Fraser Island Defenders Organisation

FIDO — The Watchdog of Fraser Island
c/- John Sinclair, 2/30 Cameron Street, NUNDAH Q 4012
Phone : John Sinclair: (07) 3256 8616 or 0418 650 535
www.fido.org.au — Email: john@fido.org.au
Aim: *To ensure the wisest us of the natural resources of Fraser Island*

2 April 2007

The Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Senate Inquiry into Traveston Dam

Dear Senators,

I wish to make a formal Submission on behalf of the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation (FIDO). This organization has been advocating protection of Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Straits for over 35 years and have lead the conservation campaigns to stop sandmining and logging from degrading Fraser Island's World Heritage values and ultimately having those values recognized.

We are concerned about the environmental and social impacts of the Traveston Dam, and in particular the downstream environmental impacts.

There are significant internationally important ecosystems downstream that will be adversely impacted by the Traveston Dam, including the Great Sandy World Heritage Area and the Great Sandy Strait Ramsar Site.

This submission focuses on the downstream impacts of the Traveston Dam, as that is the primary focus of our organization. FIDO believes that despite the political promises made by the Queensland Government the construction of the Traveston Dam will effectively stop most if not all of the flow of the Mary River into Great Sandy Strait. Any environmental flow going past the dam will be captured by weirs downstream for agriculture and Gympie's water supply. Little if any flow will get past the Yengarie tidal barrage. Even without the Traveston Dam, the flow past the tidal barrage is already minimal, and for much of the past year there has been negligible or no flow past this point. The only other significant flow into the Mary River below the barrage could come from Tinana Creek, but that is already heavily committed to the Maryborough urban water supply. Thus the impact of this additional dam is likely to stop the environmental flow of the Mary River into Great Sandy Strait.

Whilst this Submission focuses on the downstream impacts, we are also concerned about the inundated area, where the future of the Mary River Cod, the Mary Turtle and the Lungfish will be threatened. As well as causing social dislocation to hundreds of people, the Traveston Dam will also flood a number of sites of significance to Traditional Owners, an issue that has not been adequately assessed.

Downstream Impacts

The Great Sandy Strait is a rich ecosystem that is recognized by having the entire eastern length included in the Fraser Island World Heritage area and the entire strait as a Ramsar Wetland of International significance. The Great Sandy World Heritage Area extends 500 metres from Fraser Island's high water mark. At the most critical part of the Strait, it extends 500 metres from Dream and Stewart Islands, to cover the full length of the eastern side of the Great Sandy Strait Ramsar site.

Great Sandy Strait follows the ancestral bed of the Mary River south from its existing mouth. It developed as an estuary during the last 10,000 years since the end of the last ice age when the sea level rose approximately 120 metres. The lessening gradient resulted in a slower velocity of flow through Great Sandy Strait. As a result the silt washed down from the Mary River catchment created this extremely rich and productive estuary. Traveston Dam, along with the other already existing impoundments on the Mary River, will now trap all nutrient rich sediment that once flowed into Great Sandy Strait.

This rich marine ecosystem depends on a steady flow of nutrients and silt as well as water. It also depends on fresh water flushing it. The dramatic reduction (almost total blockage) of environmental flow into this most significant estuary will heavily impact on these very sensitive aspects of marine ecology. Any significant reduction of the flow from the Mary River will necessarily adversely impact on the salinity and pH of Great Sandy Strait.

The Traveston Dam will adversely impact the Great Sandy Strait and the Great Sandy World Heritage Area in several ways as a result of the Mary River rarely if ever releasing any flow into Great Sandy Strait.

- The flow of nutrients from the catchment will be reduced, resulting in loss of vegetation and marine life. There will be less fish for recreational and commercial fishers, as well as marine life and migratory birds. This will adversely impact both the Great Sandy Strait Ramsar Site and the Great Sandy World Heritage Area.

- As well as creating a rich ecosystem sustaining marine and bird life, the silt creating the Great Sandy Straits was also central to allowing the local indigenous communities to travel from the mainland to Fraser Island and back again. The Aboriginal history of the region depended on the capacity of communities to hunt on the mainland or the island depending on the seasons. Interfering with that process will adversely impact the traditional history of the region, in particular the history of the Great Sandy World Heritage Area.

- For millennia floods have flushed channels through the Great Sandy Strait allowing the passage of marine life as well as the passage of humans in boats. Without flooding, the mouth of the Mary could well become unnavigable for all but the smallest craft. Whilst dredging may allow boats to subsequently negotiate the sandbars and mudbanks, marine life will largely be blocked from heading upstream. This will adversely impact the Great Sandy Strait ecosystem, the Fraser Island World Heritage Area, as well as the lower Mary.

- The maintenance of the fresh water flowing into Great Sandy Strait is vital to supporting the levels salinity and pH on which Great Sandy Strait's rich ecosystem is based. The loss of environmental flow resulting from the Traveston Dam will reduce the productivity in ways that can't yet begin to be quantified.

Dam Viability

There are many issues about the site, which we also raise:

- Over the last 80 years of rainfall in the Mary River catchment, each 20 year period has been seen less flooding events than the preceding 20 years. This is possibly due to the increasing volumes being drawn from the river for agricultural industrial and urban purposes and the establishment of more structures such as the Borumba and Baroon Pocket Dams. It may also reflect changing rainfall patterns, which will a significant feature of Global Warming. This proposed massive Traveston dam, which is being built on the political pronouncement that 85% environmental flow will be maintained, will only fill with a major flood. Based on the rainfall data available, such events may now occur only once or twice every 20 years. It is quite possible that Traveston Dam, if built by 2011, will not fill until 2021 or even 2031.
- The Mary Valley is a sandy valley. The silt washing down from the mountains, some of which has been carried to Great Sandy Strait will make the dam shallower and shallower over time. This will reduce the capacity of the dam as a water reserve.
- Evaporation from this vast, shallow dam will be significant, and a compounding problem, as the dam becomes shallower over time.

Cost Benefit Analysis

There has been no Cost Benefit Analysis released to show that the Traveston Dam is the best solution to the Water Needs of the Region. Indeed, it appears that the full cost of the Traveston Dam has yet to be determined, let alone compared that with the alternatives. This is a serious concern, and something that needs to be facilitated at the earliest opportunity.

In conclusion, we believe that the Traveston Dam should not be built for several reasons:

- It is inconsistent with the Federal Government's obligation to protect World Heritage sites;
- It is inconsistent with the Federal Government's obligations to protect Ramsar Sites;
- It is inconsistent with Federal Government's own legislation to protect endangered species;
- There are genuine concerns about the ability of the Dam to meet the projected water yields;
- The alternatives to the Traveston Dam have not been adequately assessed through a Cost Benefit Analysis.

We would be happy to provide further information in relation to this submission if required.

Yours sincerely

John Sinclair,
Honorary Project Officer.