



Australian Koala Foundation

A.C.N. 010 922 102

'CANBERRA FIDDLES WHILE FIRES BURN' - AKF

Like many seeing the fires rage in South Australia, the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) is deeply concerned about the fate of Koalas.

While no one knows exactly how many animals died in the fires, assessment from the AKF suggests that fewer Koalas might have been impacted than expected – probably less than 50.

'This is a good thing, but does not mean that the Koalas in South Australia are safe long term,' says the AKF's CEO, Deborah Tabart OAM.

'It is ironic to me that we have politicians of all persuasions tweeting about Koalas burnt in the fire, but not one of them appreciates the need for a Koala Protection Act.

'It's important to ask why Koalas in this area do not enjoy the protection of the Federal Government. When the Koala was listed as Federally Threatened Species in May 2012, Koalas in Victoria and South Australia were specifically excluded from protection,' said Tabart.

The Threatened Species Technical Committee, the group provides advice to the Federal Minister for the Environment on listing decisions, including the status of the Koala, did not realize how close to a 'Vulnerable' listing it was nation-wide.

Under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, a decline in numbers of 30% or more was needed for a national listing.

Shockingly, Koalas in Victoria and South Australia missed out on better protection by 1%, with the committee recommending against the protection of these Koalas after a conclusion of their decline being at 29%.

In 2010, the committee concluded that there were approximately 100,000 Koalas in Victoria. In 2012 this estimate more than doubled to 215,000. Numbers from the AKF suggest as few as 19,000-35,000 Koalas.

'It's very convenient,' says Tabart.

'How did they get that precise figure, when the AKF, even after nearly 30 years and \$10m in research and mapping cannot give such a delicate balance of the math?

'I believe it's because they constantly fudge figures. The committee has even acknowledged the numbers were doubled purely on hearsay, and have conceded that there is no formal estimate, or even any data to support the increase,' she said.

By more than doubling the Koala estimate in Victoria in 2012, the committee ensured that Koalas would not be protected. If they had picked 150,000, or 180,000, the Koala would be protected.



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‘One could argue that this was a contrived decision, and the Koalas impacted by the fires in South Australia are at greater risk because of it,’ said Tabart.

‘Why was this done? Who knows really, but it is my considered opinion that it was to protect logging interests’.

The AKF suggests that Australians and the Federal Government need to appreciate that catastrophic events like the recent bushfire have a greater and greater impact on threatened species as numbers decline.

‘On Christmas Eve, when all of Australia was asleep, Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt even reduced the level of oversight for the protection of Koala habitat,’ said Tabart.

‘The AKF is not asleep and watching closely. The Koala is on the way to localised extinctions on a daily basis, and Canberra fiddles while the fires burn,’ she said.