonging, and we recognise and acknowledge that Country has spiritual and cultural significance to Aboriginal peoples.

Aboriginal peoples have inherent rights, responsibilities and obligations to protect Country that includes the land, waters, air and biodiversity of New South Wales. They have been stewards and caretakers of the lands and waters for thousands of years. They have unique perspectives, knowledge and experience to teach, inspire and help care for Country. The health of the natural environment, fresh waters, land and marine animals, plants and people are intimately connected. This connection goes deep, and has since the beginning of time.

Respecting and protecting Country will benefit Aboriginal people's health, wellbeing, culture and practices to create stronger communities.



Foreword



Koalas are facing extinction in the wild by the middle of this century, unless we start to do things differently.

We all want our grandchildren to be able to walk into the bush and see koalas in the wild. They are one of the most iconic animals to the people of New South Wales and hold immense cultural significance to First Nations people.

As the Minister for the Environment, I am determined to turn this trajectory around.

Koalas also play a vital role in the state's tourism industry and are considered an umbrella species, meaning that by protecting koalas we protect many other species and their habitat.

The NSW Government is committed to protecting and ensuring the long-term survival of koalas in the wild. The government has already allocated an additional \$172 million towards establishing a Great Koala National Park, a Georges River Koala National Park, protecting the Woronora wildlife corridor in Sydney's south, and supporting local koala care organisations.

But we know that more is needed.

We now need to examine the way we are delivering the NSW Koala Strategy, to look for gaps in our approach and harness new information in our efforts to secure koalas. It is also an opportunity to listen and learn from those around us—especially First Nations people—to holistically support, manage and care for this iconic species.

This discussion paper, along with the NSW Koala Summit on Friday 22 March 2024, seeks views on our current approach to koala conservation and will help identify future conservation priorities.

I want to make sure every voice is heard through this process, and I look forward to working together to ensure the future for koalas in New South Wales.

The Hon. Penny Sharpe MLC

Minister for Climate Change, Minister for Energy,
Minister for the Environment, and Minister for Heritage

Purpose and scope of this discussion paper

The NSW Koala Summit and this discussion paper will seek valuable feedback about the effectiveness of current conservation activities being delivered under the NSW Koala Strategy.

Stakeholder input from the summit and discussion paper will shape actions that governments, community groups, businesses and individuals can take to conserve koalas in New South Wales.

Process for the review

Stage 1

Tell us what you think about koala conservation in NSW

1. Discussion paper released for public feedback
2. Open for written submissions

Stage 2

NSW Koala Summit 22 March 2024

1. NSW Koala Summit held in Sydney, 22 March 2024
2. Share summary of summit's discussions

Stage 3

Develop new koala plan

1. Undertake further targeted consultation as required
2. Analyse feedback from the summit and discussion paper
3. Draft new koala plan

Stage 4

Release and implementation

1. Release new koala plan
2. Deliver the plan in partnership with stakeholders



Contents

Foreword	3
Purpose and scope of this discussion paper	4
How did we get here?	6
The current NSW Koala Strategy	7
Prioritising koala populations	9
The importance of Aboriginal ecological knowledge to koala conservation	11
Pillar 1: Koala habitat conservation	13
Pillar 2: Supporting local communities to conserve koalas	15
Pillar 3: Improving the safety and health of koalas	17
Pillar 4: Building our knowledge of koalas	19
How to have your say	21
How submissions will be used	21
Summary of focus questions	22

How did we get here?



2018

The \$44.7 million NSW Koala Strategy set out actions for the first 3 years of a longer-term vision to stabilise and increase koala populations across New South Wales.



2020

The 2019–20 **Legislative Council Parliamentary Inquiry into koala populations and their habitat** found that without urgent action, koalas would become extinct in New South Wales by 2050.

State Environmental Planning Policy (Koala Habitat Protection) 2020 replaced and repealed the 2019 Koala SEPP. The 2020 SEPP largely reinstated SEPP 44.



2022

The National Recovery Plan for the Koala was released by the Australian Government in March 2022 and is aligned with the NSW Koala Strategy.

The conservation status of koalas in New South Wales was upgraded on 20 May 2022 from vulnerable to endangered under the *NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*.

The combined populations of New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory were also listed as endangered by the Australian Government under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* in February 2022.

State Environmental Planning Policy (Biodiversity and Conservation) 2021 commenced. Koala SEPPs 2020 and 2021 were transferred to it with no policy change.

2019 to 2020

The 2019–20 **summer bushfires** burnt thousands of hectares of important koala habitat.



State Environmental Planning Policy (Koala Habitat Protection) 2019 replaced SEPP 44.

2021

The \$190 million NSW Koala Strategy 2021 to 2026 (the Strategy) was developed in response to the inquiry's findings of declining koala populations.



State Environmental Planning Policy (Koala Habitat Protection) 2021 commenced, applying to non-rural land zones across NSW. **Koala SEPP 2020** remained in force across rural land zones in NSW.

2023

The NSW Government made a number of new commitments to protect koalas in New South Wales

- Establish a Great Koala National Park on the mid-north coast
- Establish a Georges River Koala National Park in Sydney's south
- Protect the Woronora wildlife corridor near Heathcote
- Fund 3 wildlife hospitals in regional New South Wales



2024 onwards

The future of koalas in New South Wales

It is now time to review the NSW Koala Strategy to protect our iconic koalas and ensure their long-term survival in the wild.





The current NSW Koala Strategy

The \$190 million NSW Koala Strategy 2021 to 2026 was released as the first of an intended series of 5-year-strategies. It set out the first 5 years of actions working towards the long-term goal of doubling the number of koalas in New South Wales by 2050. It delivers targeted investment and action under 4 pillars: koala habitat conservation, supporting local communities to conserve koalas, improving the safety and health of koalas, and building our knowledge of koalas.

The 4 pillars are illustrated below.

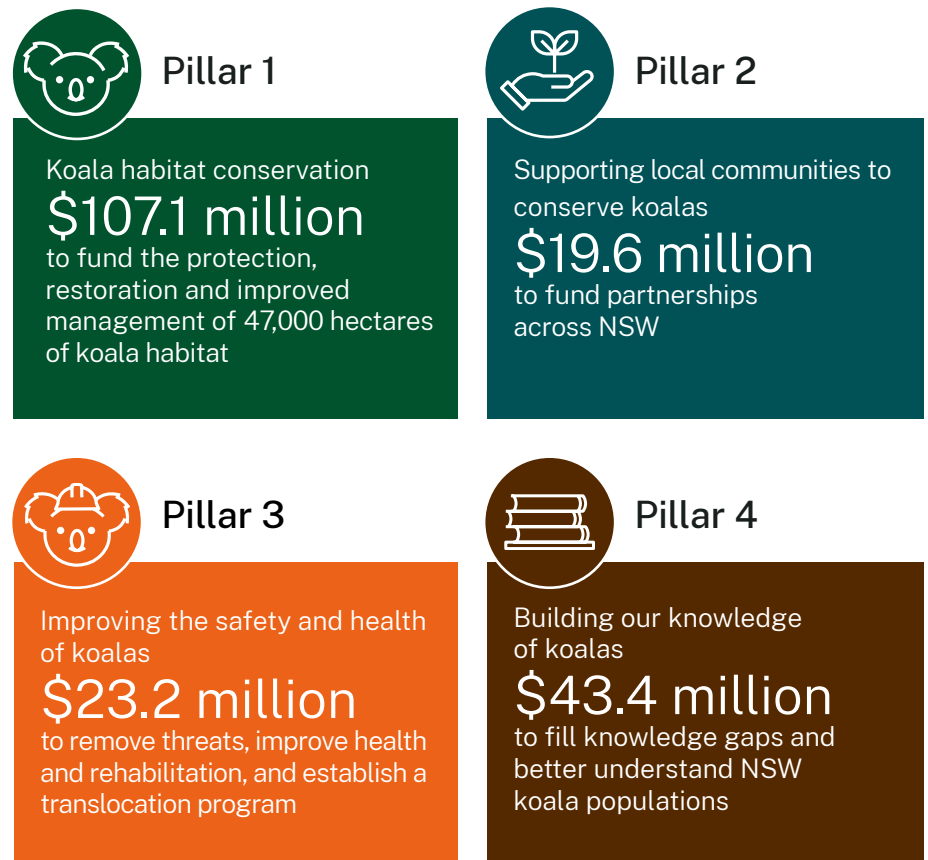


Figure 1 The 4 pillars and investment over 5 years in the current NSW Koala Strategy

You can read the full Strategy [here](#).



Focus questions

1. Do you think the goal of doubling the number of koalas in New South Wales by 2050 provides a sound foundation for the NSW Government's approach to koala conservation into the future? If not, what do you think the goal should be?
2. In your area of expertise, what gaps do you think there are in the Strategy?





Prioritising koala populations

The Strategy identifies 50 priority koala populations based on Areas of Regional Koala Significance, or ARKS. ARKS identify koala populations where koalas have the potential to persist over the long term.

Of these 50 koala populations, 19 are identified as **populations for immediate investment**, and the remaining 31 populations are identified as **populations to fill key knowledge gaps**.

The Strategy uses '**strongholds**' to further prioritise key populations. These stronghold areas represent koala populations that are significant in some respect, such as being very large populations or representing areas that will be climate refuges in coming decades.

The Strategy allows for koala populations to move between prioritisation categories over time, as knowledge improves or as populations are made more secure through strategic interventions.



Focus question

3. Are the current categories of *strongholds*, *populations for immediate investment* and *populations to fill knowledge gaps* the right ones for koala conservation? Are there other important koala populations that should be identified for conservation management?

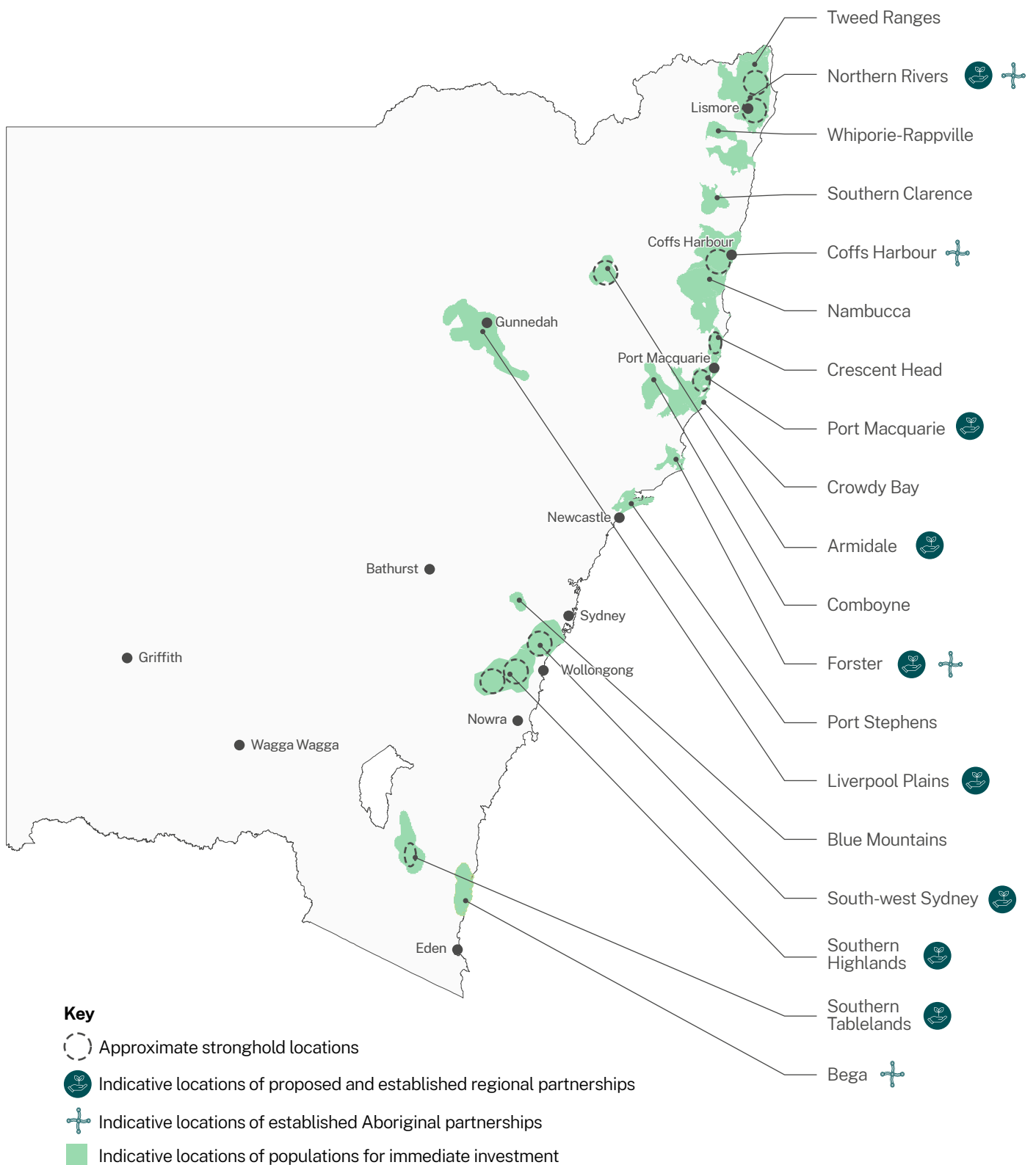


Figure 2 Populations for immediate investment, stronghold locations, regional partnerships and Aboriginal partnerships as identified under the current Strategy



The importance of Aboriginal ecological knowledge to koala conservation

Further degradation of Australia's natural environment, including the loss of wildlife such as the koala, has direct impacts on Aboriginal peoples and their culture. The koala is embedded in Aboriginal lore and spiritual beliefs that shape identity, behaviours and interrelationships between people and Country.

Many Aboriginal cultures have a strong connection to koalas and their habitat. Koalas are totems of Aboriginal clans, family groups or individuals in New South Wales and stories of the koala are deeply woven into many different Aboriginal songlines and creation stories. Each clan has complex relationships and affiliations with place, and are responsible for the management of resources and the land to ensure the ongoing harmony between natural and cultural systems, including koala habitat.

Aboriginal communities have a crucial role to play in ensuring the long-term health of koalas and their habitat.

A statewide Koala Aboriginal Advisory Panel with more than 70 community members has been established. As a governance body, the panel informs on-ground koala conservation actions. Its expertise will be relied on to guide the development and implementation of the refreshed Strategy.

Four partnerships with Aboriginal communities have been established under the NSW Koala Strategy with:

- the Gumbaynggirr community and Coffs Harbour and District Local Aboriginal Land Council
- Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation on Yuin Country
- Hunter Local Land Services and Taree Indigenous Development and Employment (TIDE) in the Hunter-MidCoast
- North Coast Regional Landcare Network in the Far North Coast.



Focus question

4. How could a revised Strategy further empower Aboriginal communities? What, if any, are barriers in the current framework?



Addressing the impacts of climate change

The impacts of climate change are already affecting koalas. These impacts are likely to increase in frequency and severity in the coming decades.

The Strategy prioritises areas that are likely to be used in the future as refuges from the impacts of climate change.

Under the Koala Strategy we have:

- identified, protected and expanded habitat that serves as refuge from heat, drought and fire
- promoted climate-ready revegetation approaches, including tree species selection and consideration of seed provenance
- continued research to help manage the impacts of bushfire on koalas
- identified stronghold areas that support healthy, stable and genetically viable populations that are expected to persist in the long term
- developed and implemented an adaptive management framework so that management actions can respond flexibly to the impacts of climate change.



Focus questions

5. How do you think the NSW Government can more effectively identify and protect climate refuges in a revised Strategy?
6. What support should the NSW Government be providing to koala populations in areas that we know will be subject to serious climate change impacts?
7. How could a revised Strategy support better adaptive responses to climate change?



Pillar 1

Koala habitat conservation

The Strategy aims to conserve koala habitat in a number of ways, including purchasing land with koala habitat to add to the national parks estate, and funding the Biodiversity Conservation Trust to partner with private landholders who have koala habitat on their property. The Strategy also supports the restoration of koala habitat across different land tenures, including working with private landholders to restore and protect koala habitat on private land.

What has been achieved so far?



Purchased

10,069 hectares

of koala habitat for addition to the national park estate



Restored or commenced restoration of

7,365 hectares

of koala habitat across tenure



Protected

7,697 hectares

in partnership with private landholders across the state through the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust's in-perpetuity conservation agreements (as at September 2023)



Focus questions

8. Do you think the combination of habitat acquisition, private land conservation and habitat restoration is the right approach to protecting important koala habitat? What else should the NSW Government be doing to protect koala habitat?
9. How can landholders be better supported to protect, restore and enhance koala habitat on their land? What are the barriers?
10. How can landholders be supported to participate in natural capital markets and other opportunities that drive improved outcomes for koalas?



Statutory review of the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* and native vegetation provisions of the *Local Land Services Act 2013*

The NSW Government is currently developing its response to the statutory reviews of the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* and native vegetation provisions of the *Local Land Services Act 2013*, which will include considering measures for managing threatened species and ecosystems.



Focus question

11. How can the NSW Government better support local councils to identify and protect koala habitat?



Pillar 2

Supporting local communities to conserve koalas

The NSW Koala Strategy is built on a regional partnership model that delivers locally led koala conservation actions in a strategic way together with local councils, conservation groups, Aboriginal organisations, NSW Government agencies such as Local Land Services and other stakeholder groups in regions with important koala populations.

The partnerships help us to prioritise investment and ensure that community expertise and knowledge inform on-ground actions.

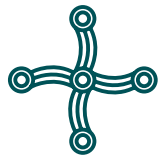
What has been achieved so far?



Established

7 regional partnerships

with local councils, conservation groups and other partners



Established

4 partnerships

with Aboriginal communities



Embedded

external partnership officers

within regional partnerships to deliver the on-ground actions



Wholly or partly delivered

33 of the **37 actions**

actions in the NSW Koala Strategy through regional partnerships



Invested **\$19.6 million**

in koala conservation actions in local communities



Focus questions

12. Do you think the regional partnership model is an effective delivery model for delivering on-ground koala conservation actions? Do you know who the regional partnership is in your area?
13. Are there any threats or issues specific to your region that you think should be given more attention?
14. How can the NSW Government work better with philanthropic and business partners to leverage investment to deliver outcomes at the local level?





Pillar 3 Improving the safety and health of koalas

Koalas face many threats to their safety and health, including habitat loss and fragmentation, vehicle strikes, disease, dog attacks, fires, droughts and heatwaves. The cumulative impact of these threats places significant stress on koala populations.

The Strategy focuses on improving koala health and rehabilitation, training and supporting vets, vet nurses and the wildlife rehabilitation sector, addressing vehicle strike, reducing the impacts of chlamydia and other diseases, and using translocation to re-establish koalas in unoccupied habitat.

What has been achieved so far?



Started

**22 vehicle
strike mitigation** measures



Provided

36 microchip readers
to 13 koala rehabilitators



Trained

1,465 students
via vet and vet nurse training program
(delivered by Taronga Zoo)



Released

guidelines on native wildlife care



Purchased a rapid

chlamydia testing machine,
and supported **vaccine trials**
as part of the NSW Research Plan



Conducted feasibility assessments
and implemented the first

translocation project



Focus questions

15. What else can the NSW Government do to better mitigate vehicle strike?
16. What can the NSW Government do to better support the wildlife carer sector?
17. What measures should the NSW Government be taking to address koala disease, including chlamydia?
18. How could the NSW Government improve the koala translocation program to ensure conservation outcomes are met?
19. How can the NSW Government help to better protect koalas and their habitat in response to hazard reduction burning and bushfires?
20. How can the NSW Government improve emergency coordination with koala carers, vets and other partner organisations in the event of a bushfire or extreme weather event?





Pillar 4 Building our knowledge of koalas

There is still much to learn about koala populations and the best way to effectively manage them over time. The Strategy identifies and funds research in priority research areas, and has started rolling out a baseline program to determine the occurrence, distribution and relative abundance of koalas across the state.

The Strategy has also started implementing a koala population monitoring program, including the Sentinel monitoring program, which collects in-depth information about koala genetics, disease and ecological factors at a select number of sites.

What has been achieved so far?



Started surveys for the
Baseline program



Started the koala population
monitoring program in
10 key koala populations



Released the 10-year
Koala Research Plan and funded
18 research projects
tackling priority research areas



Started the **Koala population
sentinel monitoring program**
to learn more about how genetics, disease, and
ecological factors influence koala survival and
reproduction in key populations



Held the **Biennial Koala
Research Symposium**
in February 2023



Focus questions

21. What do you see as the most critical knowledge gaps in understanding the distribution and relative abundance of koalas across New South Wales?
22. What changes should be made to the koala research plan to make sure it delivers research that directly benefits koala conservation?
23. What data do you need to effectively carry out koala conservation work? What changes would you recommend to how the NSW Government manages koala data?





How to have your say

The information and questions in this discussion paper are a guide for your feedback. You are welcome to comment on other aspects of the Strategy. If you have relevant examples, data and research, ideas or issues you would like to raise as part of the review of the Strategy, we encourage you to include them in your feedback.

We value your input and it will shape the review of the Strategy.

Submissions can be made:

Online Respond to the consultation questions online at: environment.nsw.gov.au/nsw-koala-strategy-consultation-form

By email Email your submission to koalasummit@environment.nsw.gov.au

By post Post a written submission to:

NSW Koala Strategy Review
Department of Climate Change,
Energy, the Environment and Water
Locked Bag 5022
Parramatta NSW 2124

Closing date: 26 April 2024

How submissions will be used

Making a submission is entirely voluntary. The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water will collect and use your submission to inform the review of the NSW Koala Strategy. Sections of your submission along with your organisation or individual name may be reproduced for the purposes of a summary report to be published on www.environment.nsw.gov.au. Other personal information, such as your address and contact details, will be removed prior to publication. Submissions requested to be 'anonymous' will have identifying information, such as your name, removed before publication. Submissions marked 'confidential' and those that raise legal or other concerns (for example, privacy, defamation) will not be published. Views presented in submissions are the responsibility of the author of the submission. There may be circumstances where the government is required by law to release the information in your submission, even if marked confidential, such as for law enforcement purposes or under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* (NSW).



Summary of focus questions

The current NSW Koala Strategy (overarching questions)

1. Do you think the goal of doubling the number of koalas in New South Wales by 2050 provides a sound foundation for the NSW Government's approach to koala conservation into the future? If not, what do you think the goal should be?
2. In your area of expertise, what gaps do you think there are in the Strategy?

Prioritising koala populations

3. Are the current categories of strongholds, populations for immediate investment and populations to fill knowledge gaps the right ones for koala conservation? Are there other important koala populations that should be identified for conservation management?

The importance of Aboriginal ecological knowledge to koala conservation

4. How could a revised Strategy further empower Aboriginal communities? What, if any, are barriers in the current framework?

Addressing the impacts of climate change

5. How do you think the NSW Government can more effectively identify and protect climate refuges in a revised Strategy?
6. What support should the NSW Government be providing to koala populations in areas that we know will be subject to serious climate change impacts?
7. How could a revised strategy support better adaptive responses to climate change?

Pillar 1: Protecting koala habitat

8. Do you think the combination of habitat acquisition, private land conservation and habitat restoration is the right approach to protecting important koala habitat? What else should the NSW Government be doing to protect koala habitat?
9. How can landholders be better supported to protect, restore and enhance koala habitat on their land? What are the barriers?
10. How can landholders be supported to participate in natural capital markets and other opportunities that drive improved outcomes for koalas?
11. How can the NSW Government better support local councils to identify and protect koala habitat?



Pillar 2: Supporting local communities to conserve koalas

12. Do you think the regional partnership model is an effective delivery model for delivering on-ground koala conservation actions? Do you know who the regional partnership is in your area?
13. Are there any threats or issues specific to your region that you think should be given more attention?
14. How can the NSW Government work better with philanthropic and business partners to leverage investment to deliver outcomes at the local level?

Pillar 3: Improving the safety and health of koalas

15. What else can the NSW Government do to better mitigate vehicle strike?
16. What can the NSW Government do to better support the wildlife carer sector?
17. What measures should the NSW Government be taking to address koala disease, including chlamydia?
18. How could the NSW Government improve the koala translocation program to ensure conservation outcomes are met?
19. How can the NSW Government better protect koalas and their habitat in response to hazard reduction burning and bushfires?
20. How can the NSW Government improve emergency coordination with koala carers, vets and other partner organisations in the event of a bushfire or extreme weather event?

Pillar 4: Building our knowledge

21. What do you see as the most critical knowledge gaps in understanding the distribution and relative abundance of koalas across New South Wales?
22. What changes should be made to the koala research plan to make sure it delivers research that directly benefits koala conservation?
23. What data do you need to effectively carry out koala conservation work? What changes would you recommend to how the NSW Government manages koala data?



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Published by:

Environment and Heritage on behalf of NSW Government
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
Locked Bag 5022, Parramatta NSW 2124
Phone: +61 2 9995 5000 (switchboard) Phone: 1300 361 967
TTY users: phone 133 677, then ask for 1300 361 967
Speak and listen users: phone 1300 555 727, then ask for 1300 361 967
Email info@environment.nsw.gov.au
Website www.environment.nsw.gov.au
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