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To: The Research Director

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Submission to Land Tenure Inquiry

<http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/committees/SDIIC/inquiries/current-inquiries/01-Government-land-tenure>

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our views to the Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry on land tenure issues in Queensland.

Mackay Conservation Group (MCG) is a regional environment non-government organisation covering north Central Queensland. Our primary objective is biodiversity conservation and protection. To that end we also do submissions on coastal developments and mining and port projects. We also engage with landowners and organise biodiversity monitoring in our region.

Protected Areas are too small in area to risk unsupervised and poorly managed access in northern Central Queensland

As the extent of mining and associated development has increased enormously over the past decade we are increasingly conscious of the need to protect areas of high conservation significance in our region. In our region to date less than two per cent of the Brigalow Belt and Desert Uplands Bioregions are in the National Reserve System of Protected Areas. Most of that protected area is in National Parks.

That area is too small and QPWS staffing too low to consider commercially-oriented accommodation facilities and other recreational activities such as horse riding and motorised vehicle uses within National Parks.

Where public access is easy and largely unmonitored by authorities we find ongoing damage from public access from motorbikes and 4WDs in our region especially in

Eungella. State staffing is too small to manage such damage. We believe that coordinated efforts to provide private lands of low conservation value for such recreational uses is a much better approach to long-term management of the Queensland estate than unsupervised access to National Parks, which will never have the qualified staff needed to supervise such activities.

Ecotourism in the Protected Estate Areas

While there is a place for low impact ecotourism businesses in Queensland provided there is a stringent accreditation process for such businesses, the appropriate place for such endeavours is not in areas of high conservation significance, especially where flora and fauna are especially vulnerable to disturbance.

Past attempts to establish ecotourism businesses within areas of high conservation in Queensland have usually failed, and the reasons for that need to be well understood and researched before risking more investment in them. Such ventures need to be justified economically and scientifically to avoid irreversible damage to biodiversity values.

While the public should be educated in the priceless natural values of the unique natural values of Queensland's National Parks, access must be well managed. With only six per cent of the State in protected areas, much of the remaining 94 per cent remains in which to develop ecotourism and other forms of recreational developments and this should be the first option for consideration of many forms of such development, before impacting what is in reality a very small area set aside for conservation.

The world standard for protected areas is 17 per cent and as long as Queensland's protected areas fall well short of that most forms of tourism development should sit outside the borders of areas of high conservation value. There are ample opportunities to establish tourism ventures adjacent to National Parks and other areas of conservation values. Such opportunities should be researched, described and made available to entrepreneurs seeking tourism development ventures as a first option before the State considers impacting areas of high conservation values.

Value of Protected Areas

There have been calls for the national protected estate to "pay its way." It already does this in the ecosystem services it provides as well as biodiversity protection. Much of the future values of flora and fauna to humans remain yet to be discovered. Areas of high conservation value such as National Parks, Nature Refuges and other Conservation Areas.

A program for quantifying the values of such ecosystem services is needed to understand the value of these services to the Queensland and national estate, and to avoid financial losses from inappropriate development or access to areas of high conservation values. The State government bears the primary "duty of care" responsibility to maintain and improve these ecosystems services.

Protecting Nature Refuges

We have particular concerns about protection of Nature Refuges, which are recognised areas of high conservation value in private properties. Landowners put

considerable investment into conservation of such areas and the value of this to the national system of protected areas needs to be formally recognised and protected if this private investment in public good assets is to continue. These areas occupy only a small area of Queensland and represent a considerable private investment in national assets. While they remain vulnerable to mining there is no incentive for private investment in them, either for expansion or ongoing maintenance. Such landowners are looking for security for their investment and deserve it. With such certainty they can proceed provide ecotourism options. Without that certainty such investment is very risky given the extent of coal and petroleum mining exploration permits in Queensland. These permits now cover more than 80 per cent of our region. The conflict needs to be resolved to protect investment.

The value of minerals is only looked at short-term i.e. the royalties that the State derives from mining. The long-term values of protecting areas of high conservation values from mining are not being accounted for when considering mining projects. It is causing a decline in biodiversity values, especially in our region where so little land is protected in National Parks.

The State has also committed to protection of nature refuges through signing the International Convention on Biological Diversity. Under this Convention mining is not recommended in properties meeting the IUCN Class I-IV levels of conservation values. The anomaly of allowing mining in such Nature Refuges needs to be resolved if landholder investment in conservation is to continue.

Honour existing Land Use Agreements

Two agreements have been developed through negotiations between government, industry and conservationists, the Delbessie Agreement and the State Forest Agreement.

The Delbessie Agreement-negotiated with Agforce- provides for the maintenance of good condition of pastoral leases through incentives for longer lease arrangements. The agreement also provides for identification of future National Park and 'biodiversity hot spots'.

The State Forest Agreements-negotiated with Timber Queensland provide for a transition of timber harvesting from state forest to plantation. This is a more reliable and cost effective option for industry, whilst supporting the conservation of higher value conservation lands.

Transfer of leasehold to freehold

The fact that over 60% of Queensland is crown leasehold land is a considerable advantage to the State. It allows the state to provide opportunities to graziers whilst ensuring the opportunity remains to improve the condition of the estate, particularly through arrangements such as the Delbessie Agreement.

A large transfer of leasehold to freehold land opens up the distinct possibility that such lands will be bought for mining or foreign-owned agricultural operations. As water supplies become more in demand and dwindle as mining expands there is a strong drive by mining companies to purchase lands with agricultural and grazing

water entitlements. The mining industry has a very poor record of sustainable rehabilitation of mined areas.

If there is widespread transfer of leasehold to freehold there will be more foreign ownership, more lands mined, and greater loss of biodiversity values. We already see this with mining operations in the region where the same fauna and flora species are adversely affected across the landscapes of our region. The inevitable result will be many of these species will become listed as threatened and threatened species will disappear. Leasehold land remains in government hands and the government retains greater control over management actions on those lands.

Sincerely,
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