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SIGNIFICANT RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH CHANGING SECTION 10 ROUTE OF WOOLGOOLGA TO BALLINA HIGHWAY UPGRADE

Suggested “tweaks” to the Woolgoolga to Ballina Pacific Highway upgrade in section 10 have significant risks and would directly impact on sensitive plants and animals in the area.

Ecologist Dr Steve Phillips has suggested “tweaks” to the preferred route by about 700 metres in the north and south would help reduce impact to the local koala population.

While Roads and Maritime Services welcomes every opportunity to improve the way routes are determined and new highways are built, the 700 metre “tweaks” as suggested by Dr Phillips have significant risks, including:

- Additional impact to mapped koala habitat
- Additional clearing in the Wardell heathland directly impacting many other threatened species including critically endangered subtropical lowland rainforest, frogs, bats, birds and potoroos
- Major impact to Aboriginal owned land including the Indigenous Protection Area
- A full environmental assessment seeking further community feedback on such, would cost up to \$4 million and delay the project by up to two years.

During the route selection phase, Roads and Maritime made several adjustments to the preferred route in section 10 as a result of community and stakeholder feedback. In fact, we are still considering small changes as part of the detailed design to further avoid known koala food trees.

The Ballina Koala Plan was developed after 15 months of extensive investigations and research by a range of experts from more than 13 scientific, environmental and research organisations.

The measures proposed include:

- Completely closed fencing of the new highway including koala grids at Coolgardie interchange
- Additional fencing along the existing Pacific Highway between Wardell and north of Coolgardie interchange to address koala deaths on existing roads neighbouring the project
- Increased structures to connect koala home ranges adjacent to the new highway between Richmond River and the Coolgardie interchange

- Planting out 130 hectares of koala habitat adjacent to new highway to create improved habitat linkages between west Wardell and the Blackwall Range.

The analysis found implementing this combination of measures would offset a decline in this koala colony and may even improve the overall population outlook for koalas in the area.

During development of the Ballina Koala Plan, several workshops were held with a range of experts in koalas and PVA, to determine what information should be used in the model and how it should be considered. Dr Phillips was invited to these sessions. Unfortunately he did not attend, instead sending a delegate.

The Ballina Koala Plan is the most extensive study of any koala colony along the Pacific Highway and its outcomes have been described as “scientifically sound” by independent peer reviewer Associate Professor Dr Johnathon Rhodes – who is recognised as one of Australia’s leading experts in koalas and in Population Viability Analysis. It has also been endorsed by the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer, Professor Mary O’Kane AC, as Chair of the Koala Expert Advisory Committee.