

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

Question No: 283
Hearing: Additional Estimates
Outcome: Outcome 1
Programme: Biodiversity Conservation Division (BCD)
Topic: Large-scale tree species conversion
Hansard Page: 22
Question Date: 04 March 2016
Question Type: Spoken

Senator Rice, Janet asked:

Senator RICE: There is evidence of basically a systematic shifting of native forests. They are being replanted with species that are not suitable for koalas as preferred food trees. If no-one has information here—

Mr Andrews: We are updating the recovery plan and working with our state and territory partners on that, particularly Queensland, New South Wales and the ACT. The public consultation on that plan will be sought in mid-2016. The government is also working to finalise the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy. That document will guide koala conservation nationally. At the meeting of the environment ministers in 2015 the Australian government and the Victorian governments jointly agreed to lead the development of national koala translocation guidelines, particularly focused on health and welfare and the genetic implications. The specific question about the trees could be in the recovery plan. Mr Richardson would know that, so we will have to take that on notice.

Senator RICE: You can take that on notice and, relatedly, whether you are aware of large-scale tree species conversion in public forest areas—whether there is data on food stocks for koala populations in terms of their preferred tree species and what protections or checks exist to ensure that koala food species are not being deliberately or inadvertently stripped from their habitat areas.

Mr Andrews: Okay.

Answer:

1. “whether there is evidence of basically a systematic shifting of native forests. They are being replanted with species that are not suitable for koalas as preferred food trees.”

Forestry activities conducted within a Regional Forest Agreement area are exempt from the EPBC Act and as such, the Department is not involved with the planning or implementation of forestry management within those areas. Outside of Regional Forest Agreement areas, any action that has, will have, or is likely to have, a significant impact on the koala must be referred for assessment under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) (see also response to question 3 below).

2. “whether there is data on food stocks for koala populations in terms of their preferred tree species”

The development of a recovery plan for the listed koala species of Queensland, New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory is a priority for the Australian Government. The recovery plan being developed under the EPBC Act will set out research and management actions necessary to stop the decline of, and support the recovery of the

listed koala. The species requirements for survival, including food resources, will be considered in the recovery plan. This is a complex matter as the koala's preferred tree species vary across its extensive range. Koalas select their preferred feed trees on the basis of other factors such as tree size/age and the nutritional quality of the leaves. The Department is consulting with expert scientists, state agencies and other stakeholders to ensure the recovery plan provides the most up to date guidance regarding koala food trees and habitat.

3. *“what protections or checks exist to ensure that koala food species are not being deliberately or inadvertently stripped from their habitat areas”*

The koala population found in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory is a matter of national environmental significance protected under the EPBC Act. Australia's national environmental law regulates actions which have, will have, or are likely to have, a significant impact on a matter of national environmental significance such as the listed koala population. Significant impacts may include impacts on food tree species. The *EPBC Act referral guidelines for the vulnerable koala, Department of the Environment, 2014* provide guidance to proponents and regulators in this regard.