



Australian Floodplain Association

**Submission
to**

**Inquiry into Indigenous
Economic Development in
Queensland
including Issues surrounding
Queensland's *Wild Rivers*
*Act 2005.***

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Executive Summary / Summary of Key Recommendations

- The Australian Floodplain Association believes existing environmental regulation, especially in regard to preventing large scale irrigation and minimising the toxic impacts from mining is weak and inadequate. The Wild Rivers legislation is appropriate as it raises the bar on future development, in a manner that current legislation is unable to do.
- Legislation needs to be crafted so that there are no large ‘takers’ of water; however there are many ‘users’ (both indigenous and non indigenous people as well as the natural environment, flora and fauna) who would benefit from the naturally occurring and episodic flow of the water after high rainfall events.
- Protection is required for rivers with high natural values in Queensland, as opposed to the expensive (financially, socially and emotionally) rehabilitation efforts we currently see being proposed for the Murray Darling Basin. It is cheaper to protect, than to rehabilitate.
- Permanent protection of unregulated catchments in Queensland is highly desirable, and the Wild Rivers Bill 2010 is a moving in the right direction to ensure that the water flows

are permanently protected and that our nation can start to manage water resources effectively.

- Floodplain graziers welcome the impact of legislation which will ensure that the water which flows down the inland river system in Western Queensland can continue to flood out across floodplains as nature intended it to, and will not be taken by irrigation or mining. The pastures that result from overland flows can grow livestock and produce quality meat. Floodplain meat production is one of the few food producing industries which coexists with the river and does not take or divert water out of the system.
- Once Wild Rivers protection is in place and rivers flow with full water flows, the economic benefits to Indigenous (and non indigenous) people will be plentiful. These will centre on tourism, grazing and Wild Rivers branding.
- The proposed Wild Rivers legislation is a correct and appropriate regulatory framework which will ensure long term benefits for indigenous and non indigenous people in Western Queensland; the economy of rural areas, and will contribute positively to the natural values of the environment.

About the Australian Floodplain Association

The Australian Floodplain Association (AFA) is a non government organisation which was established in 2005 to link and assist landholders (mainly graziers and dry land farmers), and their communities, who depend on our rivers, floodplains and wetlands for their livelihood. The Australian Floodplain Association strongly supports the permanent protection of environmental assets and values of our rivers, floodplains and wetlands as well as ensuring the sustainable economic potential of these areas for all people.

The Australian Floodplain Association is an organization which represents floodplain and wetland landholders and their dependent communities. The membership of the Australian Floodplain Association resides predominantly within the Murray Darling Basin and the Lake Eyre Basin. Representation also includes groups such as The Paroo River Association, The Macquarie Environmental Landholders Association, Mid Darling Water Users association, Culgoa/Balonne Minor Water Users Association, Lower Balonne Floodplain association and The Coopers Creek Protection Group.

The Australian Floodplain Association supports the general principles of the Wild Rivers Act 2005 and believes it carefully balances the needs of economic viability for all, whilst providing protection for the environmental and ecological assets of the environment in a Wild Rivers area. We strongly believe unregulated rivers should be permanently protected.

Terms of Reference

1. *Existing environmental regulation, legislation in relation to mining and other relevant legislation including the Wild Rivers Act (Qld) 2005 and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999;*
2. *The impact which legislation in the form of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010 would have, if passed; and*
3. *Options for facilitating economic development for the benefit of Indigenous people and the protection of the environmental values of undisturbed river systems.*

The Key Elements of the Submission which Respond to the Terms of Reference

1. *Existing environmental regulation, legislation in relation to mining and other relevant legislation including the Wild Rivers Act (Qld) 2005 and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999;*

The Australian Floodplain Association welcomes legislation which preserves the ecological health and productivity of floodplains. A floodplain is the flat land adjacent to a river which experiences episodic flooding. This flooding supports ecological communities which thrive in this 'boom and bust' pattern of highly variable inundation. The pattern of flooding and deposition of topsoil creates the rich self-mulching soils upon which valuable grazing enterprises depend. The floodplains of Western Queensland have long been recognised as being ecologically important areas for flora and fauna biodiversity, and these plant and animal communities co-exist with pastoral grazing. The grazing activity is considered highly opportunistic as it occurs in response to the 'boom and bust' cycle which follows large rain events. Unlike other food production industries, there is no water take, as the water used in grazing is that which occurs naturally.

This submission relates in particular to the proposed Wild River declaration as it applies to the Lake Eyre Basin catchments of the Georgina and Diamantina Rivers, and Cooper's Creek. The Queensland portion of the Lake Eyre Basin is home to a plethora of predominantly cattle and

sheep grazing enterprises, which employ many indigenous and non indigenous people. We believe that the Wild Rivers Legislation which is proposed for Western Queensland will have positive protective benefits and makes a strong stance on mitigating any negative impacts from large scale irrigation or mining. Preservation of overland and in stream flow of water is vital. This lack of water flow or the absence of natural flooding impacts on the health of many important environmental assets, and would have negative employment and associated adverse and unfavourable economic impacts for indigenous and non indigenous Queenslanders.

One only has to consider the situation in which the Murray Darling Basin finds itself in 2010 to understand how the reduction in the volume of floods impacts on floodplain health, natural ecology, groundwater systems and the economic viability of communities. Should some form of river regulation (e.g. protection similar to Queensland's Wild Rivers Act) been activated many years ago in the Murray Darling basin, the current financially and emotionally expensive rehabilitation plans that are currently being considered would not be required. The Australian Floodplain Association therefore believes protection, not rehabilitation is required for other river systems / catchments and basins. Therefore, the impact of the Wild Rivers Bill 2010 is desirable, and the AFA welcomes this legislation. Existing regulation in relation to the impact of preventing large scale irrigation and mining is weak and inadequate. The Wild Rivers legislation ensures there are no large 'takers' of water; however there are many 'users' (both indigenous and non indigenous people as well as the natural environment, flora and fauna) who would benefit from the naturally occurring and irregular inundation and flow of the water after high rainfall events.

2. The impact which legislation in the form of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010 would have, if passed;

The Australian Floodplain Association believes that our nation has demonstrated a gross incapacity to monitor and manage our water resources on a national scale. Floodplain graziers are keen to see water continue to spread across our landscape in floodplain areas, so that the ecosystems flourish, biodiversity is ensured and local communities and economies thrive and grow with the resulting economic gains. In particular, floodplain graziers depend on the water that flows down the inland river system in Western Queensland to grow the grasses, to feed the stock, to produce an income and be economically viable. The water used by floodplain graziers is that which flows down the river and across the floodplains as nature intended it to. Once the water has moved on, graziers use the resulting legacy of pastures and herbage to grow livestock. Floodplain meat production is one of the few food producing industries which coexists with the river and does not take or divert water out of the system, to do so.

The proposed Wild Rivers Bill 2010 will ensure that these floodplains continue to flood, and that our individual enterprises and collective communities for both indigenous and non indigenous people, will continue to grow. Sustainable grazing thrives on floodplains which flood regularly.

Should this legislation not be passed, water extraction threats in the form of large scale irrigation or mining exist, and are very real. The water take from such enterprises would guarantee that the 'boom and bust' cycle would be less intense or nonexistent. Sustained periods of no significant flooding would see a massive reduction in livestock carrying capacity and untold damage to animal and plant habitats within the river and in the floodplain area.

Therefore, we believe that the legislation will have a positive impact in both the short and long term future, and is essential for the ongoing health of rural economies and for ensuring positive and diverse ecological outcomes in the area of flora and fauna habitats. The benefits of this legislation apply equally to indigenous and non indigenous Queenslanders. We cannot afford to make mistakes in the Western Queensland Lake Eyre Basin catchments, in a manner similar to that of the current Murray Darling Basin. This legislation will ensure the Georgina and Diamantina Rivers and Cooper's Creek remain free flowing and beneficial to all. Permanent protection of these unregulated catchments is highly desirable, and the Wild Rivers Bill 2010 is a moving in the right direction to ensure that the water flows are permanently protected.

3. Options for facilitating economic development for the benefit of Indigenous people and the protection of the environmental values of undisturbed river systems.

There are numerous options for ensuring robust economic development and full economic participation by indigenous people, as a result of this legislation which will permanently protect the water flows and environmental values.

The Australian Floodplain Association firmly believes that once Wild Rivers protection is in place and the rivers continue to flow with full and regular water flows, the economic benefits to Indigenous (and non indigenous) people will flourish.

Tourism – There will be huge national and international interest in travelling to the Lake Eyre Basin once Wild Rivers legislation is in place. The Lake Eyre Basin is one of the largest internally draining river systems in the world, and remains in great environmental condition. There has been an increase in tourism numbers in recent years, and a river protection declaration is likely to see a dramatic increase in tourist numbers as a result of the Wild River status. As a result, there will be numerous expanded opportunities for small and medium sized tourism ventures, which could be owned and/or staffed by indigenous people. Indigenous people have a special connection to country, and are well placed to be involved in showcasing these unique environmental assets in both their 'boom and bust' state. Tourism and grazing are two industries that co-exist seamlessly, and indigenous employment prospects abound in both industries.

Once a Wild Rivers area is declared, the Indigenous Wild Rivers Ranger Program could be used to responsibly manage the unique natural resources of a Wild Rivers area. Indigenous rangers would be well placed to create partnerships and share knowledge which will further create

healthy communities and sustainable landscapes. This could include undertaking strategic and operational work in the area of invasive plants and feral animals.

Grazing - Indigenous Australians have a long and proud history of being involved in the grazing industry as both land owners and workers. It is expected that once an area is declared as a Wild River area, marketing could be undertaken to sell the message that produce that comes from a Wild Rivers area is clean, green (and organic, where applicable). The water protection legislation will be the key to ensuring this state, and as a result, there will be many opportunities for long term employment in viable grazing enterprises. The Australian Floodplain Association does not believe that the Wild Rivers Act imposes any restrictions on the day to day operations of a grazing enterprise. It does 'raise the bar higher' on future development applications in a manner that ensures the continued overland flow of water, and this is considered to be a sensible and proactive approach to permanent protection of catchments which are currently unregulated.

Wild Rivers Branding - The Australian Floodplain Association is a keen advocate of a Wild Rivers branding initiative that would be recognised nationally and internationally, and that embeds indigenous culture, heritage and stewardship as a key underpinning principle. This branding would occur after a Wild River is declared, and would sell the superb environmental values of the Lake Eyre Basin (Queensland portion) and could be used by indigenous and non indigenous commercial interests, local government, tourism and grazing. A Wild River area could become an area that has high brand recognition with the public. Indigenous people would feature strongly in this branding and promotion. With correct branding and action, Indigenous economic opportunities would be enhanced by the Wild Rivers Act.

Conclusion

In closing, the Australian Floodplain Association strongly believes that the proposed Wild Rivers legislation is a correct and appropriate regulatory framework which will ensure long term benefits for indigenous and non indigenous people in Western Queensland; the economy of rural areas, and will contribute positively to the natural values of the catchments and surrounding environment.

We urge the House of Representatives Economics Standing Committee to carefully consider the positive impacts that Wild Rivers Legislation will have on the Western Queensland portion of the Lake Eyre Basin, and the resulting enhanced economic benefits that will apply to indigenous and non indigenous Queenslanders.

The Australian Floodplain Association would welcome the opportunity to present any additional information to assist the House of Representatives Economics Standing Committee with this Inquiry.