

Ballina Koala Plan update



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PACIFIC HIGHWAY, WOOLGOOLGA TO BALLINA UPGRADE

Roads and Maritime Services is committed to minimising its impact on biodiversity while building a safer highway. This sheet provides an update on the project's Conditions of Approval and development of the Ballina Koala Plan.

The final link in completing the Pacific Highway to a four lane divided highway, the 155 kilometre Woolgoolga to Ballina upgrade, has been approved by the NSW and Federal governments. This approval comes with strict conditions about managing the project's impact on the environment, including the koala and other threatened species.

One condition requires Roads and Maritime Services to demonstrate that the impact to the Ballina koala population will be acceptable before building can start in the area known as Section 10, which starts at Broadwater and finishes at Coolgardie, south of Ballina.

One condition requires Roads and Maritime to carry out a Population Viability Analysis (PVA), for a 50-year timeframe, to demonstrate *"the long-term viability of the Ballina Koala population, taking into account the impacts resulting from the road upgrade in Section 10."*

This will form part of a Ballina Koala Plan to ensure the best outcome for koalas in that section.

While this is taking place, work is progressing on the other 142 kilometres of the upgrade.

Ballina Koala Plan

Roads and Maritime, in line with expert advice has developed a strategy to address conditions of approval relating to management of the koala population between Wardell and Coolgardie, near Ballina.

Key features of the strategy include:

- Establishing an expert panel to provide advice to Roads and Maritime on the modelling work and mitigation measures for the Ballina koala population

- Engaging experts to collect more data on the Ballina koala population, carry out the population viability analysis and peer review the analysis
- Share information with key stakeholders including Ballina Shire Council and its reference group as well as the broader community
- The data collected and subsequent modelling carried out will inform development of the Ballina Koala Plan and will be subject to rigorous external expert peer review.

Roads and Maritime continues to work closely with experts and other stakeholders during development and implementation of the Woolgoolga to Ballina Koala Management Plan.

Niche Environment and Heritage contractors have been engaged to update the overall koala management plan, carry out population viability analysis, and prepare the Ballina Koala Plan for section 10 – from the Richmond River at Broadwater, deviating west of Wardell, to Coolgardie.

The overarching Koala Management Plan details how impacts will be minimised and managed for koala populations and areas of potential koala habitat.

It also identifies a number of management actions to be carried out to ensure the long-term survival of this species in the area of the project.

The Ballina Koala Plan will be submitted to the Federal Environment Minister to determine if the impacts to the Ballina koala population are demonstrated to be acceptable.

Woolgoolga to Ballina upgrade

21 Prince Street Grafton NSW 2460

PO Box 546 Grafton NSW 2460

www.rms.nsw.gov.au/W2B | T 1800 778 900 | E W2B@rms.nsw.gov.au

This project is funded by the Australian and NSW governments

In addition, a revegetation strategy will be developed to determine areas for replanting before building starts, as well as provide details of the revegetation required for each area to connect habitat.

We will plant 130 hectares of koala food trees on Roads and Maritime, owned land near the new highway corridor, with at least 50 per cent to be planted before major work starts and the remainder after building work finishes.

PVA data collection

The term PVA refers to Population Viability Analysis – a computer modelling process that enables us to better understand long-term wildlife population trends. It can also be used to examine how wildlife species respond to different management and mitigation measures or scenarios.

The Woolgoolga to Ballina PVA requires substantial baseline data inputs on the local koala demographics. Roads and Maritime has engaged a team of experienced scientific consultants including EcoSure and BioLink (Dr Steve Phillips) to collect data for ecologist Dr Rod Kavanagh (Niche Environment and Heritage) to carry out the PVA.

Dr Phillips and his team of experts are currently collecting data to feed into the PVA. Koalas in and around section 10 are being analysed in order to collect demographic and genetic data. To do this, koalas are caught by both a flag and pole or a special koala trap designed by Dr Phillips. Within an hour of collecting the required information, the koalas are released back to their natural habitat. The project team is targeting to collect data from 70 individual koalas to inform the PVA.

Once the data is collected by Dr Phillips, ecologist Dr Rod Kavanagh (Niche Environment and Heritage) will use the data collected to complete the analysis. This is expected to take about two months. He will be reporting the results to the project's expert panel, chaired by the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer Mary O'Kane, before they are released to the community later this year. For more information on the PVA process refer to the frequently asked questions attached.

Independent expert panel

An expert panel, independent of the project team has been convened to provide advice and feedback to the Woolgoolga to Ballina team.

The independent expert panel will be chaired by the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer Mary O'Kane and includes a number of environmental professionals recognised for their expertise in koala biology, conservation ecology and environmental management.

The role of the expert panel is to:

- Review all relevant ecological information (survey data, reports, PVA results etc.) that relate to the Ballina koala population
- Review Roads and Maritime proposals to manage and mitigate potential impacts to the koala through Section 10 of the upgrade
- Make recommendations about proposed koala survey and monitoring methodologies
- Advise on the suitability of proposed mitigation measures proposed and the integrity of the scientific methods proposed to undertake population viability modelling for the Ballina koala population
- Liaise with relevant stakeholders or experts as required to further inform the panel's activities.

The project team will consider all input, advice and feedback provided by the expert panel in the context of the overall strategic objectives, and the Conditions of Approval.

For more details please refer to the project website at www.rms.nsw.gov.au/W2B

Next steps

The expert panel is expected to hold its first meeting in February 2015.

It is expected the panel will meet at regular intervals and continue until the koala management plans for the project have been approved by NSW Department of Planning and Environment and Federal Department of Environment.

Roads and Maritime expects to have the updated Ballina Koala Plan and modelling outcomes of the PVA by mid 2015 with a decision from the Federal Environment Minister on the acceptability of impacts expected by October 2015.

We will keep you regularly informed of project progress through letters, community updates, and our website.

For more information about the Woolgoolga to Ballina Pacific Highway upgrade contact the project team by email W2B@rms.nsw.gov.au or by phoning **1800 778 900**.