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Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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**Re: Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment
(Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012**

I write on behalf of North Queensland Conservation Council in support of the above-mentioned Bill.

As the NGO speaking for the environment in north Queensland, NQCC is aware of the problems that can and do arise when attempts are made to incorporate national or even international environmental impacts into decisions relating to local, short-term economic needs with. These problems relate to access to necessary, detailed data; staffing to undertake the level of analysis required; and moral hazard (the tendency to take risks because the costs that might incur would not be felt by the risk-taker).

This latter risk is exacerbated by the ready availability of monetary returns from local investment compared with the generally non-localised and non-monetary nature of long-term and far-reaching environmental benefits. The 'tragedy of the commons' works against the public good.

Overall, it is unrealistic to expect those without responsibility for matters of national significance to take sufficient account of them when making decisions relating to statewide issues, as the benefits arising cannot be captured. An equivalent would be asking the states to take responsibility for international trade negotiations that are not in (or are even against) their regional interests.

In Queensland, we have many examples of environmental decision that reflect local or regional rather than national (or even international) considerations – of which the approval of the Alpha coal mine by the State is but one recent one. With the current State government openly intent on the development of four selected sectors (resources, construction, agriculture and tourism), the base for these sectors on which their strength depends, the environment, is invariably overlooked.

Examples of the overwhelming emphasis in Queensland on matters economic rather than matters environmental include, *inter alia*:

- The passing of the *Economic Development Bill 2012* that, according to the State government, was designed to enable the state government to fast-track economic development for the benefit of Queensland, including, *inter alia*:
 - amending the *State Development and Public Works Organisation Act* to clarify and improve the powers of the Coordinator-General in order to fast track projects, better reflect government priorities [resources,

construction, agriculture and tourism] and streamline the assessment of environmental impact statements and short term leases in State Development Areas.

- The approach of the Queensland government with respect to the development in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Despite UNESCO warning the Federal government that coastal development within the GBRWHA was out of control and that, unless this development was reined in, there was a strong possibility that the GBRWHA would be placed on the 'in danger' list, Queensland has done nothing to constrain development. It has lauded plans to increase the number of export terminals for the ever-growing number of mines it is backing in the hinterland, with statements such as:
 - 'We are in the business of coal' (comment by Premier Newman on the release of the UNESCO report into the state of the GBRWHA)
 - "Many of these projects [the subject of the Coordinator-General's decisions] have stemmed from rising world demand for Queensland's natural resources, most notably coal and coal seam gas.) Mr Broe's efficiency in delivering outcomes for Queensland is testament to the State Government's determination to grow a four pillar economy focusing on tourism, agriculture, resources and construction." (DSPIP Media Release celebrating the 100th decision by the Coordinator-General – a powerful public service position with the role of facilitating and regulating private-sector infrastructure projects).
 - The 'advertisements' carried on its website for expansion of Abbot Point coal export capacity (within the GBRWHA).
 - "The Newman Government is planning ahead for Queensland's strong economic growth by strategically purchasing land to meet future industrial and resource industry demands.... More than \$10 million has been approved over the next three years to acquire land for future industry development in the GSDA (Targinie), and \$7.3 million will be spent in the current financial year." (DSDIP Media Release 11 September 2012)
- Other actions by the State government that cause concern include:
 - The plan to 'open up' National Parks to commercial development
 - The suggestion to excise Gladstone from the GBRWHA
 - The revocation of the Wild Rivers project
 - The un-winding of State climate change programs
 - The weakening of the Coastal Plan
 - The removal of protection from bats
 - Reduced feed-in tariffs for those generating solar power
 - Withdrawal of funding from the Environmental Defenders Offices.

These examples serve to demonstrate the unfortunate attitude of the current state government to the environment. NQCC believes that handing over responsibility for the national environment to the states would be disastrous, resulting in damage that could

either not be undone or which would take generations to fix.

But concern is not only in relation to the Queensland state government. Other states are planning and implementing projects that are in their political and/or economic interest but which have woeful implications for the environment. Consider, for example, the NSW government's decision to put shooters in *national* parks.

The very nature of the issue, one which holds all the risks associated with management of public goods, demands that it be in the hands of the most objective, uncompromised agency. States do not always meet this standard.

We commend the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012.

Wendy Tubman

Coordinator