

Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority Bill 2026

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Opening Statement

The Sunshine Coast's rivers, estuaries and coastal entrances are living systems that support navigation, recreation, tourism, local livelihoods and ecological health.

The proposal to establish a Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority (SCWA) presents an opportunity to address long-standing fragmentation in governance and improve the coordinated management of these waterways.

My comments focus on ensuring the new authority combines scientific expertise, local knowledge, transparency and environmental stewardship.

1. Value of a Dedicated Waterways Authority

A single authority with a clear remit for regional waterways has the potential to improve:

- coordination of dredging and sand management
- navigational safety
- long-term planning
- accountability for infrastructure and maintenance

Historically, fragmented responsibilities between agencies have made proactive management difficult. A dedicated authority could improve outcomes if responsibilities are clearly defined and operational coordination is strengthened.

2. Importance of Local Knowledge

Waterways behave dynamically and local users often hold deep practical knowledge of these systems.

The authority should ensure structured consultation with:

- local boating and fishing communities
- surf lifesaving clubs
- tourism operators
- environmental groups
- Traditional Custodians

Formal advisory panels or structured consultation forums could help integrate this knowledge into decision-making.

People who interact with these waterways daily often observe patterns and risks that may not always be captured in modelling alone.

3. Transparent Decision-Making

Strong transparency measures will be essential for building public trust in the authority.

These could include:

- publication of dredging and sediment management plans
- clear reporting of environmental impacts
- public access to scientific assessments where possible

- regular community engagement forums

Providing access to non-sensitive monitoring data and assessments allows community knowledge to complement scientific analysis and encourages informed participation.

4. Environmental Stewardship

Sunshine Coast waterways support sensitive ecosystems including estuaries, seagrass beds and coastal habitats.

Management strategies should:

- prioritise ecosystem health alongside navigation safety
- incorporate long-term sediment movement modelling
- ensure dredging decisions consider cumulative environmental impacts

Healthy waterways are fundamental to both the ecological integrity and economic wellbeing of the region.

5. Adaptive Management and Monitoring

Waterway systems change continuously due to storms, river flows, tides and coastal processes.

The authority should adopt an adaptive management approach, supported by ongoing monitoring of:

- sediment movement
- river and tidal dynamics
- navigation risks
- environmental indicators

Regular review cycles will allow strategies to evolve in response to real conditions rather than relying solely on static management plans.

6. Long-Term Strategic Planning

Many waterway management decisions historically have been reactive.

The new authority provides an opportunity to implement long-term strategic planning that looks beyond immediate dredging needs and considers the evolution of these systems over decades.

Planning frameworks should consider 20–30 year horizons for:

- sediment management
- navigation infrastructure
- environmental protection
- climate and coastal change impacts

7. Clarity of Responsibilities

To avoid duplication or confusion, the operational relationship between the Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority, Maritime Safety Queensland, local councils and other agencies should be clearly defined.

Clear responsibilities and coordination mechanisms will ensure the authority simplifies governance rather than adding unnecessary administrative complexity.

Closing

The establishment of the Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority has the potential to become a constructive step toward more integrated and responsible management of the region's waterways.

Its success will depend on maintaining a strong connection between science, local knowledge, community input and transparent governance.

If these elements are embedded from the beginning, the authority could significantly strengthen both the safety and ecological health of Sunshine Coast waterways for the long term.

Marita Thornton

