

Vern Veitch
Deputy Chair/Environmental Coordinator
SUNFISH Queensland Inc.
4 Stagpole Street
West End Qld 4810

Ph: 07 4771 6087
Fax: 07 4771 6034
Mobile: 0418 729496
Email: vernv@sunfish.org.au
www.sunfish.org.au

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INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission on Catchment Management and for the extension of time granted.

To preempt many of the comments that follow, we recognise the dedication and quality of input of many members of the Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) committees and commend their contributions. That said, we have some strong concerns about the effectiveness of ICM to implement many of the initiatives that are so obviously needed.

We believe that too much faith and perhaps too few resources are being put into the committees to empower them to be effective. We will address these issues in more detail under the Terms of Reference (ToR) headings below.

1. The Development Of Catchment Management In Australia.

Catchment management in this area was initiated between 4 and 6 years ago in the mid 1990's. Despite strong commitments by a number of individuals progress has been limited and the rate of change has been slow. At the same time, additional wetlands and riparian strips have been destroyed.

Committees in rural areas are at a high risk of being overtaken by vested interests such as strong local industry groups. Due to the obviously high potential economic impact on productive landholders, it is critical that committees be well balanced with members who will not be impacted financially by any adverse decision. Many projects are therefore restricted to those properties where there is landholder agreement.

Effectiveness in residential and industrial areas is enhanced by a broad cross-section of community involvement and a genuine will of land managers in these areas to enhance public health as well as that of the environment. Manufacturing industries have been forced by public opinion to "clean up their act" and have responded to community expectations. As a result, whole of catchment restoration is addressed and progressively implemented.

Effectively, some committees are being corrupted due to the imbalance that can be created by dominance of one sector within a committee.

2. The Value Of A Catchment Approach To Managing The Environment.

A whole of catchment approach is critical to water quality and the health of our waterways. In this region, it is difficult to contain what we do on the land and anything that escapes will find it's way into the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) World Heritage Area (WHA). Regional planning must therefore take into consideration the potential for cumulative impacts.

In rural areas however, it is often difficult to identify the impact of individual activities and the rate of change is slow until the ecosystem reaches a critical level and the results become clearly visible. Often at this stage, there is a feeling of disbelief that anything done "on the farm" could have contributed to this situation. Management practices had not changed so why did the water quality degrade so quickly?

Often in this situation, the result is from cumulative impacts over an extended period of time and the effects of such things as the removal of riparian strips and application of fertiliser have taken years to make themselves apparent. A whole of catchment approach is critical in addressing the potential long-term impacts of such degradation.

If we are to avoid the type of impact on the GBR that we are now witnessing in the South East USA (Florida Keys region) then we must get our land management right now. As little as 30 years ago, reef managers in the Florida Keys believed that the reef in that region could "NEVER" be impacted by land based impacts.

3. Best Practice Methods Of Preventing, Halting And Reversing Environmental Degradation In Catchments, And Achieving Environmental Sustainability.

To mitigate impacts from land use changes, "best practice" must be followed universally. In most coastal rural areas within the North Queensland region, this is not occurring. Despite considerable resources being injected into rural industry extension programs, many farmers are slow to adopt new technology and change established management practices.

Voluntary compliance can be difficult to achieve when it costs nothing; when there is a cost involved, few will incur reductions in profit to achieve environmental benefits that are not apparent for years or even decades. This is made more difficult due to the reluctance of industry to self-police despite claims to the contrary. Some industries are yet to develop codes of practice and those that have are yet to achieve broad compliance.

In this region there are many recent examples of agricultural development in industries that have a code of practice or require farm development/management plans. An example of this can easily be seen in the Cardwell Shire where in excess of 500 and perhaps as many as 1000 unlicensed drains have been connected to natural watercourses. Many of these drains would not comply with industry best-practice guidelines or local government regulations. Another recent example is the draining and backfilling of a billabong on the Haughton River flood plain about 50 Km south of Townsville.

4. The Role Of Different Levels Of Government, The Private Sector And The Community In The Management Of Catchment Areas.

State Government needs to show strong leadership if catchment management is to be seen to be an effective tool in mitigating environmental concerns. Exempting rural industries from Environmental Protection Act (EPA) and Integrated Planning Act (IPA) requirements puts the health of many of our catchments at risk.

The IPA is exempting major changes in land use such as the change from grazing to intensive crop growing despite the obvious potential to create environmental harm. In many cases, local government do not have the resources or the expertise to adequately advise, enforce or in some cases even identify many of these issues. The situation is made more difficult by the potential implications to local government politicians that are often too easily swayed in communities that are small in number.

Local government can also lack expertise in assessing benefits to the broader community and adequately addressing downstream impacts. Consequently, it is difficult for those communities to deal with issues that have a broader environmental impact such as chronic water quality issues that have the potential to accumulate.

If the State Government continues to ignore land management issues and fails to enforce and strengthen existing legislation, local involvement in ICM and other environmental groups will be thwarted.

5. Planning, Resourcing, Implementation, Coordination And Cooperation In Catchment Management.

Coordination and cooperation is lacking at local and state level and is thus affecting the effectiveness and ability to implement ICM initiatives on the ground. The Commonwealth Government needs to review strategies that might assist with on ground action as well.

There are a lack of financial incentives and perceived or actual economic penalties that discourage land-owners from protecting or restoring environmentally sensitive areas. At local level, high land rates on non-productive land are an important factor in encouraging further loss of critical habitat.

Initiatives are needed in the form of rate relief, revaluation (to lower land value) of non-productive land for rates purposes and increased tax deductibility for environmentally beneficial work that is properly assessed need to be implemented. All Australians benefit from the protection of the environment in North Queensland and local residents can not be expected to pay for the total cost of protection. Strong consideration needs to be given to developing a carbon credit system that benefits local land-owners.

6. Mechanisms For Monitoring, Evaluating And Reporting On Catchment Management Programs, Including The Use Of These Reports For State Of The Environment Reporting, And Opportunities For Review And Improvement.

The more money spent on reporting, the more that is taken away from important on-ground projects. That is not to say that reports should not be required, but they should be

kept short and concise and take the minimum amount of time from relevant specialist who can better use their time in the field. The best form of reporting is a healthy “model” catchment.

Summary

Our waterways are the arteries and veins of our environment. Their health is critical to the health and functioning of the remainder of the system. For too long they have been seen as a dumping place for anything no longer needed on the ground. This continues to be the case through both neglect and ignorance.

ICM is an important tool in reversing the downward slide of the health of our catchments. It must be empowered and resourced to ensure its effectiveness and it must be supported by appropriate strategies by all levels of government. This is particularly true of the State Government. Unfortunately, at this point in time, there is an urgent need for initiative and leadership to be shown in the area of responsible land management.

Yours sincerely,