

Question on Notice

No. 41

Asked on Wednesday, 12 February 2014

MR RUTHENBERG asked the Minister for Transport and Main Roads (MR EMERSON)—

QUESTION:

Will the Minister explain the measures being taken to relocate koalas and preserve their habitat during construction of the Moreton Bay Rail Link project?

ANSWER:

I thank the Member for Kallangur for the question.

In planning for this project, the project team recognised the need to protect the local koala population and over 12 months ago, a comprehensive koala tagging and monitoring program started.

A team from Endeavour Veterinary Ecology led by leading wildlife vet Dr Jon Hanger, has been working to fit every koala spotted within the Moreton Bay Rail footprint and adjacent land with GPS radio collars and undertake a health check.

To date, about 280 koalas have been successfully tagged and monitored and demonstrates this initiative is going beyond standard practice by collecting accurate field data specific to the local population, that was not only used to develop the rail design, but becomes invaluable with clearing now started.

While it's business as usual practice to have 'spotter catchers' on construction sites during clearing activities, the team have employed ecologists and fauna spotters to work with clearing teams and the tracking devices allow teams to understand where koalas are located before starting clearing activities.

This innovative program will provide local carers and the community with strong data on the home ranges and movement patterns of the local koala population and help support future populations of koalas.

The project is also undertaking extensive offset tree planting for impacts to non-juvenile koala habitat trees. Two parcels of land totalling about 120 ha suitable for koala habitat offset tree planting has been purchased by the project. To date, about 17,000 habitat trees have been planted at one site at Griffin.

In addition to the mitigation measures, the project team are going one step further to ensure the survival of koalas in this region. The project team has received approval from the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection to carry out translocation of koalas under a Scientific Purposes Permit and within strict conditions.

This will ensure that any koalas impacted by the project can be relocated out of harms way, further ensuring their survival in the region.

I am also pleased to talk about a Chlamydia vaccine trial being led by Professor Peter Timms of the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). This work is in collaboration with the Moreton Bay Rail project team and funded by Australian Research Council Linkage fund with the Department of Transport and Main Roads being one of several industry partners.

Chlamydia is one of the most significant threats to the future of koala populations both in urban settings and in the wild causing death or infertility in many individual koalas.

The trial involves researchers being able to access the koalas before construction starts, administering the vaccine, and then monitoring their progress during the construction work.

The project team has been working with QUT and Endeavour Veterinary Ecology Services to make this trial happen and provide valuable data to the research team.

Trials with captive animals at Lone Pine Sanctuary have so far shown the vaccine is effective; the researchers now have the opportunity to carry out the largest trial of the vaccine on wild koalas by working with the animals in the vicinity of the rail link project.