



North Queensland Conservation Council

... the voice for the environment in North Queensland

North Queensland Conservation Council Inc.
114 Boundary St, Railway Estate Qld 4810
PO Box 354, Townsville City Qld 4810
Ph: 0424899623
Email: john.g.connell@nqcc.org.au

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**To: Hon. Glen Butcher
Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water**

Re: Burdekin: Burdekin working group and water efficient irrigation in Lower Burdekin

Dear Mr. Butcher,

NQCC has continued to assess the status of the health of the Burdekin, with immediate concerns on the two linked issues of (a) erosion on Cape Bowling Green and (b) rising levels in the river-bed and possible breakout of the river. This is illustrated by a headline article in the Burdekin Local News (07 Oct.), and is something we highlighted in our presentation at the 24th International Rivers Symposium in Brisbane (30 Sept.).

In recent weeks we have also had meetings in Townsville with the Office of Coordinator General, (24 Oct), and our local member, Mr Scott Stewart (29 Oct.).

We have been very encouraged by the way in which the various Queensland Government agencies have taken action to examine these pressing issues. In the meeting with Scott, we were informed that your department has formed a working group to examine them in some detail. This group is due to hold a technical meeting by the end of this month, to then be followed by a meeting to disseminate their findings to stakeholders. To enable NQCC to remain fully informed and guide our internal discussions ahead of the proposed stakeholder meeting, could we request that a representative of NQCC be permitted to attend the technical meeting as an observer?

In the meeting with Mr. Stewart, we focussed on two broader issues; (a) how to move towards management of the Burdekin Basin as a whole, and (b) how to develop an efficient irrigation system in the Lower Burdekin.

The second of these is most pertinent to your ministry and presents an important win-win opportunity for the both the regional economy and the Burdekin River. Various funding allocations have been made to both irrigation systems in the Lower Burdekin. These remain remedial rather than transformative. Establishing an efficient irrigation present in the Lower Burdekin could be a flagship project which would put into action the new objective of achieving 'water efficiency' currently expressed by (a) National Productivity Commission's

*North Queensland Conservation Council Inc.
Street Address: 114 Boundary St, Railway Estate Qld 4810
Postal Address: PO Box 364 Townsville City Qld 4810
Ph: (07) 4700 4978 | Mob: 0428 987 585 | www.nqcc.org.au | ABN: 55 903 033 286*

“National Water Reform 2020”; (b) Queensland’s State Infrastructure Strategy; and (c) Queensland Bulk Water Opportunities Statement.

The environmental benefits of achieving irrigation efficiency in the Lower Burdekin for the health of the Bowling Green Bay wetlands and the Great Barrier Reef would be profound. This is supported by a recent study commissioned by the Great Barrier Reef Foundation: “Effective and Efficient Pathways for Investment in the Improved Water Quality in the Great Barrier Reef (June 2019). This found that achieving ‘efficient irrigation’ in sugar cane areas would be the most cost-effective strategy to improve water quality (Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen) in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.

Such a project would thus appeal to what are often competing groups i.e., local farming communities and those focussed on environmental impacts. Furthermore, it would create a new and constructive narrative - one that sidesteps the “dams/no dams” that currently persists. Thus, we urge you to also examine this opportunity as part of the overall considerations regarding the management of the Burdekin Basin.



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

cc. Hon. Scott Stewart (MP Townsville)
Chris Pam (President NQCC)
Crystal Falknau (Coordinator NQCC)