

# CLARENCE RIVER COUNTY COUNCIL

Floodplain Management Authority

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The Secretary  
House of Representatives Standing Committee  
On Environment and Heritage  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
Email: [Environment.Reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:Environment.Reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Sir / Madam,

**Re: Submission regarding Catchment Management**

Council, through its flood control and asset management and maintenance activities, has various direct and indirect impacts on catchment management in the Clarence River valley. Council actively contributes to a variety of initiatives that enhance improved management of the area, and the coastal floodplain in particular, and is therefore well placed to offer this submission for your consideration.

**1. Re Catchment Management generally**

- a) An overall and comprehensive plan of management for an area is the most appropriate way to encourage, implement, and monitor regional and local activities to achieve environmental sustainability.
- b) Catchment Management (CM) is a suitable vehicle to establish a broad management plan as the catchment area is easily identifiable, unlike, say, bio-regions. Local government areas and regional areas are usually not appropriate for environmental management units.
- c) In many areas, sub-catchment plans may be necessary, especially when considering large catchments like the Clarence River. Council, for example, is developing management plans for individual drainage systems (usually smaller than the sub-catchment) such as Shark Creek, Swan Creek, Alummy Creek etc.
- d) As "smaller scale" plans will invariably be developed for local areas, these should mesh seamlessly with the broader plan. The success of these small scale plans depends on the long term commitment of local volunteers, sometimes for decades. Hence it is imperative for local planning groups, eg landcare and watercourse management committees, to have assurances that the "broad catchment plan" or priorities will not change.
- e) In NSW at present there is some uncertainty regarding the future of Total Catchment Management (TCM) as a result of the recent formation of regional Water Management committees and Vegetation committees. This has resulted in the disillusionment of dedicated and experienced community volunteers involved with TCM membership. The loss of this significant human resource should be avoided.
- f) Training for volunteers at the early stage of their involvement with TCM should be considered, and opportunities provided to extend their knowledge, experience, and network.

- g) Other natural resource management committees should be briefed, at inception stage, regarding their role in relation to CM. Generally these committees should be allocated a role defined by the broader CM plan. In this case they should have access to funding support, dependent on CM priorities.
- h) CM plans should be supported with funds to allow on-ground liaison and action. The present NSW model does not provide a mechanism for the integrated implementation of the plan or “vision” except by external funding mechanisms.

## **2. Regarding environmental sustainability**

- a) Authorities and industries should be required to develop comprehensive procedures to responsibly address environmental issues, which ideally would be defined through objectives detailed in the CM plan.
- b) In the case of flood control structures in coastal floodplains, these procedures would generally relate to the maintenance and management of structures such as levees, drains, floodgates, culverts, penstocks etc. Council, for example, is presently developing comprehensive (and leading practice) drain cleaning procedures for 160 drainage systems, approximately 35 being floodgated natural (modified) watercourses.
- c) Council has established the Clarence Floodplain Project (CFP) (see attached newsletters) to address the issues of sustainability associated with its structures. This CFP is assisted by a Steering Committee made up of representatives of all major stakeholders – community, government, and industry. This cooperative, open approach has resulted in many positive developments.
- d) Council’s experience indicates that, as many impacted areas are privately owned lands, or are waterways requiring access through private land, voluntary management by, and cooperative management with, local landholders is extremely effective. Not only is this strategy cost-effective, it also ensures long term gains. And most importantly, all progress is made with the full knowledge and involvement of the most important stakeholder group – local landholders. Council has been fortunate to obtain Natural Heritage Trust assistance to develop this approach, and it is the availability of a dedicated officer to support landowners and to assist with the development of detailed local management plans, arrived at by consensus, that is the key to the success of this approach.
- e) Council now authorises local landholders, via a management committee, to operate floodgates and other water control structures according to a detailed and site-specific management plan negotiated with all affected landholders. The long term gains are yet to be measured but will include – wetland rehabilitation, water quality improvements (especially acid and nutrient discharges), improved weed control, passage of fish & other aquatic wildlife, and in many instances enhancements to local agriculture (for example improved swamp pastures, improved farm discharges, less time spent on drain maintenance by landholders).
- f) Local management groups, once given responsibility, are frequently motivated to continue to recommend management improvements. For example, farmers authorised to manage floodgates for water quality improvements are now offering suggestions to provide additional fish passage.
- g) Regarding wetland rehabilitation – impediments to remediation works, such as the necessity to complete comprehensive environmental impact assessments, should be removed or varied, where appropriate. For example, permits to reinstate water levels where wetlands have previously been drained, for example by installation of water retention devices, is difficult and expensive to obtain. In some instances this needlessly hinders rehabilitation efforts.
- h) Regarding the rehabilitation of significant environmental areas such as wetlands – funds for long term lease of areas for rehabilitation purposes should be made available, possibly as a partnership (industry, community and local, state & federal governments). The advantages of lease arrangements are that the landholder retains ownership, and can still be involved in developing rehabilitation strategies. Covenants on property titles, and contractual style management plans, can lock in outcomes. Leasing is cheaper than purchase, especially when long-term management costs are considered. Council has identified landholders willing to discuss lease options of some wetland areas that are

marginal to the main agricultural enterprise, but is finding it difficult to find suitable cost-sharing partners even for a pilot project.

### **3. The role of different sectors**

- a) A cooperative, inclusive approach will provide the most effective long-term gains. This is demonstrated by Council's Clarence Floodplain Project which has representatives from NSW Farmers, NSW Agriculture, NSW Fisheries, Dept Land & Water Conservation, Local Government, Clarence Catchment Management Committee, Clarence Fishermen's Cooperative, Clarence Canegrowers Association, and conservation rep (pending).
- b) Generally all sectors can and should provide expertise. Government and industry probably have the responsibility to provide the bulk of the funding. Community (and some industry) sectors also provide much valuable local knowledge and time on a voluntary basis which should not be undervalued.
- c) As most environmentally sensitive lands are in private ownership, and are largely impacted by privately owned activities including industry, the provision of liaison and extension officers to assist in the development and uptake of strategies to benefit the environment, and community generally, is paramount. Ideally, all sectors should contribute funds to this approach. A mechanism to encourage industry involvement in the process is essential, as the partnership approach is most likely to ensure on-ground improvements.
- d) The role of research organisations (universities, government agencies, research and development corporations etc) is also very significant, as in many areas the most effective management strategies are still being developed. Extensive monitoring of pilot projects can assist in evaluating management options. In local areas this also doubles as a valid extension activity.

If you require any expansion on this brief submission, or clarification of issues raised, please contact the undersigned.

Yours faithfully

Peter Ham  
**GENERAL MANAGER**  
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