



Cairns and Far North Environment Centre Inc.

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Title of Referral: Far North Queensland Ports Corporation Limited (trading as Ports North)/Transport - water/Trinity Inlet, Cairns/QLD/Cairns Shipping Development (Trinity Inlet) Project, QLD

Reference Number: 2012/6538

Emailed to: epbc.referrals@environment.gov.au

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing on behalf of the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre to comment on the referral relating to a proposal by 'Ports North' to undertake further dredging in the Trinity Inlet. This proposal raises some serious environmental concerns as it has the potential to damage the surrounding natural areas which are of international ecological significance.

Given the proximity of the Inlet to Great Barrier Reef, and its value to the tourism industry, we believe that additional dredging and spoil disposal to allow larger cruise ships to enter the inlet should only proceed if it can be clearly shown that the dredging will have no adverse impact on the natural environment. Issues of concern to CAFNEC include:

- impacts on marine life such as dugongs and turtles;
- the release of potentially contaminated sediment into the greater Trinity environment and its impact on recreational fishing; and
- changes in the movement of tides and currents.

Our main concerns are around the issue of dredge spoil disposal. Dredge spoil is currently disposed of in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, about 9km north of the Cairns Port. This existing offshore spoil dump has a finite lifespan, as maintenance dredge spoil is continually disposed of at this site. Even with the proposed expansion of this disposal area, this site will eventually fill and another will need to be found. Dredge spoil disposal is already a critical issue in the local marine environment, and adding an the estimated additional 5,163,300m³ of capital dredge spoil from the initial works and an additional 580,000m³ of maintenance dredge spoil annually (an increase of 260,000m³/year from the current annual average) will heighten this problem and create an added burden for the marine environment.

The increased maintenance dredge spoil will constitute a significant ongoing threat to marine ecosystems, particularly seagrass beds, and raises the question of where to next for the dredge spoil. Dredging of the inlet will result in increased sediment loads, and most likely contaminant levels, in the inlet and surrounding areas, as silt from the sea floor is disturbed and re-suspended in the water column. This sedimentation of the water inhibits the growth of seagrass species, which are an important food source for marine species such as turtles and dugong. We have concerns that the proposed works would degrade nearby seagrass beds, with negative consequences for marine animal populations.



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In addition, we would like to highlight the potential for this project to contribute to cumulative negative impacts on the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, as there are currently many other such projects either proposed or underway along the Queensland coast. Given the scale of these dredging operations, the cumulative impacts of these projects need to be considered. The impacts of the 2011 flood and cyclone events on seagrass beds and turtle populations demonstrated the potential for devastating impacts when sediment loads increase simultaneously across large areas of the coastline.

Dredging also has the potential to damage fisheries in the region. For example, dredging in the Gladstone Harbour has been linked to outbreaks of fish disease and declining fish stocks. The social and economic implications of a similar situation arising in Cairns would be severe. The proposed dredging operation could have severe economic implications for the reef tourism sector if reef health was affected and for the fishing industry if a scenario similar to Gladstone Harbour were to arise.

The majority of tourists visiting the region come here to see the natural areas that surround Cairns, and in particular to see the Great Barrier Reef. Dredging projects such as this one have the potential to degrade the health of the coral reefs and seagrass beds in the region and the marine life that they support.

As far as we are aware there has been no detailed economic feasibility study undertaken to assess the regional economic benefits of the proposal and we question the validity of the \$436 million figure which is used by the proponent. We believe that the ecological impacts of this project going ahead would greatly outweigh any perceived benefits, and would also damage the tourism industry which the dredging would supposedly assist.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this referral and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

Yours sincerely,

Anna McGuire.

Sustainability & Climate Change Campaigner