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29 January 2016

Water Trigger Review
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To whom it may concern

Re: Independent review of the 'water trigger' legislation

North Queensland Conservation Council (NQCC), the regional voice for the environment in NQ since 1974, appreciates the opportunity to comment on the review of the 'water trigger' component of the EPBC Act.

The importance of water in the environment

There can be no denying that the issue of water, especially in the driest inhabited continent on the planet, is of paramount importance. In a climate rapidly heating up as a result of human activity, the need for protection and security of water resources cannot be over overstated

The Australian community is well aware of the importance of the nation's water supply, and it is extremely concerned about how this natural resource is managed.

Given the alarming wake-up call that the community received when they learned that, through abuse and overuse, 50% of the coral of the Great Barrier Reef had been destroyed over a period of just 27 years, the community is now fearful for that other great Australia icon, the Great Artesian Basin. But it is not just the GAB that is at risk when it comes to water; also in jeopardy are vital water bodies in urban and peri-urban areas that support the majority of the Australian population and industry, with national implications.

To say that water is the foundation of Australia's indigenous and later-coming people's life and lifestyle is no exaggeration. Given this, its protection must override all other concerns. Without adequate reliable water resources there can be no healthy society or strong industry.

The cryptic nature of water resources

Unlike, for example, traffic congestion, the impact of the overuse of water is often not obvious. Few Australians get to witness the degradation of the Murray Darling Basin, the environmental problems of the Coorong or the salination of SW Western Australia. Making things even less easy to appreciate is the fact that much of Australia's water supply lies in vast underground basins. (Ironically, the names of these basins have now become more linked to coal resources than to water – and the exploitation of that climate-changing and increasingly worthless fossil fuel is exploited at the expense of, *inter alia*, vast quantities of water.)

It is this cryptic attribute of much of our water resources that makes high level, rigorous and transparent management so necessary. And like flora and fauna, water (and air) does not recognise territorial boundaries. What occurs on land in one area can have major impacts on other areas – in the case of water, often some distance away. The GAB, for example, underlies three states (Qld, SA and NSW) and the Northern Territory. And, as has been noted, many if not all aquifers are linked. It is partly for this reason that management at the Commonwealth level is essential.

Strengthening of the role of the IESC

Firstly, NQCC welcomes the fact that this legislation is to be reviewed by an independent, expert scientific committee (IESC). When making policy decisions in relation to issues of such moment it is imperative that the advice on which the decision is based is independent and expert and based on sound science. It goes without saying that once provided it is essential that such information is followed to the letter by policy-makers. To ensure that the expertise and wisdom of the IESC is adopted, it should be given power to make and monitor standards.

The need for Commonwealth legislation

In addition to the issues raised above (the cross-border behaviour of water and the national importance of water resources at social, environmental, economic and security levels) it is important that water management is consistent across the continent. Varying State and Territory levels and means of management would result in varying protection of the national asset of water.

Cumulative impacts

The Department of the Environment, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO recognised that much of the reason behind the shock loss of 50% of the coral reef over the last 30 years was a result of unrecognised cumulative impacts.

This 'death by a thousand cuts', or impact of many 'small' individual insults accumulating over time is a major cause of environmental degradation. A

nationwide view and management of water resources would assist in ensuring that such cumulative impacts did not occur.

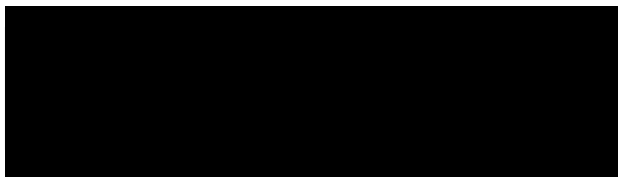
Objections to the water trigger

It appears that opposition to the water trigger is concentrated amongst the big commercial users and influences of water resources – notably the mineral resources industry. Opposition from such sources needs to be understood for what it is – an objection to protection of invaluable long-term public water resources that may lead to a loss of private short-term profit. It is essential that water use and management decisions are made on the basis of science, not short-term private profit. This becomes even more imperative when much of the market for fossil fuel resources, major water users, is ‘drying up’.

Improvements to water management

NQCC would like to see the management of water resources strengthened at a national level. While it is not in a position to itemise ways in which improvements could be made, it would welcome the IESC reviewing existing legislation and their findings being implemented. At the least, the water trigger should be broadened to include all mining-related exploits and, indeed, all developments that involve large use of water and major impacts on water resources.

Yours truly,

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Coordinator