



Strategy for Delivering Water Resource Management in Cape York

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Minister's foreword

The Queensland Government is committed to enhancing the four pillars of Queensland's economy—agriculture, resources, tourism and construction. A key initiative in the delivery of this agenda is the preparation of new statutory regional plans to provide regional economic and land-use opportunities.

A draft Strategy for Delivering Water Resource Management in Cape York was released for public consultation in November 2013 by the Department of Natural Resources and Mines to support the regional planning process in Cape York being undertaken by the Department of State Development, Infrastructure and Planning.

After considering community feedback on the draft strategy I have now developed this final strategy. This strategy establishes a clear pathway for delivering responsible and productive water management, allocation and use of water resources for the Cape York community.

This strategy identifies short term and long term actions that will enhance opportunities for future access to water resources for agriculture, tourism and other industries in a responsible way.

Importantly, the strategy will deliver a water resource plan for Cape York bringing certainty and security to existing water users and supporting future economic development opportunities and the social wellbeing of Cape York communities.

I will endeavor to work with the community as the strategy is delivered to ensure a prosperous future in Cape York.

Andrew Cripps MP
Minister for Natural Resources and Mines



Chapter 1 Introduction

The Department of Natural Resources and Mines has developed the *Strategy for Delivering Water Resource Management in Cape York* (strategy). The strategy applies to the river basins in Cape York as shown in Figure 1 (strategy area).

The strategy establishes short term and long term actions that provide a pathway for delivering a responsible and productive framework for water management, allocation and use for the Cape York community. This will provide certainty and confidence for water users across Cape York, support future economic development opportunities for industry and safeguard community water supply needs.

The strategy complements the regional planning process by providing a pathway to ensure water resource management can be delivered in a way that is consistent with the outcomes of a Cape York Regional Plan. This pathway also allows water to be provided for Indigenous people to fulfill their economic and social aspirations in line with the *Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act 2007*.

The strategy recognises the importance of the resources sector to the local and State economies and the significant potential for further resources development into the future, particularly on western Cape York where there is strong interest in future bauxite mining operations.

This strategy will support the Queensland Agriculture Strategy which is part of the Queensland Government's vision to double agricultural production in Queensland by 2040. The pathway set out by the strategy will provide a framework that seeks certainty for producers in agricultural areas underpinned by delivering secure and defined water entitlements for agriculture.



Chapter 2 Short-term actions

Short term actions will help to ensure that water continues to be available to support economic and social development opportunities while water resource planning activities are undertaken. These are:

- end the Cape York Peninsula Amendment Moratorium Notice (moratorium notice) and
- the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (DNRM) will deal favourably with water licence applications where the impacts of the proposed development are minimal or have been demonstrated to have manageable impacts on existing water users and the environment.

2.1 Ending the Cape York Peninsula Amendment Moratorium Notice

The moratorium notice ceased to have effect from 28 May 2014 and applied to the following river basins: Jardine, Jacky Jacky, Ducie, Olive–Pascoe, Watson, Holroyd, Coleman and Jeannie. The purpose of the moratorium notice was originally to limit water related development while wild river declarations were prepared.

Any future removal of a Cape York wild river declaration will also mean that any volumes of unallocated water reserves prescribed in the declaration will no longer exist. However, this will not affect a stakeholder's aspiration to obtain water for future development opportunities. To date, there have been no applications received by DNRM seeking access to water from any of these unallocated water reserves. The short-term framework provides an equal playing field for accessing water for all stakeholders across Cape York utilising the application process under section 206 of the *Water Act 2000* (Water Act).

A section 206 process allows for water licence applications to take water in a watercourse, lake or spring and water from an aquifer across the strategy area to be considered by the chief executive. Under section 206, there is no limit to the volume of water that can be applied for, subject to the consideration of public interests, impacts on existing water users, non-consumptive users, natural ecosystems, and the physical integrity of watercourses, lakes, springs or aquifers.

2.2 Dealing with water licence applications

DNRM intends to deal favourably with water licence applications that demonstrate minimal and/or manageable impacts on water users and the environment to provide for responsible economic development opportunities. If the number of licence applications, or volume sought for take is excessive, a moratorium could be considered as a short-term measure pending the implementation of long-term framework proposals.

This approach provides scope to tailor management decisions to specific areas and will also aid in the preparation of longer term strategies by identifying development hotspots and priorities for water resource development and management. Future unallocated water reserves will be considered in the water planning activities discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.



Chapter 3 Long-term actions

Long term actions to be implemented will provide a pathway for responsible and productive water resource management in Cape York that balances agriculture, resources, tourism, construction, human consumptive needs and non-consumptive needs. These are:

- commence a water resource planning process in Cape York to support responsible and productive management, allocation and use of water resources
- align water rights in special agreement acts with the Water Act framework to bring water management and allocation under a single legislative framework.

3.1 Commencing a water resource planning process

Commencing a Cape York water resource planning process under the Water Act will support efficient water use and promote highest value uses for water for economic productivity. This will involve the development of water planning instruments for Cape York.

Development of these water planning instruments will be informed by social, economic, hydrologic and environmental knowledge. This will include the review, assessment and modelling of surface water and groundwater hydrology, and review and assessment of environmental considerations for Cape York. The outcomes of these assessments will inform the planning process and be communicated to stakeholders. Detailed assessment may include:

- documentation of existing scientific information and studies
- collection of data to improve understanding of important hydrological and ecological information and processes needed to carry out modelling and assessment of each river basin in Cape York
- economic and social information on current condition and trends related to water supply and use within Cape York
- Indigenous cultural values related to water
- data analysis and modelling to investigate scenarios related, but not limited, to water allocations, unallocated water reserves and future water resource development proposals.

Community consultation will underpin the water planning process to ensure that community aspirations are incorporated into the long term planning activities for Cape York. Preparing water planning instruments will provide a number of beneficial outcomes for the Cape York community such as better specification and/or issue of water entitlements with conditions that ensure secure supplies for existing users. Furthermore, water planning instruments can establish tradeable water allocations to expand the water market and contain water sharing rules that can be activated during times of critical water need. Unallocated water reserves will be considered for each catchment in Cape York to provide for future water development without compromising the security of existing water entitlements or the environment.

Therefore, commencing a water planning process will provide the means to address various aspirations and development priorities in Cape York in the long term.



3.2 Aligning water rights in special agreement acts with the Water Act framework

It is envisaged that through negotiation with relevant companies, the management of existing water rights contained in special agreement acts and future water development needs of these companies, will be aligned with and incorporated into the Water Act framework. This will act to ensure long-term sustainability and productivity of the mining industry in Cape York by bringing water development opportunities and management under the one legislative framework.

Aligning special agreement act water rights with the Water Act will enhance management of water resources and increase certainty of access and security of entitlement for existing water users in Cape York.

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