



Australian
Koala
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Koala experts make valuable submission to 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

Better landuse planning in southern Australia could help koalas and people survive future fires, asserts the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF).

This week, scientists from the AKF made a detailed formal submission to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

“As well as addressing impacts on koalas, we felt compelled to articulate some of the underlying landscape issues,” said AKF CEO Deborah Tabart OAM.

“At the very least, we’d like to see changes to how pine plantations, eucalypt plantations and native forest are configured in the landscape.”

Local koala populations have been severely affected by the fires.

Too slow to outrun the flames, koalas naturally respond to bushfire by climbing high into the treetops. Such a strategy no doubt served the species well prior to white settlement, when fires were less frequent and less severe. It proved catastrophic, however, for koalas caught up in the Victorian fires.

“The koala’s experience tells us that there isn’t anything normal or natural about these kinds of fires,” said Ms Tabart. “They burn much hotter and higher.”

“To get to the causes, conditions on the day like temperature and wind speed must, of course, be considered. However, we sincerely hope the Royal Commission takes the analysis further and looks at how different land-uses across the landscape behave and interact with respect to fire,” said Tabart.

For example, the movement of fire from a eucalypt forest into pine plantation can significantly increase a fire’s size and intensity. Fire behaviour can become extreme in pine plantations, with a ‘ladder effect’ creating crown fires.

The AKF report examines fire in pine plantations, eucalypt plantations and native forest, exploring differences and possible interactions (noting that studies of the latter appear to be lacking). This is complemented by a number of case studies and discussion of issues such as fuel loads and prescribed burning.

The authors’ insights are backed up by a comprehensive review of fire research and fire reports. Also mentioned is innovative landscape modeling work being developed in the United States aimed at guiding landscape management policy.

The AKF report presents a simple strategy for addressing several of the Terms of Reference outlined by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

“We have taken particular care to recommend solutions that constitute real and important steps towards protecting the landscape in that region,” said Tabart. “We hope that our contribution helps both koalas and human life in the future.”

The 28-page submission is available on the AKF website or by phoning 07 3229 7233. To find out ways to help the Australian Koala Foundation save our koalas, visit the website at www.savethekoala.com.

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