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Peter Besseling, Mayor
Port Macquarie Hastings Council
PO Box 84
Port Macquarie NSW 2444

Dear Peter,

Re: Vegetation Mapping , Koala Habitat study and mapping for Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management.

The Bonny Hills Progress Association was deeply disappointed that at its 19th March 2014 meeting after addresses by two developers, Council resolved to further review the koala habitat and vegetation mapping data developed for the Port Macquarie-Hastings Local Government Area and the methodologies used.

These studies are integral to long term planning for our local area and form the basis for Council to proceed with its long awaited Biodiversity Strategy and Koala Plan of Management to protect and help restore local habitat and corridors.

However, PMHC is now lagging behind many other Councils up and down the NSW coast in adopting these important strategies, as evidenced by letters from the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) which are attachments to the report to Council's meeting of 19th March.

It is a matter of some concern that Councillors are now being lobbied by members of the development industry to obstruct the adoption of a comprehensive Koala Plan of Management. Given the response at that meeting, Council runs the considerable risk of a perception that they are kowtowing to the development industry. We encourage Council not to succumb to entreaties by people with vested interests, and proceed without delay to progress the adoption of these strategies.

It is hard to conceive that Council should consider delaying these steps - essential to the survival of our iconic Koala population, given that they are so loved by our community, and a valuable tourism resource that greatly benefits Council and the residents of the Port Macquarie-Hastings area generally.

We appreciate the benefits of evidence based planning, the goal of which is to provide greater certainty to the community and a strategic direction for the development industry. In our opinion, Council must not allow itself to be distracted from progressing these evidence-based strategies to satisfy developers who are ‘grasping at straws’ to find an Achilles heel in the process.

The proposed methodologies are endorsed by the OEH and accepted by the Federal Government under the EPBC Act (1999) as the appropriate techniques to be used. They are the standard used to define koala habitat in accordance with SEPP 44, and are used by Councils across NSW. The OEH considers them to be scientifically robust and fit for the purpose of proceeding to establish a comprehensive Koala Plan of Management. They regard the historical records of koala occupation over 20 years, coupled with on-the-ground work and visual surveys, used in reviewing the datasets, to be the most useful methodologies, and the best standard of scientific practice used in NSW.

Independent statistical advice sought by the BHPA regarding the claim by Woosnam-Merchez *et al.* (2012) that the SAT methodology is biased stated that:

‘The accuracy of results from a sampling exercise is a function not only of the method used but the resources applied, and both KRAM and SAT try to maximise the efficiency of resource use. Overall, I consider the use of focal trees in the SAT method is not so detrimental as to render it untrustworthy. It should certainly improve the chances of finding presence of koala faeces. Also the 1 m radius of the SAT method does have the advantage of efficiency in terms of resource use, and I consider the possible “bias” of SAT to be acceptable for this exercise’.

Council should also seek expert advice if they are seriously concerned, but attacks on the methodology by the development industry must be seen for what they are. Throughout history people with vested interests in a contra view will always find someone sufficiently plausible to put that view, and back them as a means of slowing the rate of change. The most recent high profile example is that of the fossil fuel industry in relation to acceptance of CO2 induced climate change.

A further point to make is that it has to be realised that there will always be room for improvement in any methodology over time as technologies advance and, in this case, as more ground-truth information and smaller scale data come to hand. But we cannot afford to wait for perfection – it will never happen. The methodology has been widely judged as sufficiently robust and fit for purpose in its current form, and this together with its widespread use over many years along coastal NSW justifies its application in our LGA. Having said that, the process for continuously updating maps and databases should be agreed at the outset.

The BHPA reflects the views of the residents of Bonny Hills, and we are certain that the wider community would share our concerns. Council's own Delivery Program in 4.7.1 aims to promote the conservation of key habitats. We believe that acceptance of the amended changes to the vegetation and koala habitat mapping, and the ongoing revision of the accompanying datasets are steps in the right direction, without which Council cannot attract biodiversity investment funding. Please do not disappoint the majority of the community who care about our environment and especially our declining koala population.

We urge Council to continue to develop the strategies notwithstanding pressure from the development lobby in such a vital matter for the future of our environment. There has been a large investment of ratepayer funds in the project to this point and the community will not want to see it go to waste.

Could you please advise how Council intends to move forward from its decision of March 19th to review its approach to the long term planning strategies?

Yours sincerely

Phil Hafey
Secretary
7 May 2014

cc: Acting General Manager, Craig Swift-McNair
Councillors
Matt Rogers, Director of Environmental Services