

Email: admin@whitsundayconservation.org.auwww.whitsundayconservation.org.au**24 June 2021****Submission on the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021 (Bill)**

Attention: Committee Secretary
Health and Environment Committee

Dear Secretary and Members of the Health and Environment Committee

On behalf of the Whitsunday Conservation Council (WCC), please accept this submission regarding the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021 (Bill)

The WCC is a Whitsunday based umbrella organisation associated with and supporting a large number of Whitsunday based conservation groups.

WCC would strongly urge the committee not to approve the new Bill which attempts to downgrade regulations that are helping in the vital push to improve water quality running off from agricultural lands into our Great Barrier Reef.

Good quality water is critical for our Great Barrier Reef's health. Urgent and rapid compliance with the Reef protection regulation is required to give the inshore ecosystems of our Reef the quality of water it needs to survive, sustain its Outstanding Universal Value and build resilience to warming waters.

The Whitsunday region is a major tourist destination. Over 40% of all Great Barrier Reef visitors pass through the Whitsundays. The near shore Whitsunday Islands, including the internationally famous Whitehaven Beach, make the region unique. Health of the island reef system is paramount to the ongoing success of the local tourism industry.

Unfortunately, the islands are more prone to land-sourced pollution than destinations further offshore. Historically, poor water quality has been a serious problem for the Whitsundays and has seen little, if any improvement in the past 20 years.

The overwhelming scientific consensus on the detrimental impacts of poor water quality of GBR is settled. This fact is reflected in numerous plans to protect the Reef, most of which have bipartisan political support.

WCC consider that management of the GBR is one of the best national and international examples of science-informed, evidence-based adaptive management enhanced by regular and public reporting.

WCC believes there is ample evidence based on good, quality assured, regularly reviewed and updated science to show that there is an urgent need to minimise the impacts of land-sourced pollution, and that the agricultural industries in the GBR catchments all need to be part of this solution.

Furthermore, there is strong evidence linking the impacts of farm water runoff on the health of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) and adjacent catchment areas. The *2017 Scientific Consensus Statement, Land Use Impacts on Great Barrier Reef Water Quality and Ecosystem Condition* provides the most comprehensive, consolidated analysis and synthesis of the evidence linking the impacts of water runoff from both agricultural and urban–industrial land uses.

Chapter 6 of the *2019 Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report* prepared by GBRMPA provides a good overview of why the increased pollutant loads from land-based run-off are affecting the GBR, and reef-dependent industries.

In Recommendation 5 of their 2016 report, the GBR Water Science Taskforce states clearly the case for regulation, as noted in the following quote “...to be an important part of the mix of policy instruments to accelerate progress towards meeting the Reef water quality targets. Across many sectors in society there is a consistent pattern that voluntary practices either by industry or individuals need to be underpinned by adequate regulation to bring about changes in behaviour or improved management outcomes.”

The Australian and Queensland governments have committed a significant amount of funding towards improving water quality for the Great Barrier Reef. Important progress has been made, including with adoption of voluntary initiatives, however the GBR Report Cards show that the load reductions are not on track to achieve the 2025 targets.

It is clear now that the 2025 water quality targets will not be met by relying solely on voluntary adoption of best management practices. The *2019 GBR Report Card* shows that, after more than a decade of investment, 36.2% of grazing land and 12.7% for sugarcane is using best management practice systems— both of these land uses have a target of 90% of land at best management practice systems by 2025.

It's clear from this rate of adoption, that there are graziers and canegrowers who have made a business decision NOT to participate in government and industry programs to support adoption of best management practices. So, whilst many farmers are participating and making a difference, others are not. Those NOT participating are essentially free-riders that are undermining the effort and investment made by their peers.

This is the primary reason that WCC has strongly supported effective regulations, as the key missing piece in government policy, to help get practice change on track to achieve the water quality targets. Effective regulations along with long-standing government and industry investment supporting adoption of best management practices, provides the right policy and investment mix to achieve the 2025 water quality targets.

A final point worth noting, given the recent draft decision by UNESCO to list the Great Barrier Reef as “in danger”, Australia has a responsibility to work harder to ensure the future health of the Reef. In their report, UNESCO noted that *“the draft decision concluded that, despite many positive achievements by the Australian Government, progress has been insufficient in meeting key targets of the Reef 2050 Plan. The Plan requires stronger and clearer commitments, in particular towards urgently countering the effects of climate change, but also towards **accelerating water quality improvement and land management measures.**”*

WCC strongly urge the committee to refuse this “Reversal Bill” to help safeguard the future of our Reef and to recommend improvements to ensure the achievement of the 2025 water quality targets.



WHITSUNDAY CONSERVATION COUNCIL

per

Faye C. Chapman

Secretary

The Whitsunday Conservation Council acknowledges the Ngaro, Gia, Juru and Birri People, the Traditional Custodians of the land and seas upon which we meet to conduct our activities. We pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.



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Caring for the future is in our nature