



WATER QUALITY AND COASTAL DEVELOPMENT REEF ADVISORY COMMITTEE (WRAC) 18th Meeting 29 November 2005 – Townsville SUMMARY DOCUMENT

The eighteenth meeting of the WRAC was held on 29 November 2005 in Townsville. Following is a summary of the main items discussed at the meeting.

COASTAL DEVELOPMENT

The Committee was given a presentation on coastal development within the GBR catchment, which outlined current Australian Government coastal development initiatives, including steps that the GBRMPA is taking to influence sustainable development at the local government level. Members considered the gaps, overlaps and future requirements for ensuring sustainable coastal development in the GBR catchments into the future.

In discussion, the following comments were noted:

- There was some concern at the significant increase in industrial development (and associated upgrades to infrastructure) along the GBR coast that may contribute to climate change due to an increase in the use of fossil fuels. There appeared to be little consideration given to the accumulative and long-term effects of industrial development and growth.
- It was acknowledged that there is good planning in place, both at Federal and State Government regulatory level, and that many of these sorts of issues had already been identified. It was suggested that problems may arise as a result of resource limitations in some areas, rather than poor planning; for example, implementation of these sorts of programs is often limited to the larger local government groups who have staff appropriately trained in the natural resource field.
- There was some concern at the apparent lack of a management plan to address stormwater. It was suggested that, in areas where rainfall had been below average, the first decent rains were likely to cause major damage to the GBRMP from debris flushed through the system.
- There was some concern at the lack of consistency in taking up issues such as the management of nutrients on the Reef. Some of the key threats are run-off containing land-based sediments and nutrients, as well as the destruction of habitats and communities that act as a filter for nutrients and sediments. Many of the causes are from diffuse sources (e.g., stormwater, run-off from agricultural practices) and need to be controlled.
- It was acknowledged that the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan tries to address many of these issues. Frameworks have been established; however, there still

needs to be a firm commitment to implementation from both the Queensland and Australian Governments. While it appears that there is a commitment for the Plan's proposed improvements to management, monitoring and planning, some members were concerned about commitment for the appropriate resources, including new funding.

- Members recalled that in the WRAC's initial discussions, it was felt that regional bodies and industries had not been engaged as well as they may have been, and suggested that this process was still proving to be a hurdle. It was agreed that community engagement is essential to encourage a process of change, and that positive outputs should be reported, as an incentive for continued participation.

In concluding discussion, it was pointed out that there has been remarkable change within the Natural Resource Management process. While there has been a lot of progress made, there are obviously some disappointments as well. The importance of having environmental values recognised in any planning process was noted.

REEF PLAN

Implementation and Reporting

The Committee was updated on the progress with implementation and reporting on the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan (Reef Plan). As part of the information strategy, the Reef Plan Secretariat will work closely with the Queensland Farmers Federation, AgForce and other agriculture industry representatives to ensure that a positive message is being promoted.

In discussion, the following comments were noted:

- It was suggested that an indication of positive outputs needs to be given (e.g., the decrease in the amounts of fertilisers that have been used in the catchments), as incentives for continued participation in the Plan.
- It was noted that the present reporting was a benchmarking process in respect to the GBRMPA setting up its monitoring program.
- It was suggested that it may be appropriate for the independent audit to be publicly available in the near future, so that we can move on from the recommendations made. The Commonwealth and State Governments are working better now than they were, and there is a greater alignment with industry. It takes individuals to make a difference, not just governments.

- Concern was expressed at the perceived failure to impose penalties on those who are not complying with State legislation, such as the Environmental Protection Act. It was noted that there are various developments waiting to begin (e.g., roadworks and building developments), and there is a high risk of acid sulphate soils being washed into the GBR lagoon.

Integrated Monitoring Program

The Committee was provided with an overview of the IFA08 project, which is providing the co-ordination mechanism for the water quality monitoring program in the GBR catchments.

In discussion, the following comments were noted:

- Natural Resource Management (NRM) groups are currently under pressure to complete a target setting exercise, and it was suggested that the sharing of appropriate information may assist them in this process.
- In terms of reporting, it was suggested that the WRAC and the Water Quality Co-ordination Group (WQCG) or similar groups, could co-ordinate advice. It was suggested that the involvement of high-level executives was essential, and that the reporting process should be directed more at Director-General level.
- Members acknowledged the advantages of having the WRAC meetings bring together all the NRM groups, and were keen for that opportunity to continue. The Chairman noted that the initial aim of the WQCG was to bring the regional groups together, so that another group, the Water Quality Technical Group (made up of departmental representatives), could meet at the end of the WQCG's meeting, taking advantage of those members' attendance. Unfortunately, this did not materialise. At the same time, good relations have established with the Reef Plan Secretariat and the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (DNRM).
- Members agreed that it was important that this project be seen through to completion; if funding is a concern, resources must be found to ensure the project's completion. Strategic Reserve funding was being sought.

Target Setting – The Way Forward

The Committee was brought up-to-date on the issue of defining interim quantitative water quality targets in the GBR catchments, subject to the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Operational Committee (IOC). It was noted that addressing water quality is about the journey as well as the destination; there is a tremendous amount of inertia in the way in which the catchments' water quality will respond to any change in land management practices. There is no quick fix to change the inertias from one trajectory to another; change will take its time.

In discussion, the following comments were noted:

- It was suggested that there is a challenge in terms of the types of monitoring tools and models that are to be used. The variability of the catchment from south to north was noted, and it was suggested that it would be inappropriate to rely totally on water sampling alone.
- It was suggested that the current models are cutting-edge in terms of defining linkages and, for all their imperfection, they are really the only tools we have of linking land-use to impacts out in the Marine Park.

- Most regional bodies are very concerned with measuring change in water quality all the way up the catchment; the end of valley target is one thing, but unless some decent sub-catchment level targets are met, emphasis on the end of valley target is misplaced to a degree.
- It was suggested that there was still an element of confusion in the community; definite messages need to be given, otherwise community support could be lost.
- It was suggested that concentration levels rather than loads would be a more appropriate indicator, given that water quality objectives in river systems were based on concentration levels. It was pointed out that there were difficulties in measuring concentration levels in rivers; it would be problematic in determining the best time for sampling to be carried out, given that testing was normally done during "slow flow".

In concluding discussion, the Chairman noted that this was an ongoing development of an adaptive process, and acknowledged the invaluable communication of the group of people who have been involved in this process over a long time. He suggested that we need to be cognisant of how the targets are promoted.

CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN

Members were provided with an overview of how the GBRMPA, in collaboration with the Australian Greenhouse Office, is working to address the challenges associated with climate change effects on the GBR, and of the importance of trying to build resilience through reducing stresses on the GBR's ecosystems.

Members agreed that the presentation contained valuable information, and suggested that local councils would benefit from receiving the same presentation.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting, WRAC 19, was proposed for 16 and 17 March 2006, and will be the first meeting of the new Committee's term of membership.

Meetings for the remainder of 2006 include:

- WRAC 20 on 13 and 14 July; and
- WRAC 21 on 9 and 10 November 2006.

CURRENT MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE	
Mr Tony Allingham	Grazing Industry
Mr Mike Berwick	Wet Tropics NRM
Ms Veronica Blazely	Dept Environment and Heritage
Mr Harry Bonanno	Burnett/Mary NRM
Mr Noel Dawson	Independent Chairman
Mr Tony Fontes	Tourism Industry
Dr Miles Furnas	AIMS/CRC Water Quality
Mr Richard Leck	Conservation
Ms Sheriden Morris	CSIRO
Dr Tony Pressland	Natural Resources
Mr Clive Rogers	Mackay/Whitsunday NRM
Dr Nick Schofield	Catchment Management
Mr Kirk Smith	Catchment/Management Landcare
Mr Ian Sutton	Conservation
Mr Vern Veitch	Recreational Fishing
Dr Tim Wrigley	Canegrowers
Mr Hugh Yorkston	GBRMPA
To be appointed	Estuary and Water Management CRC
To be appointed	Fitzroy Basin Association NRM
To be appointed	Qld Dept Natural Resources and Mines