

Central Western Qld Remote Area Planning & Development Board submission:

on the Qld State Governments proposed amendments to the Regional Planning Interests Act 2014 as it relates to the Qld part of the Lake Eyre Basin

The Central Western Qld Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) is a regional organisation of councils and regional development agency owned by and representing the seven councils of Central Western Qld. Those councils, being Barcoo Shire Council, Barcaldine Regional Council, Blackall-Tambo Regional Council, Diamantina Shire Council, Boulia Shire Council, Longreach Regional Council and Winton Shire Council represent a significant portion of the Qld section of the Lake Eyre Basin.

The RAPAD region boasts one of the most dispersed populations in the country, with roughly 12,000 people spread across an area of more than 320,000 square kilometres. Despite unique challenges – from remoteness to variable climate, a declining population – the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) states the region has the potential to enter a period of high economic growth through to 2031.

As a whole, the region is expected to grow 2.8 per cent per annum compared to the 1.9 per cent per annum achieved over the last decade, with key strengths in industries like agriculture, tourism and services which are aligned to global growth trends. Overall, the RAI modelling indicates the RAPAD region has the potential to deliver an annual output of \$1.5 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA) by 2031.

Focusing on key strategic priorities and commitment to a long-term vision will be vital to achieving these gains and RAPAD understands the complexity in maintaining the health of the Lake Eyre Basin while maximising the economic viability of the region. The region's industry strengths of agriculture, in particular beef and sheep production, including organic, will be a major driver of this growth. Similar to other Rangeland regions, the agriculture industry dominates the employment share for the region, and its annual output is expected to be \$0.6 billion more in 2031 than it was in 2013. Increasing demand from Asian markets for clean, green meat coupled with strong brand recognition of the regions, and Northern Australia's high-quality produce puts the RAPAD region in a strong position. Strategies to increase sheep meat and wool production to supply international markets for example, will be an important priority. Nevertheless, agriculture alone will not deliver the region's full potential. The RAPAD region's economy has the potential to deliver \$1.5 billion in regional output in 2031. This builds on its strong productivity, 28 per cent higher than the Australian average, and competitive specialisation in the fast-growing industries of agriculture and tourism. To reach this potential, the region must overcome its challenges and focus on key priorities and commitment to a long term sustainable economic vision and it is the role of Government – State and Federal to support the growth of our region.

Collectively, industries like tourism, public services (education, health, and public administration), construction and IT will contribute the biggest share to future economic growth. The resource industry while relatively small may offer significant contributions to the region if effectively managed and regulated. Upskilling and developing greater capacity across these industries, for example in agriculture and tourism, but also health and digital

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skills, will be key to these industries reaching their full potential. Enhancing the capability and capacity of the region will help to build on its already highly productive workforce. In both 2008 and 2013, the average productivity of the RAPAD region was more than 28 per cent higher than the Australian average. Traditionally low levels of unemployment and specialisations in agriculture, wholesale, civil engineering construction and recreation services jobs have formed the basis for a healthy labour force.

RAPAD, and its member councils understand the community's desires and aspirations and the balance required to achieve economic, social and environmental sustainability.

RAPAD has previously led facilitation on past iterations of this present discussion about the Lake Eyre Basin, through the Wild Rivers and Western Rivers policy approaches under both the then Labor and LNP governments respectively. The approach RAPAD took was one of leading multi-stakeholder negotiation amongst all stakeholder groups.

In 2018 RAPAD became aware of the changes proposed by the present State Government as a result of lobbying from various interest groups as far back as 2015, which in turn brought about a State Government commitment to progress these changes. In late 2018 we wrote offering to be a partner in discussions. In November 2019 we again wrote to the State Government requesting the release of a discussion paper, more openness from Government on this matter and our desire to partner with the State to facilitate discussions about meeting the environmental needs of the region while maximising our economic potential. To date this has been ignored.

As is now well documented and reported the Government took the approach of releasing a 6-page power point presentation with minimum detail, a week before Christmas, asking then for a 4-week turnaround for feedback. As one media outlet reported, it takes a special type of consultation to bring together disparate stakeholder groups, to voice their collective distaste for the Governments approach.

RAPAD is providing the following advice based on several input processes;

- The Boards – Mayors – intimate knowledge of their councils and community's views, including the Boards own current strategic plan - <https://www.rapad.com.au/assets/Uploads/RAPAD-Strategic-Plan-2018-20-print.pdf>
- Meetings with groups such as the Western Rivers Alliance, AgForce, and as a part of the stakeholder collective formed in response to this consultative process,
- Past consultations undertaken for RAPAD by Professor John Cole in his 'Pathways to Futures' regional consultation - <https://www.rapad.com.au/assets/Documents/Pathways-to-Futures/RAPAD-CWQ-Synthesis-Report-2016.pdf>
- Recent consultation undertaken for the Department of Environment and Science funded 'Realising the Big Vision' project - <https://www.rapad.com.au/assets/Uploads/Consultation-Report-WOW-Final-Realising-the-RAPAD-Big-Vision.pdf>
- RAPADs Pathfinder report undertaken by the Regional Australia Institute - <https://www.rapad.com.au/assets/Documents/Media-Releases/RAPAD-Pathfinder-Report-July-2017.pdf>
- Consultation with Desert Channels Qld, the regions peak natural resource management organisation for the Qld section of the Lake Eyre Basin, and here we draw on, in this submission, the extensive technical that DCQs possess regarding the Lake Eyre Basin,

- Our involvement in the Federal Governments Department of Environment and Energy – User Panel, Geological & Bioregional Assessment Program, and finally,
- acquired knowledge from RAPADs leadership, facilitation and secretariat roles of past Wild Rivers and Western Rivers consultative processes.

As a result of those past Wild Rivers and Western Rivers policy approaches RAPAD formed a set of principles which have been altered through the last few years however essentially, they remain constant.

RAPAD:

- Agrees that there is community wide support for 'long term sustainability', and the existing, economic, social and conservation values of the Lake Eyre Basin (LEB) and its river systems. RAPAD understands the LEB is one of the world's great inland river systems although its integrity remains under threat from a range of factors, none more so than from invasive pest animal and plant species, and here Government must commit to long term funding to Desert Channels Qld, the agricultural industry and local government to ensure this threat can be minimised,
- Agrees that rivers, permanent & semi-permanent waterholes offer important cultural and environmental, as well as economic and social significance, and should be protected in some form,
- Agrees that the balance is complex between the community desire for long term sustainability, a desire by many to protect the rivers and landscape, landholders' agricultural activities (including organic producers), local government operational needs, resource industry (e.g. mining, petroleum, gas & unconventional gas exploration and development) needs,
- Agrees that where there has been significant development surrounding the rivers and adjacent waterways within the LEB any 'protection area status' should not be declared. Significant development is defined as intervention to change the landscape surrounding the river or waterway such that the system does not have all, or nearly all, its natural values intact. That is, the landscape surrounding the river or waterway, can no longer be described as being undisturbed or as being in near its natural condition,
- Agrees that resource industry activities such as but not limited to, mining, petroleum, conventional and unconventional gas exploration and development activities are activities that can create value economically and socially, however for the same economic, social and also environmental reasons, they should be:
 - regulated in the Queensland rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin, and that that regulation extends to the headwaters of the Cooper, Georgina and Diamantina systems. Protection may be required to extend up into the low order streams at the very top of these headwater areas where extensive mining and high rainfall may occur, producing significant risk of pollution events,
 - required to provide adequate financial guarantees for all remediation costs of pollution should it occur,
 - only allowed to proceed to development, notwithstanding all legal development approvals, where a demonstrated tangible economic and social benefit is realised by the communities of the LEB,
- Agrees that other industry activities, such as, but not limited to, agriculture and tourism are not adversely impacted by resource industry activities,

- Agrees that industries such as tourism and agriculture existing and operating as it is at present in the LEB be allowed to operate without interference and that Government commit to ongoing extension for agriculture through, and with the agricultural industry, to facilitate adoption of best practice grazing and environmental stewardship,
- Agrees that water license holders have a legally obtained license and that they be entitled to retire it at their leisure or receive an appropriate commercial compensation if the Government orders such a license be surrendered,
- Agrees that local government should not be adversely impacted by legislation pertaining to such things as access to sand and gravel, road maintenance, land for commercial development, access to urban water,
- Agrees that local government shall support good water management practices relating to water sharing (waterholes) between producers and local governments, and any legislation should recognise these good practices,
- Agrees that water should be provided for local government, residential and small to medium business growth, any current activities, stock and domestic, road construction and maintenance, and for indigenous & cultural use,
- Agrees that a landholder with riparian rights to water in the strategic environmental area of the LEB be allowed to build a dam or earth tank for stock and domestic purposes, the total size of which needs however to be determined to be consistent with pervious points,
- Agrees that cognisant to the above relevant dot points, agricultural activities in general be able to develop; e.g. blade ploughing, fodder harvesting, regrowth thinning and vegetation management,

As indicated, these are principles and, in some cases, they may be in alignment with proposed changes however with little detail provided by Government it is difficult to establish.

On the issue of unconventional gas RAPAD has no fixed position other than as stated in our principles.

Boulia Shire Council advise that in their consultation with the Pitta Pitta traditional owners, the Pitta Pitta were not a part of the TO meeting held in Longreach. Furthermore, on behalf of the Pitta Pitta, BoSC have asked they request that there be no *'them and us'*; everyone needs to agree on future legislation pertaining to the LEB.

In relation to specific proposed changes:

1. **SEA:** RAPAD does not support the expansion of the Strategic Environmental Area (SEA) to cover the Georgina, Diamantina and Cooper catchments. This proposed change will increase the area of the SEA to approximately 51 063 803 ha an increase of 773%.
2. **Environmental attributes definition:** RAPAD is open to discussion on widening the attributes although with little detail provided, we cannot offer further comment. In principle we accept that activities that impact negatively on beneficial flooding and natural flows for example are unacceptable.
3. **Unacceptable land use within a 'Designated Precinct' to include high impact petroleum and gas activities:** Consistent with our principles RAPAD believes all high impact activities are in need of strong regulation in sensitive areas.

4. **Increase the extent of the Designated Precinct:** RAPAD is open to discussion although with limited detail on how this applies in practical terms, we are not in a position to support or not support.

General commentary:

RAPAD would like to know:

How amendments may or may not affect certain land management activities such as fencing, specifically cluster or exclusion fencing?

How amendment may or may not affect tourism operations and or potential related infrastructure?

How is a wildlife corridor defined and mapped?

How these amendments may or will impact our grazing industry and the opal (open cut and underground) industry?

How would amendments affect everyday local government operational functions such as road repair and maintenance?

What are impacts if any on water use present and future?

The board of RAPAD requests that Government undertake further consultation throughout the region. We always understood this was a first round of consultation and once these submissions were collected, there would be a second round.

For further information please contact me, the undersigned on 0428583301.

Yours Sincerely



David Arnold
CEO