

Following a series of meetings with government officials and department officers explaining the workings and ramifications of the proposed Wild Rivers legislation, designed to protect the integrity of river systems throughout Cape York, the wider community of the region became increasingly concerned about how their businesses, the communities and the region as a whole would survive and prosper under this new regime.

The general feeling was that while most people from outside the region were of the belief that tourism was the panacea for all development activity, community growth and future job creation on Cape York this was definitely not the case and residents of the region wanted the same opportunities afforded the rest of the country.

They saw the implementation of the Wild Rivers legislation and more particularly the codes that govern them as a huge impediment and deterrent to any future orderly development on Cape York. To this end a series of meetings were held prior to the declaration of the first tranche of rivers in the northern gulf region to get some sanity and workability into Wild River Codes.

The first meeting was held in Georgetown in March 2006 and was attended by Mayors, CEOs, pastoralists, traditional owners and other interested parties to workshop the codes.

In June 2006 a deputation to Brisbane was organized to hold urgent talks with the Minister for Natural Resources Henry Palaszczuk. The deputation consisted of the mayors and CEOs from Cook, Mareeba, Carpentaria, Etheridge, Croydon and Burke and the President of the LGAQ.

The State Government had announced that the Wild River Codes would be adopted by Parliament at the next sitting in July, some four weeks away.

The reason for the urgency was that no one within the Natural Resources Department or the Wild Rivers implementation team would listen to community concerns.

The deputation to the Minister highlighted a number of anomalies with the Codes that would make them unworkable. Among them were,

- A restriction on clearing in excess on 1 meter around any infrastructure within the preservation zone. (Which meant fence lines, watering points, outbuildings etc would be unworkable)
- A restriction on fertilizers of any kind within the preservation zone. (Which meant on cattle licks could be used)
- An embargo on the taking of sand and gravel from river crossings for the repair and stabilization of rural roads. (Which virtually meant that rural roads could not be repaired)

The above is a small sample of the concerns voiced by the delegation.

The minister (who previously had the DPI portfolio, was from the land and had a good knowledge of how things worked in remote rural Queensland) was alarmed by the issues raised and ordered Wild River implementation officials who were at the meeting to go back to the drawing board and redraft the codes into a workable form and liaise with members of the delegation.

That reworking took almost twelve months and although most people in the affected area (Northern Gulf) were opposed to the Wild Rivers legislation, with the codes refined they could live with it.

The above highlights the major concerns that Cape York and Gulf communities have with the Wild Rivers legislation and its implementation.

- It was rushed and poorly drafted.
- Communication was nonexistent
- What communication there was consisted of government people trying to sell the unsellable with no thought to how the legislation would affect the people of the region
- At no time did any government official take into account any objection, concern or protest about the legislation
- The so called consultation consisted of this is what we are going to do and you can like it or lump it.
- The aspirations of traditional owners, pastoralists, local governments and the community in general was ignored

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Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Inquiry: WILD RIVERS

Tabled Document

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Date: 13 APRIL 2015

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13 APRIL 2015