

SUBMISSION TO HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

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

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SUBMISSION DUE DATE: 30th June 2021 at 5-00pm

Cape York Peninsula, one of the Reef catchments affected by the introduction of the Reef Regulations, *Environmentally relevant activity standard, Commercial cropping and horticulture in the Great Barrier Reef catchment (prescribed ERA 13A)* has two small agricultural areas. Numerous small land parcels growing a variety of horticultural crops in the Endeavour River catchment and Lakeland having 1,300⁴ hectares of irrigated bananas, water melons, passionfruit, pawpaw's and approximately 1,000 hectare of dryland crops located in the upper reaches of the Normanby River catchment.

Cape York was exempted from the minimum standards regulation introduced into the other five reef catchment because "The catchment is already meeting its sediment and particulate nutrient reduction targets through voluntary action".² Growers and grazing enterprises are extremely grateful to the Government for providing us with the minimum standards regulation exemption and felt this was an opening for us to work proactively with the Government to maintain our current zero level of sediment and nutrient levels without the need for further regulation.

It was a bitter disappointment to the community when Cape York was included in the *Environmentally relevant activity standard, Commercial cropping and horticulture in the Great Barrier Reef catchment (prescribed ERA 13A)* regulations introduced on 1 June 2021. It is for this reason that we are supporting the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021.

Lakeland producers understand that we farm in an environmentally sensitive part of the world and that we have a responsibility to continually update and improve our farming practices when new technology and management practices such as the Paddock to Reef best management practices and the Freshcare Environmental Scheme became available. We have a vested interest in maintaining soil health and minimising farm nutrient losses so we are at the forefront when it comes to improving our farming practices. As a result of this innovation Cape York water quality targets for particulate nutrients, sediment and pesticides have been met and continue to be maintained^{1,2}.

¹ Reef Water Quality Report Card 2017-18 & 2018-19

² Enoch, L (Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts) (2019). *Palaszczuk Government makes further commitments about Reef regulations* [media release]. 17 September.

Some of the projects and managements practices undertaken by growers and graziers in the Lakeland region in an effort to reduce our impact on sediment and nutrient entering our waterways include:

- Road gravelling to prevent sediment runoff in wet season.
- Mulching avocado trees and bananas for water retention.
- Trialling drip tape in bananas instead of sprinklers in an effort to reduce water usage and runoff.
- Stock paddock rotation to ensure year round grass covering.
- Reducing waste by feeding discarded bananas to cattle.
- Baling hay after wet season to feed back during the dry.
- Water quality monitoring of water used for irrigation to check water is of a suitable quality for the growing of crops.
- Fallow paddocks sown with manure crops during wet so bare paddocks do not increase sediment runoff.
- Electrical conductivity soil testing
- Pest & weed control
- Compost applications to help reduce chemical fertiliser input on farm
- Automated irrigations and fertigation programs
- KP sampling on wet season run off

We believe that lasting change is better achieved through behavioural modification bought about by education, extension and support rather than unproductive bureaucracy and penalties underpinning regulation. This is why several members of the Lakeland community made detailed submissions to the Office of the Great Barrier Reef on the Draft Environmentally relevant activity standard for Commercial cropping and horticulture in the Great Barrier Reef catchment (prescribed ERA 13A) requesting that Cape York be exempt from these. In return the local growers and graziers were prepared to work with their local NRM Board and the Department of Environment and Science to undertake localised water quality testing closer to farm to ensure that existing and future agricultural developments maintain sediment and particulate nitrogen levels below the required target level.

Lakeland producers have continually demonstrated a vested interest in water quality outcomes by participating in farm water run-off monitoring³ but would like to extend this in an effort to meet the recommendations re the lack of water quality data in Cape York noted in the *2017 Scientific Consensus Statement*.

Potential expansion of new commercial cropping activities within the wider Cape York region would be minimal given the limited Category X areas and the current Vegetation Management regulations. Expansion within the Lakeland agricultural area is also limited as there is no significant water allocation available to producers to support any substantial expansion which may produce additional water quality risks⁴.

³ Cape York NRM. (2017). 'Lakeland farms lead water quality monitoring', *Healthy Country Newsletter no. 31*, July 2017.

⁴ SMEC International. (2019). *Strategic Business Case Technical Feasibility Report for Preferred Option – Lakeland Irrigation Area Project*. Regional Development Australia Far North Queensland. 27 February.

Interested Lakeland community members have held two recent meetings with local NRM members to discuss the implementation of increased water quality testing in the Lakeland agricultural area and other potential projects. One example is the breeding and introduction of predatory insects for red spider mite and aphids that may reduce the reliance on insecticides. We are extremely eager to progress a working relationship with Government Departments that mutually benefits both sectors, however the introduction of the current Reef Regulations has left us feeling that good management, a willingness to collaborate with Government Departments and actually meeting the required targets is not recognised or acknowledged.

We believe agricultural industries in other catchments will follow if we set the example and are rewarded. Further we would like to take this opportunity to extend an invitation to the Minister to visit Lakeland to see and hear our story.