

Mission to save koalas from fires

By DANIEL DASEY

THE koala death toll from fires in the state's Pilliga region could run into the hundreds wildlife authorities said yesterday, as a rescue team prepared to nurse injured survivors.

A crew comprising a zoo veterinarian, a vet nurse and a koala handler have based themselves in Coonabarabran after fire tore through nearby bushland, which is home to the state's largest koala population.

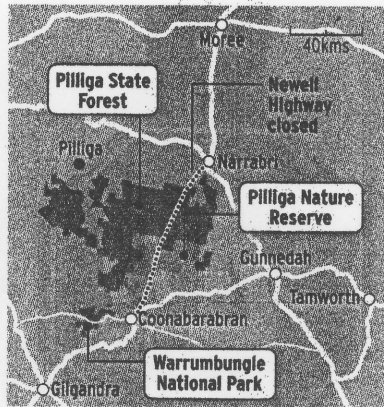
While the team from Taronga and Western Plains zoos had originally hoped to search burned areas for injured koalas, fire authorities early yesterday vetoed the plan, saying they could not allow civilians into an active fire ground. Instead fire crews are on the look-out for koalas and will bring any survivors into town for treatment.

Zoo spokesman Mark Williams said fire crews would be told how to capture hurt koalas humanely.

Mr Williams said there was no doubt dozens of koalas had died so far in a series of fires in the region and the count could easily be far higher.

"The area the fire has gone through is known to have thousands of koalas," he said. "It's believed to be the biggest grouping of koalas in NSW and there will be many that have perished."

Mr Williams said that, while many animals were able to escape fires by fleeing or entering burrows, koalas and



reptiles were particularly susceptible. Injured animals were most likely to be found on the fringes of severely burned areas suffering from burns and shock.

The State Government announced plans for the koala rescue mission on Friday. A rescue van carrying the koala handler set out from Sydney late on Friday and picked up the vet and vet nurse from Western Plains Zoo before arriving in Coonabarabran.

The team met for a briefing yesterday morning before heading out to seek injured animals. Yesterday there were four fires burning within the northern part of the Warrumbungle Shire at Pilliga, Tinkrameanah State Forest, Timor Road and Tambar Springs.

Meanwhile nearly 70 fires continued to burn or smoulder across NSW.