



Koalas generate about \$1 billion of tourism income a year, says the Australian Koala Foundation.

Photo: KYLIE ADORANTI

Costs hard to bear: developers

Ruth Liew

They're furry, cute, like to sleep a lot and have the potential to halt billions of dollars worth of property development in Queensland.

Koala numbers are declining, environmental researchers say, and the sustainability of the species, particularly in south-east Queensland, has been the subject of fierce debate among environmentalists, state governments and property developers.

A Senate inquiry is considering whether koalas should be protected under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, a decision which could throw Queensland development plans into mass uncertainty, according to the property industry.

Paul Engerman, Queensland operation manager for real estate developer Peet, said at a Senate hearing yesterday that the rules protecting koalas in Queensland were already stringent.

"We're suggesting another layer would add another layer of cost," he said.

Paul Barrett, the managing director of Queensland property developer Heritage Pacific, said the industry faced "losing competitive advantage" if koalas were protected.

He said home buyers would bear the brunt of higher building costs.

"[But] if they can provide land owners with certainty, it would forgo some of the potential additional costs involved," he said.

Both the Urban Development Institute of Australia and the Aus-

KEY POINTS

- A Senate inquiry is considering laws to protect dwindling koala numbers.
- Property developers say more regulation would increase costs.
- Home buyers would pay, they say.

tralian Property Council oppose the koala listing. "There hasn't been any rigorous scientific work to understand the issues around the koala population," said Residential Development Council executive director Caryn Kakas, who spoke at the hearing yesterday.

In Western Australia, developers may need to offset 23 hectares of land for every hectare used for development in areas inhabited by the Carnaby's Black Cockatoo, which is listed as endangered under the Environment Protection law, according to the Urban Development Institute.

Australian Koala Foundation chief executive Deborah Tabart said protecting the koala was critical to the economy because the animals generated about \$1 billion of tourism income each year.

"If you're going to damage habitats, then you have to bear some responsibility," she said.

Senator Mary Jo Fisher, the Liberal Party chairwoman of the committee conducting the koala inquiry, said she was concerned by the lack of official submissions and feedback from property developers.

"We haven't [heard] enough from people with interest in the land — be they developers, farmers or land holders," she said.