



Committee Secretary
House Standing Committee on Economics
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Date: 16th February 2011

Fax: 02 6277 4774

Re: Inquiry into issues affecting Indigenous economic development in Queensland

Dear Secretary,

Queensland Conservation Council (QCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide the following comments in regard to the above mentioned inquiry.

Introduction

Established in 1969, Queensland Conservation [QCC] is the state's peak environmental organisation that represents the interests of 70 member groups located throughout the state. In collaboration with our member's, QCC's purpose is to raise public awareness about environmental issues and lobby government to improve environmental outcomes and natural resource management across the state.

QCC was one of the key environment groups involved in the initial development of the Wild Rivers policy framework. Since the Acts introduction, QCC has actively supported the State Governments nomination and declaration of Queensland river systems under the Wild Rivers Act.

On behalf of our member and aligned groups, we call on the inquiry to reject the opposition leaders Bill support the Wild Rivers Act and for the following reasons:

- The Wild Rivers Act is vital for ensuring that Queensland's free-flowing rivers are protected for future generations. Without this legislation in place, the states remaining Wild Rivers would be subjected to the same degradation that has occurred to other river systems. This is due to other State and Commonwealth legislative frameworks being unable to provide the level of legislation protection that is needed to maintain river systems in their natural condition
- The Queensland Wild Rivers legislation does not stop development, but instead regulates what types of development can occur in riverine buffer areas. This means that development such as strip-mining intensive industry and irrigation must be setback from nominated watercourses to ensure that Wild River values are protected
- The economic impacts of the Wild Rivers Act have been grossly overstated, it does not stop economic development or limit peoples access to declared Wild Rivers areas - it is merely a planning tool used to regulate the type of development that can occur in Wild River areas to ensure the environmental values of nominated waterways are protected
- The mining industry and not indigenous communities would be the major beneficiaries of the Queensland Wild Rivers legislation being rescinded. This is because mining companies stand to make substantial profits from being allowed to extract minerals within current and future Wild Rivers areas – such as bauxite mining adjacent to the Wenlock River on Cape York
- The Bill is a cynical bid to remove a moderate environmental protection framework under the guise of Indigenous economic advancement. As mentioned above, mining companies stand to make substantial profits from extracting minerals in Wild River areas. Profits generated from mining will mostly go off shore and not to Indigenous communities
- In effect, the Bill seeks to establish a process that would give some Indigenous groups power of veto over certain proposed actions. This is unprecedented in Australia law, particularly given the Wild Rivers Act is a planning scheme and does not in any way impact on native title or tenure.
- It appears the decision seeking to apply this power of veto to the Queensland's Wild Rivers legislation is political motivated. If the Australian Parliament is serious about applying this principle, it should look towards reforming the Native Title Act and not aim to achieve this outcome by forcing the reform of state environmental protection legislation – in this case the Queensland Wild Rivers Act

- Protecting Queensland's remaining free-flowing rivers for future generations under the Wild Rivers legislation is fully supported by state, national and international environmental organisations. In addition, protecting river systems under the Wild Rivers Act has been an election committee of the Queensland Labor Party since 2004. Labor having governed continually since 2004 should be seen as Queensland voters endorsement of the intent and purpose of the Wild Rivers Act.
- As the Inquiry is examining how the Wild Rivers Act affects Indigenous economic development, the Committee should note that many Cape York Indigenous communities support the Wild Rivers framework due to the long term and sustainable economic benefit that will be provided to them from maintaining river systems in their natural condition

Concluding comments

Any Commonwealth intervention into Queensland's Wild Rivers legislation is likely to set a dangerous precedent the may expose future Governments to possible litigation from aggrieved parties.

On behalf of our member groups, we strongly urge the Committee to reject the Bill outright due to the above mentioned reasons and the obvious political nature that has motivated the Bills introduction.

Regards,



Toby Hutcheon
Executive Director
Queensland Conservation Council