

NSW government to set up new national park as it looks to balance koala protections with urban sprawl

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Photo supplied: Pat Durman

The NSW government has funded a national park south-west of Sydney to bolster protections for one of the state's last healthy koala colonies under threat from urban sprawl. The state government will spend \$80 million on koala protections, including \$43 million from the latest budget, to establish the Georges River Koala National Park.

The national park, which Labor committed to before the state elections, will cover 1,830 hectares along the Georges River, including 1,000 hectares of public land. Three koala crossings in the area, including two at the site of repeated koala fatalities, have also been earmarked at a cost of \$26 million.

The park will run through the suburbs of Gilead and Appin, where developers are seeking approval to build more than 16,000 homes.

The region is home to a growing number of koalas, believed to be the only group in the state not to be afflicted by chlamydia.

NSW Environment Minister Penny Sharpe said the government is facing pressure to increase housing supply while protecting koala habitat. "I am working closely with the planning minister, he has got a big job to do, and the government is committed to getting housing into the ground," said Ms Sharpe.

"But we need to make sure we are balancing the importance of looking after koalas as well, and we think we can do both."

Review of environment laws

Koalas are endangered in multiple states and territories including NSW, with habitat fragmentation one of the key threats to the iconic species.

Last year, the previous government released the Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan (CPCP) as a framework to allow developers to continue building on Sydney's fringe, while ensuring the protection of the environment.

Ms Sharpe said she is reviewing whether the plan is delivering the biodiversity outcomes it promised. "The previous government left us with a very complicated plan, that is very hard to ensure that it is doing everything it can," she said.

"We are looking very closely at it to see if we can make improvements to it."

The Environment Minister will also be reviewing plans to build 3,300 homes at Gilead, on a sensitive parcel of land that includes corridors for koalas to travel between the Georges and Nepean rivers. The proponent of the development, Lendlease, claims the estate will meet the NSW Chief Scientist's advice about koala protections, but environment groups and investors are worried about lack of detail regarding the width of koala corridors.

In April, Campbelltown Council referred the project to the NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DPIE) for bio-certification.

Ms Sharpe said she would review her department's advice closely once it is on her desk. "My priority as the Environment Minister is to protect corridors where we can, and that is something we need to work through," she said.

"The pressures around the Gilead development and the CPCP are things that we are looking at and we just have to work through methodically."

Former planning boss joins developer

The NSW Planning Department is also reviewing the involvement of the former Secretary Michael Cassel in the approval of the Appin development rezoning, after he joined the project's developer Walker Corporation shortly after resigning.

Ms Sharpe said the government has a responsibility to ensure the planning process is beyond reproach.

"We need to make sure that our planning processes has integrity and I know that the Planning Minister is very focused on that," she said.

"We need to make sure that any of the decisions government makes are done in the public interest, and that is what this government is focused on."