



WATER QUALITY AND COASTAL DEVELOPMENT REEF ADVISORY COMMITTEE (WRAC) 19th Meeting 7 and 8 November 2006 – Townsville SUMMARY DOCUMENT

The nineteenth meeting of the WRAC was held on 7 and 8 November 2006 in Townsville. This was the first meeting of the third WRAC, and attendees included a number of new members. The Committee now comprises members with a wide range of expertise and experience relevant to issues regarding the impact of water quality and coastal development on the GBR. A summary of the outcomes of the main items discussed is set out below.

OVERVIEW OF THE GBRMPA

The Committee was provided with an overview of the WRAC, and the sorts of issues that will be considered by members. It was noted that water quality begins in the catchment areas, and can have impacts on the outer reef; the pressures are mounting, including climate change, increased sea temperatures and coral bleaching events. While there has been some improvement generally in the water quality of the GBR, there is room for more improvement.

It was suggested that the issue of land management could be an agenda item for a future meeting, with the Committee having a structured discussion on the causes, mitigation and further improvements that can be made, with a view to formulating some recommendations for submission to the GBRMPA.

REEF PLAN

Members were concerned that the Reef Plan report to the Prime Minister and the Queensland Premier had yet to be released.

In discussion, the following comments were noted:

- There is currently no science being funded for research into the protection of wetlands. No two wetlands are the same; while we know some of the processes, we cannot hope to understand them all. The focus of management currently is the off-stream wetlands. It is very difficult to come up with support systems that can make appropriate decisions on how these wetland areas are rehabilitated; however, this needs to be sorted out, otherwise there will be ongoing difficulties in the future.
- The State vegetation management legislation has not focused on wetlands; there is a range of things impacting on wetlands where the State and Federal legislation could provide a guide.

- Members were concerned at the lack of industry involvement. While the role of Natural Resource Management (NRM) groups was acknowledged, it was agreed that industry also has an important role to play.
- Water quality was one of the research priorities identified by the Marine and Tropical Science Research Facility (MTSRF).

In concluding discussion, it was agreed that there is a need to continue to develop industry links through the Reef Plan process, in terms of implementation and governance. It was also recognised that there may be greater opportunity to achieve better GBR outcomes through NRM regional body and local government processes. It was suggested that these issues be discussed at a future WRAC meeting.

REPORTS ON PROGRESS AND ISSUES

Members updated the Committee on progress on the natural resource management arrangements in their particular areas.

CSIRO

- A major investment currently underway relevant to the “water for a healthy country” theme in the GBR; broken down into three stream areas (sustainable grazing land, floodplain renewal, and catchment futures programme), with four themes (water resources observation network, better basis management, healthy water ecosystems and concentration of wetlands). The programme will take in areas from north-eastern NSW up through Queensland and into the Top End of the Northern Territory.
- A modelling workshop was held recently, with a range of stakeholders, modellers, NRM groups and the GBRMPA in attendance. The emphasis was on the fact that the systems we are interested in are highly ephemeral. The group looked at ways that future modelling systems could be developed that would address the issues of specific relevance.

Coastal Development

- Soil and erosion is an area that needs to be addressed.
- It seems that there are many disincentives (mainly financial) in the construction industry for people to do the right thing; for example, the amount of a loan decreases if you want to build a 2-3 bedroom home, or use lightweight materials, thus decreasing the value of the home.

- There was concern that the efficient design of homes in north Queensland does not appear to be encouraged, with many of the new homes being built in the Mackay, Townsville and Cairns regions being heavily reliant on air conditioning.

Cape York

- Programmes currently in place to address the control of feral animals and feral weeds.
- It was noted that the control and spraying of certain weeds such as the hymenachne weed (a semi-aquatic grass that is now a serious threat to northern wetlands), is an onerous process. The Queensland Government, through the Weeds of National Significance Strategy, is looking at developing a standardised format, so that people can have a better understanding of this issue.
- It was suggested that spraying by itself is not the answer; rotting vegetation needs to be taken out of the waterway to lessen the incidence of further outbreak. This is an issue that many NRM groups are battling, and there is little research to assist them.
- Cape York is a very large area (the size of Victoria) and has 16 local government type agencies. Communication is quite difficult, given the area's size and remote locality. A Regional Organisation of Councils has been formed to discuss issues affecting the area.
- Attempting to implement a series of waste transfer stations on Cape York to collect rubbish and bring it down south. Supported the Reef Guardian Council programme, providing education and communication to Cape York locals and visitors alike.
- The Cape York community is hopeful that an NRM group will be established.

Canegrowers

- Changes in farming practices are now reaping the benefits; and changes in the industry will provide further environmental benefits.
- A series of best practice booklets is being developed; whilst the main focus is on the sugar industry, the booklets will also provide valuable information to NRM groups and others.
- Reasonably good tools are being developed in relation to nutrient management plans. Some delays have been experienced due to the recent case of sugar cane smut.
- Canegrowers were complimented on the industry's change in attitude towards farm practices over the last few years.

WATER QUALITY AND COASTAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP'S 5-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

Members were given a presentation on the WQ&CD Group's strategic plan, and asked for advice on what the Group should concentrate on during the next five years.

In discussion, the following comments were noted:

- The health of the GBR is the primary issue on which the GBRMPA should be reporting. Key performance indicators need to be identified and reported on, which then drive management actions that achieve changes in activities that impact on the health of the GBR.

- It is also important to identify actions that can be taken to alleviate threats. Partnerships with agencies such as NRM groups need to be clearly identified.
- If partnerships are one of the key mechanisms to be used to achieve the GBRMPA's goals, you have to look at who your partners are and whether they have lead or support roles.

CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN

Members were updated on the progress in developing the GBR climate change action plan. The action plan includes addressing issues such as early warning, survey, communication, physical response mechanisms and increases in carbon dioxide levels. Research has shown that some areas are susceptible to bleaching. Water quality is the key to recovery; if the water is turbid then algae will die more quickly. Educational material such as fact sheets will be developed, and a book is to be published in April/May 2007.

NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT ZONES

Members were updated on progress towards establishing Nutrient Management Zones under the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan. The focus will be on the mechanisms to manage nutrients and keep them "on farms". While there is a lot of information on fertilisers in the sugar cane industry, there is not the same level for horticulture. While ground water was brought up as part of the peer review process, essentially, the focus is on surface water run-off. Also looking to include industry advocates; Growcom and Canegrowers have been engaged, there now needs to be more involvement from farmers "on the ground".

NEXT MEETING

Proposed dates for meetings during 2007 include:

- WRAC 20 on 22 and 23 March;
- WRAC 21 on 26 and 27 July; and
- WRAC 22 on 22 and 23 November 2007.

CURRENT MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE

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| Mr Mike Berwick | Far North Queensland NRM |
| Ms Veronica Blazely | Dept of the Environment and Heritage |
| Mrs Leith Bouilly | Independent Chairman |
| Mr Colin Creighton | Mackay-Whitsunday NRM |
| Mr Tony Fontes | Tourism Industry |
| Professor Iain Gordon | CSIRO |
| Mr Steve Greenwood | Qld Local Government Association |
| Mr Richard Leck | Non-Government Organisation, Conservation |
| Ms Andrea Leverington | Qld Government – Reef Secretariat |
| Ms Sandy McCathie | Sustainable Practices in Building and Development Industry |
| Ms Rachel Mackenzie | Horticulture Industry |
| Ms Sheriden Morris | Marine and Tropical Science Research Facility |
| Mr Kirk Smith | Landcare |
| Mr Bob Sullivan | Cape York NRM |
| Mr Vern Veitch | Recreational Fishing |
| Dr Tim Wrigley | Sugar Industry |
| Mr Hugh Yorkston | Director, GBRMPA |
| To be appointed | Indigenous |