



North Queensland Conservation Council

... the voice for the environment in North Queensland

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**To: Hon. Meaghan Scanlon
Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef**

Re: Basin wide management of the Burdekin River

Dear Ms. Scanlon,

We appreciated the opportunity of meeting with you during the Community Cabinet meetings in Townsville (29 January). We would like to take this opportunity to update you on actions taken by NQCC since then, and suggest possible steps towards establishing a basin-wide mechanism for management of the Burdekin River.

#1 ToRs for EIS of dam projects:

NQCC made submissions on the draft ToRs for both Urannah and Burdekin Falls Dam Raising. The final ToRs released by the Coordinator General now include specific sections for “coastal processes” (Items 15.41 – 15.48) and “cumulative impacts” (Items 15.179 – 15.206). These are both very significant changes. They were proposed not only by NQCC, but also by other stakeholders such as the Lower Burdekin Water (irrigation managers in the Lower Burdekin).

The first of these requires dam proponents to make careful examination of the erosion that is occurring on Cape Bowling Green. A recent field survey shows the erosion has progressed significantly beyond that identified in June last year. This was the subject of a separate letter to you (10 May) in relation to its status as a part of the Bowling Green Bay Ramsar site. Breaching of Cape Bowling Green will have a profound impact on Bowling Green Bay.

The second, “cumulative impacts” means each proponent must also consider the effect that other projects together will have on the various aspects of the Burdekin River as detailed in the ToRs. This is a big change from the proponents assessing the impacts of each dam in isolation. It is thus a step towards establishing a basin-wide mechanism for management of the Burdekin.

#2 Productivity Commission’s Draft National Water Reform 2020

The report emphasises achieving water efficiency rather than construction of new water storage infrastructure, due to climate change effects of reducing surface water (-15% for Queensland).

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During our meeting on 29 January we suggested that investment in “modernizing the irrigation system in the Lower Burdekin” as an option to raising the Burdekin Falls Dam. This would directly address the rising water table in the Lower Burdekin. In addition, it would have highly positive environmental effects by reducing the volume of nutrients used by farmers (a welcome savings to them), and thus the nutrients that flow out on to the Great Barrier Reef.

This aligns well with the imperative from the Productivity Commission for Australia to achieve water efficiency nationally. In this regard it is worth noting that the Connections Project on the Goulburn-Murray system saved 400,000 ML/yr. with investment from both State and Federal budgets.

#3 Burdekin Water Management Plan (BWMP) Revision (Sept 2023)

The BWMP was established as a simple water allocation mechanism, following construction of the Burdekin Falls Dam. It is an imperfect mechanism for river management, which focusses on water allocation and water flows, but with little attention to water quality. The BWMP is due to be renewed in Sept 2023. We would like to suggest that this revision provides an opportunity to take further steps towards a basin-wide mechanism for management of the Burdekin Basin.

In summing up, we would suggest that a basin-wide management mechanism is imperative for the health of the Burdekin as pressures for agricultural, industrial and domestic use continue to rise, and climate change will put additional stresses on the River. As concrete steps towards this we would request that you:

- (a) have baseline data analysed for areas that would be affected by development proposal on the Burdekin under the Nature Conservation act
- (b) contact the Federal Minister for the Environment Minister to conduct a strategic assessment under the EPBC Act of the Burdekin River
- (c) work with the relevant Ministers at state and federal levels to enable funds within the National Water Infrastructure Development Fund to be made available for water efficiency projects, as called for in the Productivity Commission’s Draft National Water Reform Report.

We realise that these issues are relevant to other portfolios, and we will be writing to the Minister for Regional Development, Manufacturing and Water, and, the Minister for Resources.

Yours sincerely



John G. Connell
Head Burdekin Basin sub-committee
North Queensland Conservation Council