

The Department of Natural Resources' Approach to Wetlands

The Hon. Howard Hobbs

Minister for Natural Resources, PO Box 456, Brisbane Albert Street Qld 4002

It's been said many times, but it's worth saying again, that the Great Barrier Reef is a national and an international treasure. As the lead agency for natural resource management in Queensland, my Department acknowledges the significant contribution it can make through its role in land, water and vegetation management, in maintaining and enhancing the values of the reef.

While the focus of this workshop is on wetlands and their management, I would, at the outset, like to take this opportunity to discuss the broader aspects of land and water resource management as they might impact on the reef, and to outline some of the initiatives being driven by my Department.

The overall management of river catchments that run to the waters of the reef can have significant effects on the health and stability of the reef lagoon and of the reef itself, although how much in relative terms we are all still progressively learning. My Department, through a number of programs and initiatives, has a commitment to the sustainable use of our land and water resources while ensuring that downstream and marine impacts are minimised. These programs include:

- the integrated catchment management strategy
- the Downstream Effects of Agricultural Practices committee
- floodplain management policies
- the water allocation and management planning process
- Landcare
- Waterwatch
- the impact assessment and management of water infrastructure projects.

Wetlands, as one component of these catchment systems, have a unique and significant role to play in the health and productivity of our estuarine and marine ecosystems. They are often the final recipients of the water flowing down our river and creek systems and across our floodplains. However, many of the factors which influence the condition of these wetlands are complex and are interrelated. For example, changes in flow regimes will not only affect freshwater discharges, but also the nature, amount and rate of transport of sediment. Through the water allocation and managing planning process – such as is currently occurring in the Barron River system – flow needs for wetland health are being considered as part of the environmental flow requirements.

As you know the Queensland Government is committed to the economic development of Queensland through the sustainable development, use and management of its land, water and vegetation resources. The challenge we all face is how to make sure our development is sustainable.

While I share management responsibility for wetlands with my colleague Brian Littleproud, the Minister for Environment, my focus is on freshwater. However, a number of the wider activities of my Department can have a significant impact on both freshwater and tidal wetlands. The Department of Environment has been driving the initiative of developing a 'Strategy for the Conservation and Management of Queensland's Wetlands' to which my Department has had input. I understand this emerging strategy is to be the subject of the presentation by the Department of Environment at this workshop.

It is generally acknowledged that the long history of development of north Queensland, in particular of the sugar industry, is a significant issue for the management of wetlands of the wet tropics. I think it would be fair to acknowledge that much of this development was undertaken during a time when we did not fully appreciate the value of our wetlands. While these impacts may not always have been positive, the sugar industry in particular has recognised this and is now seeking better ways of managing its impacts.

The industry has been going through considerable expansion over the past decade and the market for sugar is such that it is anticipated this trend will continue. However, an opportunity now exists for us to plan and manage this expansion to minimise its impacts. One way this is being achieved is through the ten Sugar Industry Infrastructure Package (SIIP) projects in the coastal zone announced in November 1993. Through this initiative, expansion in the sugar industry is being planned and managed to ensure it is sustainable and environmentally sound.

I should stress that these SIIP projects are industry promoted projects that are jointly funded by the Federal and State Governments and industry. Projects can only proceed if the necessary environmental approvals administered by the Department of Environment and Environment Australia are obtained. Additionally, they require that industry sponsors are able to meet capital contribution requirements and that water boards are formed to exercise statutory oversight of their implementation. Unfortunately the commitments in the SIIP projects in promoting sustainability have been misunderstood by some in the community.

I would submit that sugar industry expansion is sure to occur regardless of the SIIP, and that this expansion may not necessarily follow a comprehensive planning approach. However, the SIIP offers additional management controls as part of exercising State and Federal responsibilities applying to these sponsored development projects. While responsibility for administering the Government interests in the SIIP rests with my Department, the projects are, fundamentally, industry promoted projects. Importantly, as I said, the environmental approval rests with the environment agencies.

You might also be aware that a review committee consisting of industry, State and Federal government representatives has been established to oversee the process of negotiation with prospective project sponsors and proponents. An environmental working group for the package has also been established to deal with environmental planning issues relevant to the projects. Representatives of industry and State and Federal governments are involved. There has been strong collaboration between the industry project sponsors, my Department and the Departments of Environment and Primary Industries on these projects.

I reiterate that all approved projects are subject to environmental impact assessment processes, and no work can commence on these projects until approval is given by the Department of Environment and its Commonwealth counterpart, Environment Australia.

Several SIIP projects, particularly those involving additional transport infrastructure through the extension of cane rail, have already been completed. However, a number of projects, particularly in the wet tropics, are still undergoing assessment. No work has commenced on the water management phase of the Riversdale-Murray Valley project at Tully, the Herbert project at Ingham, or the Russell-Mulgrave proposal at Babinda.

As with all SIIP projects, environmental impact assessment processes are being used to identify potential impacts. Environmental management plans, which also require endorsement by both State and Federal environment management agencies, will detail management requirements. The impact assessment process is comprehensive and involves many stages. I am advised, for instance, that the sponsors of the Riversdale-Murray Valley project are currently preparing a

further supplementary report to address outstanding issues that emerged from the initial impact assessment study.

Discussions are continuing with local councils regarding planning control of activities on the flood plains. Deeds of agreement to protect critical habitat areas are being extended, and local boards in the area now require all applications for new assignments to be accompanied by a farm development plan prepared with input from the Department of Environment, the Department of Primary Industries (Fisheries), Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations as well as my Department. Without this coordinated effort I would suggest that outcomes would be far less certain than they now are.

I am also advised that there are some significant concerns with the Herbert (Ingham) Water Management project. Concerns with impacts on fish habitat areas and wetlands will need to be satisfactorily resolved before the project can proceed. I am confident however, that phase one of the Russell-Mulgrave project will be given final approval in the near future.

I believe that the participation by the various State and Federal departments in collaboration with the sugar industry in the SIIP process provides a model for managing development while ensuring important wetland and other values are sustained. I will continue to support coordinated and planned approaches to the management and development of our natural resources and I would emphasise that it is a communal effort in which we are all involved.

I trust this workshop will further advance the productive and useful discussion and debate on the issues associated with achieving ecologically sustainable development in north Queensland.