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The Committee Secretary  
Health and Environment Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Parliamentary Secretary

**Re: Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021**

I refer to the Parliamentary Committee's Inquiry into the abovementioned Bill, which was introduced into the Queensland Parliament in April 2021 by the Member for Hinchinbrook, Nick Dametto MP.

The Burdekin Shire Council wishes to express its support for the Bill, as it believes the measures introduced by amendments made to the *Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2019* in 2019 place too large a burden on the operations of agricultural enterprises operating within the Great Barrier Reef river catchments.

Burdekin Shire is located within the Dry Tropics region of North Queensland, with the principal town of Ayr being situated approximately 80 kilometres south of Townsville. With an estimated resident population of approximately 17,000 and a total land area of approximately 5000 square kilometres, agriculture is the predominant economic activity in the Shire. This is due to the fertile soils and abundant water supply from the Burdekin River and Burdekin Falls dam along with a massive underground aquifer that is recharged from the river systems.

The Council is a proud Reef Guardian Council that supports the principle of protection of the Great Barrier Reef and the natural environment. It undertakes many initiatives designed to protect the reef and works in partnership with other organisations to deliver positive environmental outcomes. It is also investigating innovative solutions to the enhanced treatment of waste water from its waste water treatment plants in an environmentally sustainable way.

Some of the measures introduced with the 2019 amendments to the *Environment Protection Act 1994* and the *Chemical Usage (Agricultural and Veterinary) Control Act 1988*, included significantly increased penalty provisions, a reduced threshold for farming activities to be captured within the definition of an agricultural environmentally relevant activity (ERA) and a substantially increased regulatory burden for farmers to be able to undertake normal farming activities.

This is of concern to Council as the Burdekin Shire economy is heavily dependent on agricultural activity, with approximately 41% of the workforce being employed in the industry categories of Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry; and Manufacturing as at 30 June 2020. These figures are based on modelling by the *National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR)*. The Manufacturing category is significant in that it captures employment from the four sugar mills located within the Shire.

The Gross Regional Product of the Burdekin Shire was estimated to be \$1.23 Billion for the year ending 30 June 2020, with the categories of Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry; and Food Product Manufacturing contributing over 44% of the total value added by industry sector.

The Council has recently adopted a new Economic Development strategy for the shire *Outlook 2025: Burdekin Economic Development Strategy 2020-25 - A Framework for Promoting Prosperity*. The strategy recognises 'that the Burdekin's future prosperity will be underpinned by innovation and value-creation in the region's traditional industry driver of sugar production and processing....'.

Indeed, one of the three key themes in the strategy is *A Smart and Innovative Agriculture District*, with valuing adding through the production of new crops, establishment of food and food product manufacturing, development of new opportunities in bio-futures and support of complementary agri-business services being central to the Burdekin's future success.

It is understood the measures that are being introduced as part of the existing regulatory framework will require farmers to substantially reduce their rates of application of nitrogen and phosphorus as part of the regulation of the Six Easy Steps program. Industry sources advise this program was not developed in the Burdekin region and based on assumptions that do not apply to our subsoil types and sub-catchment water quality.

The application of these requirements, which are not tailored to the Burdekin's specific characteristics, are of significant concern as they have the potential to make farming in the Burdekin unprofitable due to the reduction in yield from crops such as sugar cane. The flow on effects would be substantial, particularly to the sugar milling and associated support industries, along with the broader community that is reliant on the economic contribution made by agriculture to the shire. If these industries fail, the consequences for the future of the Burdekin Shire would be dire.

A rethink of the current broad-brush approach with its heavy reliance on regulatory intervention and control is required. A partnership approach should be developed with the industry that focuses on the specific characteristics of each of the river catchment and sub-catchments that discharge to the Great Barrier Reef in order to find tailored solutions to the issues trying to be addressed through the current approach.

The Council supports the Bill as a first step in trying to come up with a fresh approach based on a partnership with the agricultural industries that operate within the Great Barrier Reef river catchments.

Yours faithfully



Terry Brennan  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**