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RESEARCHERS ADD NORTHERN RIVERS TO LARGE-SCALE KOALA SURVEY

The NSW Department of Industry's Forest Science Unit will begin the final stage in its three year acoustic research project assessing the status of koalas in the forests of north-eastern NSW.

Beginning in the Northern Rivers, a team of researchers will be installing up to 25 "Songmeters" in forests throughout the region to capture the distinctive call of male koalas during mating season.

Principal Research Scientist Dr Brad Law said the acoustic survey is a new method that will lead to a better understanding of the extent to which forests the region are occupied by koalas.

"Koalas are surprisingly difficult to detect, particularly in tall forests and in more remote areas, which is where this research will be focused," said Dr Law.

"They are reclusive animals, but during the mating season male koalas call repeatedly during the night so, for seven nights in each site, research teams will record these bellows so we can assess koala occupancy.

"Koalas are a vulnerable species and having a better understanding of their status is vital for informing land use practices and also protecting the current koala population.

The research is being conducted in collaboration with the Queensland University of Technology, which has developed the software that will scan recordings for koala calls.

"We trialled this new method in 2015 and since then have collected recordings from over 100 forest sites of various types right along the Great Dividing Range of north-eastern NSW," said Dr Law.

"Early results using the acoustic survey technique are encouraging and we've found many more forests occupied in State forests and National Parks than we initially thought, including in old growth as well as recently and historically harvested forests, even after heavy harvesting.

"The research is looking at the big picture of where koalas occur and which forests are supporting populations.

"This research will be essential to our understanding of the status of koalas in more remote forests and will also help us assess forest management practices to ensure a balance between koala protection and the forestry industry."

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