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# **Submission from the Clarence Valley Council**

**to the Inquiry into  
Additional Water Supplies for South East Queensland  
– Traveston Crossing Dam**

**Authorised by**

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## SUMMARY

The Clarence River is a unique environmental eco-system. The Council is one of the agencies which recognise that to ensure it is available for the benefit of future visitors and residents the river has to be cared for as well as used. For that reason the Council, as the representative of the 51,000 residents and many thousands of regular visitors is involved in:-

- Improving the ecology of the floodplain by carefully balancing the needs of residents and the natural environment through approximately 60 Clarence floodplain projects to date with many more to come;
- Investing heavily (about \$100 million over the next 5 years) in sewerage works to improve the quality of sewerage effluent discharged to the environment;
- Progressively improving urban and rural stormwater management systems; and
- Constructing an off stream water storage and associated infrastructure for potable water supplies for the Clarence Valley and Coffs Harbour communities whilst enhancing the river flows in the Clarence tributaries

## BACKGROUND

The Clarence Valley Council was created in February 2004 from an amalgamation of four general purpose Councils and two County Councils.

Located in Northern NSW the Clarence Valley Council (CVC) comprises an area 10,440 km<sup>2</sup> and is home to approximately 51,000 residents and ratepayers living in more than 40 towns and villages. In landmass terms the CVC is about 40% of the northern rivers region and the predominate feature is the broad reaches of the Clarence River that meanders through the Council area to the sea at Yamba.

Council is working in partnership with the Clarence Community to develop and maintain vibrant, sustainable urban and rural areas and this approach has a foundation in the recently adopted Sustainability Framework.

The Framework is based on sustainability principles linked to local values and aspirations and establishes the fundamentals for Council's policy setting and decision making. Also contained in the framework are five sustainability elements that provide a platform to undertake the following key activities.

Sustainability Element	Activities
Governance	Accountability, participation & communication, resourcing & support
Human Habitat	Our built environment, infrastructure, transport & essential services
Economic	The land, water, biodiversity, natural processes & landscape
Society & Culture	Our health & wellbeing, culture, history, lifestyle, education & recreation services

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Within each activity are services including the provision of a safe and secure water supply that draws resources from the Clarence River catchment.

A high profile river like the Clarence has been the subject of many proposals over the years to divert its precious resources to other regions of the state and interstate. Schemes ranging from major dams and pipelines taking water to the west and now to South East Queensland have regularly appeared on the agenda.

While action has been taken by some of the former Clarence Councils to oppose various proposals, the recent suggestion to transfer water to South East Queensland has drawn the community together in opposing this concept and evidence of this can be found in the action taken to voice their concerns through the local, state and interstate media outlets.

When the option gained extensive media coverage late last year the Council formed a policy position of total opposition to any proposal that would result in any diversion of water from the Clarence catchment. This decision was taken as water gained higher recognition on the national agenda and the spotlight again turned to the water resources of the Clarence River.

During April 2007 the Mayor of the Clarence Valley Council presented a Mayoral Minute to Council confirming Council's total opposition to diversion proposals.

**“The Federal government’s plan to dam the Clarence river system and pipe our precious water to Queensland has galvanised the people of the Clarence Valley”**

**“I said it after Malcolm Turnbull released his report, and I’ll say it again. Your Council is totally opposed to any diversion of the Clarence and we will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the community to fight the process”** Mayor Tiley, Mayoral minute 17 April 2007

More recently two councils in the west of NSW had motions before the Annual Conference of the NSW Shires Association (also referred to as the Associations) proposing the diversion of the Clarence river to the west via a pipeline through the Great Dividing Range. Whilst these motions were defeated at the Conference the Council is concerned that the proposal hasn't be laid completely to rest. In fact the Conference resolved to approach the Federal Minister for Water, Malcolm Turnbull, to address current and future concerns with water shortages for inland cities and towns, because of existing and future droughts.

### ▪ **Regional Water Supply Strategy**

The total opposition to proposals to divert water from the Clarence system is not a hasty reaction by Council. It is based on extensive investigations into the long term water supply needs associated with the sustainable development of this unique region of NSW.

Prior to the creation of the Clarence Valley Council a water supply County Council representing the former Clarence Councils was charged with the responsibility of planning for the future while a similar process was underway in the adjoining Coffs Harbour area. Both areas were looking at establishing water storage facilities and during 1995 the function of the Clarence based County Council were expanded to a regional body responsible for the development and implementation of a water supply strategy for the combined communities of the Clarence Valley and Coffs Harbour region.

The benefits of a regional approach ranged from better environmental outcomes from one storage facility instead of two, economies of scale by sharing costs across a region and the ability to protect low river flows and enhance natural river systems. A key to this approach was the sound partnership between Local Government and State Government and the establishment of effective working relationships with key government agencies.

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A commitment by Local Government to building community trust was achieved through a comprehensive community consultation program that gained broad community support by providing genuine avenues into the Council decision making process.

Economic, social and environmental considerations were all taken into account in formulating the strategy that promoted the following objectives;

- Water supply security for the Clarence Valley / Coffs Harbour Region.
- Protection of the natural river systems

Strong partnerships between stakeholders and a focus on delivering a regional water supply solution were fundamental in developing an innovative strategy that was adopted in 2000.

In summary, water is extracted from the river systems on a daily basis and mechanisms were required to avoid having to draw water during extended dry periods when environmental flows are low and natural river systems are under stress. This will be achieved by the provision of a 30 000 ML off stream storage facility that is filled from the Nymboida river during times of high flow and used to meet consumer demands in low flow periods when extractions from the river will cease. Licence arrangements have upgraded environmental flow requirements and placed a cap on the amount of water that can be extracted from the river.

The “**off stream**” storage option was selected following exhaustive investigations in to alternative such as desalination, recycling and rainwater tanks and was found to have far less environmental impacts than “**on stream**” storage options similar to those being promoted in proposals to divert Clarence waters to the west and South East Queensland.

Construction of the storage is well underway and when it becomes operational, Council will have a mechanism in place that will eliminate the need to extract from the natural river environment during dry weather patterns and sever drought conditions. These measures will make a positive contribution to improving the health of major tributaries within the Clarence River catchment.

**“For over twelve years we have been planning the Shannon creek dam in the Clarence valley to provide Clarence and Coffs harbour communities a safe, secure water supply. Many studies were necessary and eventually a 30 000 megalitre capacity structure was imposed with mandatory water efficiency and water saving measures applied”** Mayor Tiley, Mayoral minute 17 April 2007

Innovation is embedded throughout the strategy and an excellent example can be found in the innovative water efficiency program that builds on progress made by the Clarence Valley / Coffs Harbour communities in reducing demands on the natural river systems. The steps taken in promoting water efficiency are now embraced in the Integrated Water Cycle Management philosophy adopted by Council.

- Integrated Water Cycle Management (IWCM)

Long term planning for water supply infrastructure took into account a number of factors including projected population patterns for the region, consumer demands and system yield capabilities.

By working with the community, the vision of reduced dependency on river systems was created and to achieve this vision, a greater emphasis was placed on reduced consumption through water efficiency and the introduction of acceptable alternate sources into the water cycle. For example emerging technology in reclaimed water and desalination are helping to bring about a positive change in community attitudes and a greater understanding of the need to explore opportunities to expand the water cycle.

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During the initial phases of the strategy development a larger storage facility based on a 50 year planning horizon was included and as a result of ongoing studies and community liaison, the strategy direction was changed to incorporate a small storage. The reduced storage capacity represented a fundamental shift in strategy development and issued a challenge to consumers to extend the life of the storage through improved water efficiency that reduce demands and prolong the need for new infrastructure.

The water efficient strategic plan implements a range of programs addressing demand management, regulatory and institutional arrangements and water resources management.

Under the banner of IWCM Council has embarked on a journey that encompasses a broad spectrum of water management issues that underpin sustainable development.

The goals of IWCM include the provision of transparent information to stakeholders and ensuring that balanced decisions are made. IWCM is also a means of delivering the State Governments Water reform agenda and Council has adopted the following basic principles in the quest for improved management of water resources.

- Consideration of all water sources in water planning
- The sustainable and equitable use of all water sources
- Consideration of all water users
- Integration of water use and natural water process
- A whole of catchment integration of natural resources use and management

**Council is well down the path of formulating an IWCM strategy that is based on the integrated management of water supply, sewerage and stormwater services within a catchment framework that meets future needs and achieves environmental outcomes.**

- Environmental, Social and Economic Considerations

A complex array of environmental social and economic considerations were addressed in developing and implementing a water supply solution for a region of 90,000 people that is expected to double in population during the next 30 years.

Of particular relevance are the State and Federal environmental legislation requirements and the fundamentals of ecologically sustainable development and the precautionary principle that minimise impacts on the environment.

The accumulated impacts of a comprehensive assessments program were addressed through an extensive suite of mitigation measures identified in approval conditions and an overarching Environmental Management Plan for;

- Cultural Heritage management with an emphasis on Aboriginal Heritage issues and respecting Aboriginal Culture.
- Riverine Management and enhancing river health by improved extraction regimes and studies into fish passage, wetted perimeter and identifying river health indicators.

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- Habitat Management that addressed threatened species requirements and flora and fauna management with a focus on ecological communities. Also included is the establishment of a compensatory habitat area and undertaking an environmental monitoring program over the next 5 years.
- Construction Operation Impact Management for the various build components paying particular attention to water quality control, noise control and rehabilitation.

The state and federal approval process presented a major challenge in moving forward and had a direct influence on the final makeup of the strategy that is founded on achieving sound environmental, social and economic outcomes.

Clarence river diversion projects of the magnitude being proposed would attract what could only be described as a formidable range of environmental requirements that would fully test their feasibility.

**“Malcolm Turnbull has made mention of a ‘feasibility plan’. But I ask feasible for whom? The cost to the Clarence would be enormous. It is neither fair nor equitable that the health of the Clarence be damaged to fuel the unsustainable growth of South east Queensland”.** Mayor Tiley, Mayoral minute 17 April 2007

As previously mentioned the Clarence Valley and Coffs Harbour communities have been drawing water from major tributaries for many years and the steps taken to reduce impacts and improve the overall health of the Clarence River is in stark contrast to recent proposals to divert vast quantities out of the catchment.

In addition to developing and implementing a benchmark water supply strategy evidence of Councils commitment to sustainability is found in the scope of functions and activities being delivered to manage the Clarence River estuary.

Flooding events are part of the valleys history and Council is delivering programs aimed at restoring wetlands and important habitat areas that are essential in maintaining the rich biodiversity of the area.

These programs together with erosion control, weed management and coastal protection measures are excellent examples of the leadership role Council is taking in natural resource management that is critical to the future of the Clarence River and the communities who depend on this future.

**“Environmental health of the largest river on the biggest floodplain in eastern Australia is of paramount importance. It is vital to the local economy, especially tourism and our \$40 M fishing industry”.** Mayor Tiley, Mayoral minute of 17 April 2007.

Council's management Plan for 2007/2008 states that “ The local economy is undergoing a transition period of significant structural change in which local industry is being challenged as a consequence of global, national and regional pressures and rapidly changing economic drivers. These challenges are particularly significant for the traditional industries of agriculture, sugar, beef, commercial fishing and timber. In response to these issues council has worked with local business, industry and agencies to establish an economic strategic plan to facilitate sustainable growth of the region.”

Fishing industry representatives in particular have articulated their views and are concerned about the impacts of any substantial reduction in fresh water flows in the Clarence River system.

Major proposals to divert the waters of the Clarence are generally based on capturing significant quantities of water which the fishing industry believe has potential to damage the aquatic environment with resultant impacts on industry and recreational fishing.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Clarence River is the life blood of this unique location and is integral to the environmental, social and economic well being of the area. Council is very aware of the importance of the river system and the level of opposition building within the community and on behalf of the residents it serves is making a firm stand against any river diversion proposals that threaten its future.

**“The answer to the water problem is education so that we all reduce our water consumption. All Australians must be part of the solution to our water problems”** Mayor Tiley, mayoral minute of 17 April 2007.