MEDIA RELEASE

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EXPERT PANEL TO GUIDE WOOLGOOLGA TO BALLINA PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADE

Minister for Roads and Freight Duncan Gay today announced NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer Mary O’Kane would chair an expert panel to advise on koala population matters relating to a 16-kilometre section of the planned Woolgoolga to Ballina Pacific Highway upgrade.

Minister Gay said Professor O’Kane, appointed NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer in October 2008, was highly qualified and experienced in advising on major projects.

“Professor O’Kane will chair a panel of experts, independent of the project team, which will review all environmental information and make recommendations on measures to protect koalas as part of the planned 16 kilometre upgrade between Broadwater to Coolgardie,” Minister Gay said.

“The NSW and Australian Liberals and Nationals governments are determined to finish the duplication of the Pacific Highway by the end of the decade, but we’re equally determined to protect koalas along the planned route.

“Member for Ballina Don Page and Nationals candidate Kris Beavis have worked closely with both governments to deliver this important initiative, which will build on measures already developed to protect koalas in the area, including:

✓ Fully fencing nearly 16 kilometres of both sides of the new highway which will be connected to fauna crossing structures;

✓ Increasing the number of fauna crossings suitable for koalas by more than 400 per cent to that proposed in the December 2013 Submissions and Preferred Infrastructure Report (from six to approximately 25 structures by increasing the size of the drainage structures for use by koalas);

✓ Construction of a land-bridge (at least 30 metres wide) north of the Richmond River crossing, south of Bagotville; and

✓ Planting some 130 hectares of koala food trees on RMS owned land near the new highway corridor where at least 50 per cent will be planted prior to construction and the remainder after construction. More land may become available for planting as RMS completes the property acquisition for this section for the highway upgrade.
“The panel will include two independent experts recognised for their knowledge of koala populations, a Roads and Maritime Services environmental manager and Roads and Maritime Services Chief Executive Officer Peter Duncan,” Minister Gay said.

“The panel has been established to provide guidance to myself as Minister on matters relating to the environmental conditions set down by Federal Minister for the Environment Greg Hunt.

“The Federal Minister will only approve the start of the Broadwater to Coolgardie upgrade “if the impacts to the Ballina koala population are demonstrated to be acceptable”.

“As part of this process, a study called a Population Viability Analysis will be undertaken to establish the long term viability of the Ballina koala population.

“We have engaged scientific consultants EcoSure and BioLink, including Dr Steve Phillips, to collect data on the local koala population.

“Experienced ecologist Dr Rod Kavanagh of Niche Environment and Heritage will then use the data collected to complete and analyse the PVA.

“Dr Kavanagh will report the findings to the expert advisory panel with the outcomes expected to be announced mid this year.

“The 155 kilometre Woolgoolga to Ballina Pacific Highway upgrade is the last highway link between Hexham and the Queensland border to be upgraded to four lanes.

“Within months, construction of the first section from Woolgoolga to Ballina will start.

“On top of saving lives – the Pacific Highway project will create 2500 direct regional construction jobs and 6500 indirect jobs.

“It has taken two grown up governments to build a world class highway for the communities and businesses of the North Coast, protect koalas and deliver thousands of jobs to the region – something no government has achieved before.”

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