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Dr Bill Pender
Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By email to: jscna@aph.gov.au

Dear Dr Pender,

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia

The Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils (FNQROC) covers an area of over 252,000 sq km; from Ingham to Cooktown and out to Croydon. Members include 3 regional Councils, 5 shire Councils and 2 Aboriginal Councils.

I welcome the opportunity to provide our comments and priorities to feed into the recommendations to be considered for the Northern Australia White Paper. Within this region there are a number of key industry groups and organisations who will all be providing a submission to the Joint Select Parliamentary Committee Northern Australia. It is recognised that not one organisation can go into depth of the issues or opportunities to provide a collaborative response and that these submissions should be left to those who have a focus on a particular area of interest. The level of these submissions will also differ from local to national interests. In the main, we support these applications but of note, FNQROC supports the submissions made from councils individually, Far North Queensland and Torres Strait Regional Development Australia (FNQ & TS RDA) and Advance Cairns.

FNQROC's submission is focussed on the high level collective priorities of member councils to support the growth of our region. More detail in terms of initiatives, case studies and strategies can be made available if required.

General Comments

Far North Queensland is perfectly positioned to support economic growth in Northern Australia. We have (but are not limited to):

- an abundance of tropical expertise to support those in the tropical zone,
- international airport access
- international seaport access
- room for domestic and economic growth both on the coastal lowlands through to the Tablelands and beyond
- a political environment to support this growth, and
- a lifestyle many can only dream of.

We have many of the foundations required to leverage economic growth however, a little more support is required for investor confidence to grow and investment to flow.

There are a number of factors which affect the long term viability of economic attraction and growth. The below submissions all have a role to play to develop this region.

Water Security

More than 65% of runoff in Australia comes from far northern Australia and coastal Queensland (source: Aust. Govt. National Water commission). The Far North Queensland (FNQ) region is currently facing urban and agricultural pressures for water resources. While we have significant runoff, we have limited storage for these two sectors. Additional storage will be required within this region to manage imminent urban growth conflicting with existing and future agricultural growth. Previous studies undertaken within the region have been done with the Federal and State mantra being 'No new dams' which has not assisted in the long term planning for our water.

Energy

With any new water storage facilities it is our desire to have hydroelectricity as a component of this.

The development of an energy industry in Northern Queensland will deliver electricity more cost efficiently and therefore not only reduce the need for public financial support, but better meet the growth projections of the region.

While there is a development plan for the renewable energy industry in the north and solar and wind farm projects are underway, establishing base load generation of electricity is critical to the long term growth of Northern Australia.

This region has limited local supply resulting in our energy being transported over significant distances. This results in the first instance with significant transmission losses which is a financial burden to the consumer and the State which is not sustainable over the long term.

The Pentland Study currently underway is expected to identify the potential of base load power generation in North Queensland. We would welcome a further commitment to investigate other solutions to ensure long-term energy affordability and security across Northern Australia, and identify the potential to establish an energy industry in the north of Queensland.

The infrastructure available in this region is also substandard to handle additional loads or in return, loads from any potential renewable energy sources. The region is also subject to 'brown outs', particularly in the council areas surrounding Cairns Regional Council. There is limited information available as to the cost of lost business due to this cost or potential cost if an investor is to realise the true cost of energy supply in this region.

Land Tenure

Fundamentally, we need to fix this in the north once and for all. We need to:

- Get a resolution of native title claims to allow negotiations to commence with Traditional Owners (30% has been determined, 70% has not yet been identified or process commenced to determine ownership.) The Native Title Tribunal needs investment.
- Identify a process which will allow aboriginal freehold tenure to be used as collateral
- Have a clear development process in place for an investor. At present it is adhoc:
 - Is there a land trust?
 - Is the land trust functioning?
 - Do they have a process?

In many instances, any development initiative will fall over at one of these stages.

- Allow for perpetual lease holds
- Allow grazing lease holds to be used for other purposes
- Have a consistent policy for lands in Cape York. Over the past 20 years at least there has been 'flip flop' policy applied. One year you can undertake a project and while the proponent is meeting requirements (at their cost) the policy changes and their project is no longer allowed. This results in a lack of confidence to invest in the studies required to progress any investment.

Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements

Northern Australia is subject to regular cyclone and flooding events. Communities and businesses can be resilient to these but the Federal Government is needed to ensure the process directly after an event does not affect the ratepayer (investor). There is potential for this to occur if councils are required to take funding from infrastructure renewal or upgrade to fund the clean up after an event. Betterment funding would also assist to minimise the damage event after event (saving both the Federal and State governments over the longer term). There is also an opportunity for swift, value for money restoration if the federal government works with local governments to amend the Natural disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangement policy.

Biosecurity

Northern Australia is the front line to manage biosecurity issues. Currently, there appears to be a lack of long term vision/investment into the region. Focus on pest flora, fauna and biological (current and potential) impacts which have a significant impact on grazing and agriculture seem to have been left as a lost cause or ignored. (case studies include Siam, Hymenachne, myrtle rust and Yellow Crazy Ant to name a few). The financial impact of weeds (alone) on agriculture, horticulture and forestry across Australia is estimated at \$4bil per year. We have some significant weed species only found within this region which have been controlled through collaborative effects and local determination of priorities. Over the past few years, the efforts of the region to work collaboratively have been eroded through contestable funding allocations. The focus back to contestability has undermined the collaborative efforts in this region which was supported by the old NHT program. We are now competing against each other and others across the nation instead of other regions. This has resulted in adhoc 'unstrategic' application of funding. Pest flora and fauna is not eradicated or manageable through short term funding. A long term commitment is required manage current infestations as well as deal with sleeper invaders. A clear proactive commitment to biosecurity will assist confidence to grow agricultural, horticultural and forestry in this region. This proactive commitment will also aid to protect the unique natural assets this region has which supports the tourism industry.

Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation

The turnover of staff (federally) is having an impact on large scale development. Due to the turn over, proponents are continually being given differing opinions, studies to undertake and approvals required. While we understand staff turnover is inevitable it has caused significant delays to investments in this region – some to the extent of ten years.

There is also an inherent lack of understanding of this region by those making these decisions/requests. It is believed that having a local delivery/decision unit (with authority) in the region will assist with increasing knowledge of the region to accelerate and assist in any approval process.

Infrastructure

Telecommunication

Mobile telecommunication and high speed internet is vital for this region to grow. There are a significant number of mobile blackspots (a separate submission will be made directly on these areas) in this region.

High speed internet access is also vital for this region to grow. All those factors important to liveability are reliant on high speed internet. Equitable access to education and health services are primary. Additionally to this, it is vital for economic growth from agriculture to multinational companies. Telecommunication infrastructure needs to be treated as an essential service. Without adequate access we are denied the ability to transact nationally and internationally.

Transport

There is a clear lack of integration or investment in affordable transport links. We are seeing more and more transport via road with a lack of coordination (and perhaps affordability) to air, sea and rail.

As the region grows so will the pressure on the National Highway (Bruce Highway). We welcome investment into the Bruce Highway however, investment needs to be made on our inland road routes across the nation to support export of products and connections to air, sea and rail on the coast. The priority networks for Northern Australia from our area include:

- Peninsula Development Road
- Cairns to Melbourne (Inland)
- Cairns to Western Australia (via Alice Springs)
- Cairns to Darwin

FNQROC looks forward to the opportunity to participate in future public hearings to process the White paper development.

Yours sincerely

Cr Bill Shannon
FNQROC Chair

Cc: Warren Entsch MP, Committee Chair
Senator Jan McLucas, Senator for Queensland
David Williamson, Northern Australia Taskforce