

Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority Bill 2026

Submission No: 035

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The Chair
State Development, Infrastructure and Works Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane QLD 4000

Submission – Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority Bill 2026

Dear Chair,

I strongly support the establishment of a dedicated Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority (SCWA) to provide coordinated, long-term management of this unique and highly valued system, and I thank the government for taking action to create the SCWA.

I write as a fourth-generation Caloundra local with a deep personal and professional connection to the Pumicestone Passage and surrounding Sunshine Coast waterways. My family has lived and worked on the waters of Caloundra since 1922 as part of a commercial fishing tradition.

My grandfather, Lloyd Clarke, was a professional fisherman who taught me to swim in, handle boats on, fish in, and look after Caloundra's beautiful waterways.

In the 1930s and 1940s—before the establishment of Caloundra's Surf Lifesaving and Coast Guard services—local fishermen were regularly called upon to row out and rescue people in trouble, often in terrible conditions and at great personal risk. My grandfather was involved in more than 50 such rescues and was awarded a Bravery Commendation by the King for one of these acts. Sadly, some of these incidents involved retrieving people who had drowned, experiences that deeply affected him throughout his life.

His experience underscores the ongoing and long overdue importance of stabilising the Caloundra Bar and Bribie Island. My grandfather remained actively involved in community efforts from the 1960s onward to address safety of the Bar, the erosion of the island, and the impacts on our waterway—issues that remain highly relevant today.

Following his lead and guided by his wisdom, I am now the volunteer spokesperson for the Pumicestone Passage Catchment Management Body – a volunteer community association from Caloundra focused on protecting and restoring our barrier island, Bribie, and our waterway, the Pumicestone Passage.

I also operate a local medical practice caring for thousands of people in the Caloundra community, and I am an experienced recreational boat skipper who regularly navigates the Passage and the bar.

Through these connections, I have become actively involved in understanding the erosion issues affecting the area and advocating for evidence-based action and proactive management of our Sunshine Coast waterways.

1. North Bribie Island Erosion – A Case for Active Management

The erosion and breakthrough events at the northern end of Bribie Island since 2022 clearly demonstrate the consequences of failing to undertake active, common-sense management. These events were predicted by both the community and scientific experts for decades, yet those warnings largely went unaddressed—due to disagreement over appropriate interventions, concerns about cost, and, in more recent decades, increasingly restrictive environmental policies that discouraged intervention in what were considered “natural” coastal processes.

However, this well-intentioned caution failed to recognise two critical realities: the significant human influences contributing to the erosion, and the very real consequences of losing the barrier island itself. Bribie Island has long provided fundamental protection to the communities built behind it, while the Pumicestone Passage is a rare double-ended estuary—one of only a few of its kind globally. Together, they form an interconnected system of exceptional environmental, economic and social value.

The result of inaction has been far-reaching. The erosion and breakthrough have impacted not only navigation and bar safety but have also exposed nearby communities to increased risks from storm surge and flooding following the loss of the island’s protective function and the changed location and width of the bar. These impacts have extended to the ecological health of the Passage, the resilience of the local economy, and the long-term amenity of the community, threatening billions of dollars of economic impact if left unchecked.

Active management offers a pathway to balance navigation, amenity, economic and environmental values, ensuring the long-term resilience of this unique and highly valued waterway.

2. Governance and Community Confidence

For the SCWA to succeed, it must have the trust and confidence of the community. This requires a governance model that is transparent, independent and based on expertise.

Board appointments should not rely solely on the Minister but instead be seen to clearly follow a process that ensures a balanced mix of qualified experts and stakeholders, while minimising the perception of short-term political influence. Consideration should also be given to including ex officio members, particularly the Mayor of the Sunshine Coast, given the direct local impacts and responsibilities.

In addition, I believe the Chief Executive Officer should be appointed by the Board, with approval from the Minister, reinforcing accountability and good governance, which leads to widespread community confidence and trust.

3. Balanced Management of Waterway Values

The SCWA must maintain an appropriate balance between competing priorities. While navigation and economic development are important, they must not override environmental considerations.

Given the proposed positioning of the SCWA within the transport portfolio, there is an inherent risk that decision-making may be weighted toward navigational outcomes and waterways transport infrastructure.

It is therefore essential that this structural bias is consciously balanced through governance, strategy and legislative safeguards that ensure equal consideration is given to environmental protection, community interests and the long-term health of the system.

One way to achieve this is to embed within the legislation a clear requirement that environmental outcomes are co-equal objectives of the Authority, alongside navigation and economic activity.

This should be reinforced through governance arrangements and reporting frameworks, including the adoption of clear, measurable and publicly reported environmental performance targets.

The establishment of a Scientific Advisory Committee would also play a critical role in ensuring that decisions are grounded in evidence, helping to balance competing priorities, reduce regulatory risk, and support more effective long-term management.

The waterways of the Sunshine Coast are complex, interconnected systems. Effective management must recognise their ecological significance alongside their social and economic roles, ensuring that environmental sustainability remains central to decision-making.

4. Managing a Diverse and Complex Waterway System

The proposed SCWA covers a broad geographic area encompassing multiple, highly diverse waterways, including river systems, estuaries and the unique barrier island environment of the Pumicestone Passage. Each of these systems has distinct physical characteristics, environmental pressures and management needs.

There is a risk that a single, centralised authority may struggle to adequately respond to this diversity, potentially leading to overly generalised approaches that do not reflect local conditions or priorities.

To address this, the SCWA should adopt a structure and operating model that allows for waterway-specific planning and management, supported by local input. This could include the development of tailored management plans for each major waterway, supported by dedicated advisory or reference groups that draw on local knowledge, stakeholder experience and scientific expertise.

Such an approach would enable the Authority to retain the benefits of coordination and scale, while ensuring that management remains responsive, place-based and effective across the full diversity of the Sunshine Coast waterways.

5. Resourcing and Authority

To be effective, the SCWA must be adequately resourced and empowered. It requires not only the authority to cut through fragmented responsibilities across government agencies and legislative frameworks to deliver timely and coordinated outcomes, but also the financial and other resources required to deliver on its mission.

6. Maintaining Momentum at Bribie Island

It is critical that the progress made through the emergency works at northern Bribie Island is not lost amongst the competing needs of the other waterways under the SCWA. These works have created important momentum, but they must be followed through with urgency.

A long-term solution—focused on restoring the barrier function of Bribie Island and stabilising the bar through appropriate engineering interventions—should remain a priority. These measures are essential to protecting the Caloundra community, restoring natural system function, and securing the long-term health of the Pumicestone Passage.

Conclusion

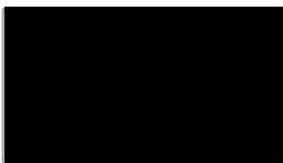
The establishment of the SCWA represents an important opportunity to deliver coordinated, proactive and science-based management of the Sunshine Coast's waterways. With the right governance, balance, resourcing and commitment to action, it can deliver lasting environmental, social and economic benefits for the region.

Summary of Key Recommendations

1. Establish governance arrangements that ensure independent, transparent and merit-based board appointments, including ex officio representation (e.g. Sunshine Coast Mayor), and CEO appointment by the Board.
2. Embed in legislation that environmental outcomes are co-equal objectives alongside navigation and economic activity.
3. Adopt clear, measurable and publicly reported environmental performance targets.
4. Establish a Scientific Advisory Committee to support evidence-based decision-making.
5. Ensure the Authority is adequately resourced and empowered to act across agencies.
6. Implement waterway-specific planning frameworks and local advisory mechanisms to address the diversity of the region's waterways.
7. Maintain urgency in delivering the long-term solution for Bribie Island, including restoring the barrier island function and stabilising the bar.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission and I look forward to the long-anticipated establishment of an effective Waterways Authority for the Sunshine Coast

Yours sincerely,



Jen Kettleton-Butler

