



COMMUNIQUE

Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce

28 September 2007

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA TASKFORCE IN QUEENSLAND

The Australian Government's Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce visited Queensland for the week 24–28 September 2007. The Taskforce, established by the Prime Minister, the Hon John Howard MP, as part of *A National Plan for Water Security*, is examining the potential for further developing land and water resources in northern Australia in an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable manner.

The Taskforce met with the Hon Craig Wallace, Queensland Minister for Natural Resources and Water and QLD government officials to discuss the range of issues associated with sustainable development across north Queensland.

The Taskforce travelled to Townsville, Richmond, Georgetown, Lakeland, Hopevale and Cairns to meet with stakeholders and community leaders who presented detailed information covering a wide range of opportunities, from small scale proposals through to more substantial water infrastructure projects. The Taskforce noted the diversity of environments and the unique nature of many river systems in north Queensland, highlighting the dangers associated with assuming a one-size-fits-all approach to resource management. A recurring theme in discussions was the opportunities available for mosaic-style smaller scale developments, reflecting the limited availability of good quality land. This will also allow maintenance of the interconnectedness of the tropical savannah.

The Taskforce noted that an important precondition to future development is the timely finalisation of water resource planning in Queensland. Reflecting a theme that has been evident across northern Australia (the Taskforce visited the Northern Territory in July and Western Australia in August) the Taskforce noted the importance of ensuring that good science supports water resource planning. It is essential that planners and developers have a good understanding of how the landscape works, especially the interconnectivity of ground and surface water systems, across northern Australia.

Such knowledge requires good science, supported by sound measurement and monitoring practice. The Taskforce noted that for much of the northern Gulf and Cape York Peninsula regions, detailed on-the-ground and in-stream information are often sparse, and that previously collected information is often not readily accessible. A system focused on

the north, which captures this information, and makes it accessible to those who need it, is essential to support informed decision making.

Another important theme that emerged during consultations in Queensland was concerns raised by stakeholders of the potential for perverse environmental outcomes to occur as a result of Queensland's Native Vegetation and Wild Rivers legislation. This was reinforced by concerns expressed that the neglect of country within reserve areas (such as in national parks) has the potential to heighten a range of important risks to the natural environment and to production assets, such as with biosecurity or intense wild fires. In this context, the Taskforce also noted strong support from stakeholders to the notion of stewardship, whereby landholders deliver a range of environmental outcomes on behalf of the community as a whole.

The Taskforce again noted the important role that infrastructure plays in opening up development opportunities across a range of industries, such as agriculture, minerals and resources and tourism. Improved roads and power supply were high on the list of hard infrastructure requirements, while access to education, housing affordability and the availability of skilled and unskilled labour were other key issues highlighted.

The Taskforce took the opportunity to visit Hopevale to learn of the aspirations and constraints impacting on indigenous communities in northern Queensland. The Taskforce noted the deep level of frustration and concern expressed by community leaders with respect to the potential impact new legislative controls could have on the natural environment and on opportunities for sustainable economic development, particularly on Cape York.

The Taskforce also noted the very real difficulties faced in raising capital and implementing sustainable development projects on freehold aboriginal land as a result of the land tenure arrangements.

An independent audit of sustainable business opportunities that exist across Cape York was also proposed as an effective means to reveal the true social and economic cost of constraints to development opportunities.

The Taskforce's interim Report will be released this year. More information can be found at www.environment.gov.au/water/action/development/nalwt-tor.html.