

Australian Bluegum Plantations says sorry for killing koalas

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Australia's largest woodchip exporter has stopped logging in areas with high populations of koalas after admitting it had killed and maimed animals in Victoria's south-west.

Australian Bluegum Plantations has been stripped of its environmental credentials after an independent environmental audit by the non-profit Rainforest Alliance found the company had breached too many guidelines designed to protect koalas.

The certification works in a similar way to the "fair trade" label on coffee and chocolate and is supposed to signify high environmental and wildlife care.

Wildlife carers raised the alarm in July after finding koalas had been killed, maimed, stranded, left suffering from pneumonia and starving in plantations in the green triangle region of Victoria and South Australia, between Mount Gambier and Portland. While there has been no population audit, it is understood there are thousands of koalas in the area.

Both the Rainforest Alliance and the Forest Stewardship Council, which sets the environmental guidelines, criticised the oversight of the plantations by the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries.

They said the department should be bringing the plantation industry, farmers, native forest operators and experts together to manage koala populations.

Rainforest Alliance auditor Anita Neville said protocols covering the timber industry were too lax. "We have a basic problem. Koalas need somewhere to live and the protocols are not going to be sufficient for plantations and koalas to co-exist," she said.

"Koalas are renters, but the problem is they don't know they are renters and when they are going to be evicted."

Forest Stewardship Council chief executive Natalie Reynolds said it could only set guidelines for its members, not manage the wider landscape. She said the department had the expertise and power to bring industries and communities together to develop a plan.

"There is a landscape level problem that requires a landscape level solution," Ms Reynolds said.

A department spokesman said it had worked with the industry and wildlife carers to develop new guidelines, introduced two weeks ago, that aimed to improve koala welfare.

In a written statement, Australian Bluegum Plantations said it had suspended harvesting in areas known to have high koala populations until it could be sure that its policies and procedures to protect the animals were being properly implemented.

The company said its koala management program began in 2011 but was deficient. It had subsequently introduced new guidelines and policies.

"ABP is fully committed to the hardwood plantation industry's ultimate goal of zero harm to koalas," the statement said.

"We are very sorry about injuries and deaths of koalas on our estate. This situation is deeply troubling to all of us and is unacceptable, and we are committed to preventing further incidents of this nature."

The company apologised for releasing "any incorrect information about animal deaths and injuries" - a reference to the fact it had initially denied it had harmed koalas.

Australian Bluegum Plantations chief executive Tony Price was the chairman of the Forestry Stewardship Council but stepped aside when Rainforest Alliance began its spot koala audit. He remains on the council's board.

"We are deeply sorry for the fact that koalas have been harmed on our property - deeply sorry," Mr Price told ABC TV.

Ms Neville said Rainforest Alliance did yearly inspections based on the council's environmental guidelines but the spot audit released this month concentrated on koala welfare.

The damning report found six significant failures. Council rules stipulate a company must be suspended when five or more major non-conformance issues are found.

Ms Neville said Asian markets, particularly Japan, would not buy plantation products without environmental certification.

Calls to Australian Bluegum Plantations rang unanswered on Tuesday.