



Bushfire season and lack of funding a double threat for koalas

LISMORE, New South Wales – A specialist koala hospital that rescues and rehabilitates hundreds of koalas across New South Wales is calling on all levels of government to step up to help protect the iconic species in the midst of a threatening bushfire season.

Friends of the Koala, based in the NSW Northern Rivers, focuses on all aspects of koala conservation. The organisation rescues, rehabilitates, and releases koalas while also protecting and enhancing habitat, undertaking research, engaging and educating the community, and advocating on behalf of koalas at a local, state, and national level.

Its specialist veterinary hospital has been operating since 2020, admitting about 350 koalas every year—more than any other wildlife hospital across the state.

With a large part of the region in drought, multiple active wildfires in areas known to have koalas in or near the fireground and a severe bushfire season forecasted, lack of government funding has the team concerned about its capacity to respond to a potentially catastrophic summer for koalas.

The centre's 550 members, 239 volunteers, and six staff members are calling on all levels of government to do their bit and support the vitally important work they do to protect the endangered koala.

Rhonda James, Vice-President at Friends of the Koala, said governments had relied too heavily on charity funding for wildlife facilities for too long.

“How much longer can we continue bearing the costs associated with rescuing, triaging, assessing, treating, and rehabilitating our unique wildlife which, in law, is the Crown's property? It is little wonder that wildlife carers often feel that they and the wildlife they care for are undervalued and unappreciated,” she said.

“We have reached a point where we feel compelled to share the challenges we are facing.”

More than 2,000 koalas have been successfully treated, rehabilitated, and released in the Northern Rivers as a result of the dedicated Friends of the Koala veterinary team and volunteers. This work is even more important as the Northern Rivers koala population is considered to be of statewide significance.

Additionally, as NSW koalas were up-listed to Endangered in 2022, every individual koala that is rescued, rehabilitated, and released back into the wild is vital.

“Every single koala that comes through our doors represents a glimmer of hope for the species. Our expert veterinarians have the skill and the passion to ensure these marsupials receive the best possible care, including emergency treatment, vaccination, and longer-term rehabilitation,” said Ms James.

“However, passion and expertise cannot keep funding the medicines, equipment, and facilities these vulnerable creatures so desperately require. Without external support, the hospital's long-term viability remains uncertain. Koalas are loved and valued globally – it's time our leaders recognised their value by supporting the groups who work tirelessly to protect them.”

President, Allison Kelly explained that “Currently, all wildlife treatment, rescue, rehabilitation and release services are delivered with no recurrent funding from either the NSW or Commonwealth governments. Additionally, several state-wide initiatives set up to assist the voluntary wildlife rehabilitation sector following the 2019-2020 bushfires are ending. Friends of the Koala have written to our local and state politicians, and some support has been garnered, but funds are urgently needed to upgrade the hospital and support operational costs for the next four years”.

"The active threats of bushfires and drought this year are a certainty. We lack the funding to increase our capacity to treat and rehabilitate animals during natural disasters like these. It is incredibly worrying for everyone striving to safeguard koalas in Northern Rivers," said Silva Everaers, General Manager at Friends of the Koala.

"It is not up to just one individual or organisation to save this iconic species – it takes a village and we are urgently appealing to governments, individuals, businesses, and philanthropists to support Friends of the Koala and help ensure wild koalas have a future in NSW."

For more information or to make a donation, please visit www.friendsofthekoala.org or contact manager@friendsofthekoala.org.

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