

Wetland Destruction

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A lot of the impacts on wetlands have been made very clear. I'd like to repeat a few of them. There were studies done in 1993 and 1994 talking about the loss of wetlands; that half of the wetlands studied in the Tully-Murray area had oxygen so low that they couldn't support fish life; that fish diversity in all of those wetlands area were diminishing; that barramundi stocks were dropping; that in every wetland area studied, case levels were below 6. I think that there's fairly conclusive evidence that the wetlands are not only diminishing – 70% loss was the figure that Ross Digman gave yesterday – we also have the 80% loss that the World Wildlife Fund concluded for the loss of coastal lowland rainforest compounding the problem. We not only have those problems but we have the problem that the condition of the remaining wetlands is not very good either. The causes of wetland loss in Queensland extend across a lot of industries and a lot of government industries but in this area it can be attributed in large part to the cane industry, especially in recent times. It can be attributed to the expansion of the cane industry, to the assignment process, to local government and poor planning process, to the State Government for failing to integrate local government responsibility for freehold and leasehold land and it can be attributed to packages such as SIIP which encourage expansion, and agencies such as the Department of Natural Resources which, we think, have failed in their role by acting as promoters. They have both the role of promoting industry expansion as well as regulating it, and they have tended to promote more than regulate. As has been said times have changed in the sugar industry, but I would certainly like to acknowledge them: changing to green trash blanketing, the recent audit that was conducted by the industry recognised a lot of the environmental shortcomings of the industry and the development of some guidelines, although they are not followed very well at the moment. Clearly there is a beginning of awareness and recognition of some of the changes that have to take place.

But with wetlands I think we are facing a situation which is very urgent. We need to take immediate steps. It is our belief that we need to take substantial steps today in addressing the problems of wetland loss and wetland protection. We don't want to end up in a protracted political or media fight. We think that there is an opportunity to enter into negotiations, discussion and agreement with the sugar industry and we think we can make a substantial step today. I guess the question we have to ask is, is the industry willing to do that? Is the industry willing to come to the table today and discuss in substantive terms the kinds of issues that have been raised in the last few days? Are they willing to enter into voluntary agreements to protect wetlands, to protect areas of remaining areas of high conservation value (we know where the areas of high conservation values are), to protect biodiversity? To discuss Ross's proposal for 20c a tonne green levy or some other form of green levy that can be used for acquisition, rehabilitation, restoration or other uses. Are you willing to discuss the question of assignment and expansion? Finally I think it is really important to discuss, at a government level, the question of regulation and making sure that while regulation doesn't inflict on the industry, it's able to deal with those 2-3% mavericks who aren't willing to abide by voluntary agreements. We want to discuss incentives too because we recognise that this shouldn't be all on the shoulders of the sugar industry. Some of the incentives that Andrew Johnson mentioned we would fully support and others such as joint grants under Natural Heritage Trust, lobbying for rate rebates and other local government incentives and providing on-the-ground help, in terms of labour for things such as tree planting and providing technical and ecological expertise. I think that there are tremendous resources available, in the conservation movement, extremely willing to help with something they think would be productive and fruitful. I think that there's a real opportunity here today to begin a community based solution to an obviously well established problem, one that doesn't depend on government lobbying and government intervention. I don't think it's going to work if we don't get

to that point today. And once again, I really want to ask, is the industry willing to talk at that level today and to make this whole workshop worthwhile in that kind of substantive fashion?