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SUBMISSION to SENATE ENQUIRY

TRAVESTON CROSSING DAM

Background

In its 2003-06 term of office the Queensland Government adopted a Regional Plan for South-East Queensland which allows for another 1 million people to live in the SEQ region, and is in the process of encouraging Local Governments to adapt their Planning Schemes to accept increased densification to accommodate this growth. There is no indication that consideration of vital resources such as water supply was incorporated into the level of growth nominated in the SEQ Regional Plan.

In April 2006, faced with continuing drought and falling dam levels in the three major dams supplying Brisbane, and with a State Government election looming, Premier Peter Beattie announced a plan to dam the Mary River at Traveston Crossing, claiming such a dam was necessary for "water security in SE Queensland". Even if this dam were to be built, it will not become operational until 2012, whereas Brisbane's water supply is predicted to reach crisis level by 2008 in the absence of substantial rain. The site proposed for this new dam had previously been rejected as a preferred site more than 10 years earlier when Wayne Goss was Premier.

There has been widespread condemnation of both the proposal and the lack of consultation. The State Government has belatedly decided to adopt measures which have been in operation in many overseas countries for decades, ie putting highly-treated wastewater back into dams for recycling, but argues, somewhat illogically, that such action will not remove the need to build Traveston dam.

Meanwhile State Government has been acquiring land for the dam even though the development has not yet cleared the hurdle of satisfying requirements of the Commonwealth's EPBC (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation) Act.

The Federal Government has recently implemented a Senate Inquiry to investigate the State Government's actions with respect to the proposed dam.

Proposed site is physically unsuited to a dam

A large part of the area which would be inundated consists of river flats, with deep fertile soils which have been productive farmland for decades. Hence, topographically and geologically, the site is a strange choice for water storage in a subtropical climate. A shallow dam with large surface area over deep porous soil will inevitably incur a high rate of loss of water due to evaporation and seepage.

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Major Environmental Impact

Impacts from damming the Mary River are potentially very widespread, and include impacts on aquatic ecosystems of the internationally significant Great Sandy Strait (Ramsar site) due to decreased freshwater flow, and impacts within the Mary River itself, both downstream of the dam where flows will be dramatically reduced (at times to virtually zero flow), and upstream of the dam where 50.7km of the Mary River will eventually be inundated.

These impacts will affect in-stream ecosystems, as well as those of the river banks and riparian areas, where 500ha of Endangered Regional Ecosystem vegetation (supposed to be protected under the State's Vegetation Management Act) will be inundated.

The Mary River Cod and Mary River Turtle are both listed as "Endangered" under the EPBC Act and do not occur naturally anywhere else in the world. Both have very specific breeding requirements. For example the Mary River Cod (which is also red-listed internationally as "Critically Endangered") needs deep, shady pools with large woody "snags" to breed successfully in the wild – the proposed dam will flood such existing habitat and will not allow conditions for similar habitat to develop to replace the habitat lost. The globally important Queensland Lungfish also has specific breeding requirements, and observations by ecological experts following construction of the Paradise Dam on the Burnett River (which was also habitat for this ancient species) appear to indicate that it is likely that the species will not survive in that river because of loss of suitable breeding habitat.

The Mary River Turtle, which is 1 of the 25 most endangered turtles on Earth, requires sandy river banks to lay its eggs. The proposed dam will impact heavily on this critical nesting habitat. In the riparian area along undercut banks, habitat necessary for deposition of eggs of the endangered Giant Barred Frog will be lost.

It is difficult to think of any single other development project in Australia which has the potential to knowingly increase the risk of extinction to so many species. Despite this, the Terms of Reference for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) recently released by the State Government for public comment include no allowance for a study of increased risk of extinction (population viability study).

It is also disturbing that the (former) Federal Environment Minister (Ian Campbell) has agreed that the EIS cover only Stage 1, following argument by the State Government that it could be another 30 years before Stage 2 is implemented. The Minister has chosen not to use powers available to him under the EPBC Act which are aimed at ensuring that developers cannot defeat the intent of the Act by submitting an EIS for only a component of the ultimate development.

In this case, the State Government is intending to build the dam wall to its final height in Stage 1, and is proceeding to acquire properties which will be inundated in both Stages 1 and 2. If Stage 1 is approved it is inevitable that Stage 2 will ultimately proceed. Whilst Stage 1 involves inundation of 36.5km of the Mary River (covering 3,000ha), Stage 2 involves 50.7km (covering 7,135ha) and its environmental impact will be significantly greater.

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Our Association believes that the Queensland Government should be made to comply with the full intent of the EPBC Act in protecting biodiversity, and that this can only occur if the EIS covers the ultimate dam being proposed, not just Stage 1.

At the very least it is hoped that the Federal Government would require a proper, rigorous scientific study, following construction of the Paradise Dam, of the success or failure of measures which were intended to "mitigate" impact on threatened species and their habitats in the Burnett River.

Such a study alone would take a considerably longer time than the wholly inadequate 6 months allowed for an EIS on the proposed Traveston Dam, and should be carried out by consultants not connected in any way with the team of consultants who prepared the EIS for the Paradise Dam.

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