

MEDIA RELEASE

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Two dam projects must now consider wider impacts.

The Coordinator-General (COG) has just released the final Terms of Reference for the Environmental Impact Statements for the Burdekin Falls Dam Raising project and the proposed Urannah Dam. This followed the COG's public consultation process where they received 67 and 218 submissions on the draft Terms of Reference for the two proposals respectively. NQCC welcomes the decision to include specific sections on the "Cumulative Impacts" and "Coastal Processes" of the projects, issues stressed in our own submissions to the COG on their draft Terms of Reference.

There are currently four proposals for new dams on the Burdekin. These are Hells Gates Dam (540,000 ML extraction) and Big Rocks Weir (10,000 ML extraction) on the Upper Burdekin; raising the Burdekin Falls Dam (150,000 ML extraction) on the Lower Burdekin, and the Urannah Dam (150,000 ML extraction) on the Broken/Bowen river catchment. Together they would almost double the current extraction to a total of 23% of average flows.

Each of these has a separate proponent or proposer: Townsville Enterprise (TEL), Charters Towers Regional Council; SunWater; and Bowen Collinsville Enterprise (BCE), respectively. Despite being on the same river system, normally each of these projects would be assessed independently. "The Murray-Darling Basin has suffered greatly by not having a basin-wide management system until relatively recently", said John Connell from North Queensland Conservation Council. "The section on 'cumulative impacts' will thus require each proponent to consider not just the impact of their own project, but also to take into account the impact of all of the projects taken together."

The need for cumulative assessment of impacts was also raised by Lower Burdekin Water which manages irrigation in the delta area of the Lower Burdekin also emphasised the need for cumulative assessment. Irrigation in the delta area of the Lower Burdekin is sourced from underground bores, and large flood events are needed to recharge the aquifer and prevent ingress of salt water from the sea. John Connell, notes that “increased extraction of water from anywhere within the Burdekin Basin, or a higher dam, would reduce these flood events. This potentially threatens agricultural production in the delta. Thus, it is vital we have an overview of all projects on the river in order to protect the viability of agriculture in the Lower Burdekin.”

The new section in the ToR’s on “Coastal Processes” would ensure that issues such as the erosion of Cape Bowling Green is also examined. Currently, Burdekin Falls Dam captures all coarse sediment from the Upper Burdekin, starving Cape Bowling Green of the sediment which formed it.

According to research by JCU oceanographer Prof. Eric Wolanski, erosion of about 100m can be observed along the length of the Cape and a breach is predicted towards the tip of the Cape in the coming decades. This tip of the Cape is an aggregation point for black marlin something well known to sport fishermen.

If Cape Bowling Green is breached by erosion, this would have significant impacts on Bowling Green Bay itself – a Ramsar wetlands site recognised internationally for its diverse ecology. It provides breeding areas and nursery grounds for many important species, such as mangrove jack and barramundi. These would all be impacted by a breach of the Cape. Coarse sediment is still supplied from the Bowen/Broken river catchment. Construction of Urannah Dam would thus accelerate this erosion process.



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The Terms of Reference for the Environmental Impact Statements for Big Rocks Weir and Hells Gates Dam have yet to be released, but it is likely that there will be similar requirements for the proponents of these two dams to address these issues as well.

“NQCC has called for new mechanisms for management of the Burdekin Basin as a whole. The requirement for all dam proponents to make cumulative assessments of their impacts is a step in this direction. The Burdekin Water Management Plan is due to be renewed in September 2023 and this could continue towards development of management approach for the whole Burdekin Basin”, said John Connell.

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