



## North Coast Environment Council



19/06/22

### Submission on The North Coast Regional Water Strategy

#### Background

The North Coast Environment Council (NCEC) is the peak regional conservation group on the NSW North Coast which has been active in protecting the environment for more than forty years. Our organisation receives no government funding, relying on the 'in kind' contribution of dedicated volunteers to highlight issues of environmental concern and campaign for an end to environmental destruction.

#### Harvestable Rights

While we are supportive of many of the initiatives contained in the final draft strategy, we were extremely disappointed and concerned with changes to the harvestable rights of landholders which saw a three-fold increase from 10 to 30%.

Given that climatic data suggests on average flows in the North Coast region could decline by 24% by 2070 we feel that this is totally irresponsible and will have significant impact on the aquatic environment, particularly lower order streams in upper catchments. These areas often support threatened amphibian, fish and other fauna species as well as important riparian vegetation. Increasing coastal harvestable rights has an impact on the downstream environment, reduces low flows, is a threat to coastal wetlands, a threat to town water supply, a threat to estuarine fisheries, causes increase water quality degradation and risks to groundwater recharge.

The impact of multiple landholders taking up this option of massively increased storage will certainly significantly impact low flows and downstream health. Increased demand for water by emerging horticultural industries currently extending into marginal land in upper catchments will no doubt be a driver for increased water diversion which should be discouraged rather than facilitated by such a regressive step. We urge the State Government to reconsider this change in the light of the very worrying climatic data and re establish the maximum of 10% of property run off rule.

The NSW Water Management Act (2000) recognises that repairing the ecological health of NSW rivers should be of first-order importance. The Act prioritises environmental health of water sources and the principles of ecologically sustainable development. The tripling of harvestable rights is not in line with these principles.

## **We are fully supportive of the guiding principle of taking a ‘holistic’ approach to land and water management**

Many of our members have had extensive experience of attempts to achieve ‘holistic’ Natural Resource Management through our roles as conservation or community representatives on various regional planning bodies including Catchment Management Committees, Catchment Boards, Vegetation and Water Management Committees since the 1990’s. The threats to our catchments have long ago been identified yet most are still to be properly addressed. Actions to effectively deal with threats to catchment health have been stifled by powerful industry lobby groups and political interests for too long.

The past five years have seen unprecedented stress on our water resources. Extreme drought conditions 2017-2020 saw what had been considered permanent water sources in creeks and wetlands dry for extended periods, leading to localised fish kills. The catchment scale wildfires in 2019-20 caused massive sedimentation of ash and silt mobilised, resulting in more extensive fish kills, destruction of riparian vegetation and subsequent proliferation of riparian vine weeds. The extensive ongoing flooding mobilised sediment from over cleared steep upper catchments through often over cleared and over grazed riparian areas and wetlands to further contribute to the environmental disaster.

We have seen millions of dollars of tax payer funding used to educate and encourage more sustainable land management practices which have had some, but limited benefit to improving the overall health of our rivers. We welcome the use of realistic climate data to guide further catchment planning. While we support financial incentives to assist land managers implement the required actions to improve catchment health, we expect that the acknowledged realities of climate change should see a considerable strengthening of legislation to ensure better ‘whole of catchment planning’ and protection of the environment.

The recent severe flooding events across the region highlighted the weakness in much of our current Native Vegetation Clearing laws which have been successively weakened through changes introduced by the Bio Diversity Conservation Act. Massive landslips occurred across many of our steep upper catchments contributing millions of tons of sediment to our rivers. Both steep lands as well as riparian buffers have been compromised by ‘allowable activities’ in these sensitive areas. The weakness of the current legislation needs to be addressed.

The Private Native Forestry codes as well as changes to our Public Forest Management (the recently weakened Coastal Integrated Operations Approvals) have reduced both steep land and riparian protection from logging to the detriment of the environment. The changes that allow more intensive logging have significant long-term negative impacts on both stream flows and water quality. The relatively high water use of young forests negatively impacts stream flows and town water supplies. If a genuinely holistic approach was taken regarding land and water management this weakening of legislation would not have occurred and we believe should be urgently addressed.

We are supportive of options that

- promote First Nations rights to water,
- Improve water governance including effective enforcement of compliance
- Facilitate whole of catchment ecosystem recovery programs,
- Facilitate best practice land management,

- Assess and mitigate where possible the risks of sea level rise,
- Identify and address environmental water needs with regard to the precautionary principle,
- plan for climate change,
- better understand groundwater and its ecosystems,
- improved monitoring and compliance of water extraction.

## **We support ensuring water resource development and use is sustainable and equitable**

We are supportive of options that

- improve fish passage and fish-safe water extraction,
- establish sustainable extraction limits and daily extraction limits,
- reduce the take of low flows,
- support First Nations business opportunities,

## **Preparation for future climatic extremes**

We are supportive of options that:

- support local councils integrated water cycle management providing secure and affordable water supply for towns,
- improve information about water availability and risks,
- review water markets,
- supporting on-farm dams to store licenced water rather than using catchment dams,
- increased use of recycled water for intensive horticulture,

## **Impacts of mining**

We have long been concerned about the impacts of mining in our river catchments. There are many historic derelict mines still leaching toxins into our rivers while extensive mineral exploration licenses are active in sensitive parts of our catchments. A number of local councils have support calls for a ban on mining in the Clarence Catchments following strong support for this initiative from the local community. We believe that all sensitive high conservation areas of our upper river catchments should be declared off limits to mining exploration due to the high risks of environmental damage and that legislation should be put in place to ensure this does not occur.

Additionally, we are not supportive of emergency water to be provided by the Oven Mountain Pumped Hydro Energy Storage Project as a part of Kempsey's integrated water cycle management program. This project was the subject of much concern from residents when it was listed in the first North Coast Regional Water Strategy.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this final draft of the North Coast Regional Water Strategy.

Yours Sincerely



