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The Burdekin Basin needs integrated, multi-purpose catchment management.

Speaking at seminar held in Townsville last week, eminent scientist John Williams warned that if urgent action is not taken, the Burdekin River could follow the same path to degradation as the Murray Darling River. Professor Williams, Adjunct Professor at the Australian National University and founding member of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, said that with multiple proposals for new dams on the Burdekin River, action is needed now.

The seminar “Ensuring a Viable Burdekin Basin” was held at JCU on 14 September and organised by the North Queensland Conservation Council. Speaking today after a review of the seminar’s findings, NQCC spokesperson, John Connell said that the main message of the seminar was that there is an urgent need for an integrated management system for the whole Burdekin Basin to ensure the multiple functions and underlying environmental health of the river is maintained.

“I was pleased to see this call echoed in Tony Raggatt’s article in the Townsville Bulletin on 19 September”, Mr Connell said.

Mr Connell reported that the seminar highlighted the key issues that need to be considered to manage one of North Queensland’s major resources. “We were excited by the attendance at the seminar of over 40 stakeholders representing regional councils, three irrigator groups from the Lower Burdekin, and a commercial fishing representative from Alva Beach” Mr Connell said. “The speakers list read like a “who’s who” of experts on the Burdekin and water issues generally, and included scientists from the Wentworth Group of Scientists, JCU’s TropWATER, CSIRO, AIMS, NQ Dry Tropics and Terrain NRM.”

Speakers from Trop WATER pointed out that sediments carried by the river play a key role in its health and its environmental impact. The presentations distinguished between fine silts that remain in suspension (e.g. clays) and coarser, heavier particles (e.g. sand) that sink into the dam. Studies presented show that the Burdekin Falls Dam itself is in good shape with an expected life of 270 years, far longer than is common for most dams. The issues with sediment arise in other areas.

One unexpected consequence of the Burdekin Falls Dam has been increased turbidity of the mainstream flows caused by silt captured by a dam and then released all throughout the year. Increases in silt and nutrients from agriculture are carried out to the reef affecting coral health.



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Speaking at the seminar, Professor Eric Wolanski shared his fears that Cape Bowling Green will soon be breached. He told the seminar that over 90% of the sand is captured in the Burdekin Falls Dam. This is the sand that formed Cape Bowling Green 2500 years ago. Its capture now appears to be associated with high rates of erosion on Cape

Bowling Green and as a result, the Cape Bowling Green peninsula may breach in the foreseeable future, affecting rich fisheries in Bowling Green Bay.

Professor Wolanski's research was featured in that article "Fears dams could boost coastal erosion", published in the Townsville Bulletin earlier this month (5 September).

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