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MEDIA RELEASE

NEW DEVELOPMENT THREAT TO THE DAINTREE RAINFOREST

FNQ environmental activist body, the Douglas Shire Sustainability Group (DSSG), has raised community concerns about a major development project currently underway on the Daintree Coast.

The Daintree Coast is once again under threat: the threat of commercialisation and over-development resulting from the construction of a power grid.

The Daintree rainforest is one of the world's rarest and most irreplaceable ecosystems, often described as 'the jewel in the crown' of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area of Far North Queensland. An international study has rated the Daintree the second most critical and irreplaceable of all World Heritage Areas.

"The developers have an agenda comprising three major elements," said McDonald. "Firstly, they want to build a bridge over the Daintree River, replacing the current ferry access, thereby allowing far greater tourist and vehicular access, along with speedier visit times. The local community recently rejected this proposal by the Shire Council. Secondly, to handle the increase in traffic, they want a bigger and better road system. In particular the development lobby wants a major upgrade of the Bloomfield Track from Cape Tribulation to Wujul Wujul. This would turn what is currently an 'adventure' trail into a major through road from Cooktown to Cairns, duplicating the inland highway and, again, resulting in a major increase in vehicle pressures. The third leg of the development strategy is the establishment of grid power. The developers are at present in the preliminary stages of construction of the proposed power grid. It is this activity that is of immediate concern to DSSG."

DSSG believes there is a need to manage capacity of tourists, residents and through traffic, rather than trying to meet ever growing demand with more infrastructure. We need an effective Daintree Coast plan mainly addressing conservation of the asset and its presentation, but integrating with both economy and community.

DSSG says the local community believes that the establishment of a reticulated electricity grid along the Daintree Coast will drive on-going urbanisation and commercial development at the expense of the environment.

Currently, the majority of domestic properties generate their own "green" power from stand-alone solar power systems. The grid project is being driven by about 14 commercial premises who have large energy demands and currently generate their electricity using diesel generators. Their expectation is that power will be cheaper (read subsidised by the taxpayer) and property values will get a big boost. It should be noted that a small number of businesses have invested in solar power and manage to operate successfully.

Over the years there have been several studies of the power needs of Daintree residents. The most recent is the Qld State Government's 2019 'Daintree Electricity Supply Options Study', carried out by KPMG. This study considered six alternative power solutions, including a grid option, and concluded

that the most cost-effective and environmentally-friendly solution was to assist residents to upgrade their solar based, stand-alone systems.

DSSG is also raising questions about the funding and approval processes for the project.

“Early estimates (pre-COVID) put the cost of construction at upwards of \$60M.” said McDonald. “In a last minute move immediately before the recent Federal election, \$20M was given to the proponents through a fund administered by then Minister Angus Taylor. No other financial details are publicly available. A Freedom of Information (FOI) request about the project yielded no information on cost. The reason given was that the scheme is *commercial-in-confidence*.”

Aspects of the project of major concern to DSSG, is that there has been:

- No environmental impact study;
- No cost / benefit analysis;
- No community survey of the residents regarding the demand or need for grid power;
- No information to residents on the wiring standards (and costs) required.

Tourism comprises 80% of the economy of the Douglas Shire and the Daintree attracts the largest number of tourists. “From a tourism perspective we know visitors want to see, as far as possible, a pristine rainforest ecosystem, not suburbia,” McDonald said.

DSSG is demanding that the Federal and State Governments undertake a full environmental impact assessment (including cumulative impacts) of the project, a survey of community needs, a technical assessment, a cost benefit analysis and a re-examination of stand-alone power alternatives, with full financial transparency where public funding is involved.

More broadly, with its mix of national park, Indigenous protected areas, private land and world heritage overlay, the area desperately needs a conservation management plan to guide future investment in both economy, community and conservation. The roles and responsibilities of each level of Government in the management of World Heritage Areas need to be identified in legislation, either under the EPBC Act or through a new law, and an effective management regime established.

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Background brief:

Supply of grid power to the Daintree Coast has been a very fraught issue for over the past 30 plus years. It has caused major social controversy and serious conflict. It now seems most of the approximately 600 property owners are fairly satisfied with their stand-alone power systems (mostly solar). However a very vocal pro-power group has formed (including most major businesses), who purport to be concerned about the emissions from their own high diesel fuel usage for generators. Ironically, this group formed the Daintree Renewable Energy Group (DREG) to lobby for provision of grid-equivalent power.

With the support of the member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch, they were successful in achieving grant money from the Federal Government. The Federal Government initially provided \$980,000 to DREG in Nov 2019 to develop a plan for the provision of renewable, hydrogen backed, reticulated power for the Daintree Coast.

In June 2021 a further \$20 million was provided over three years (in Forward Estimates) for providing reticulated power on the Daintree Coast, presumably based on the plan devised as a result of the 2019 grant. That money was provided in full to Volt Advisory Group (the contractors/advisers to DREG) by way of an appropriation immediately prior to the last Federal election.

There has been no survey of demand for the reticulated power, and no consultation with the broader resident community. The known demand (and vocal support for the project) is commercial/ business

interests and these interests will be the main beneficiaries.

The generated power will be reticulated to all properties from Cow Bay to Cape Tribulation. This will require approximately 150 kms of 3 phase underground cable along the roads.

DSSG is opposed to providing such subsidised reticulated power, as this will promote development in an area where conservation should be top priority. DSSG supports the findings of the Queensland Government in their 2019 assessment "The Daintree Electricity Supply Study"¹, which concluded that upgrading stand-alone systems would be a fraction of the cost, more reliable and have far less direct and indirect environmental impact.

The \$20m would go a long way to upgrading both residential and commercial stand-alone systems; it could begin now, would face no regulatory hurdles and would be broadly welcomed.

Most residents would prefer an upgrade of their standalone systems as they've already invested heavily in them. Connection to a grid would be very costly for most and they don't want to start having to pay power bills. For reasons of electrical safety most if not all grid-connected buildings would require wiring upgrades, if not complete rewiring, to meet code requirements. A survey of residents was conducted by a local individual in 2020. Most respondents (61%) said they would not connect to a reticulated power system, and most (94%) want assistance to upgrade their systems.

We also know from past surveys that visitors here are seeking a pristine environment, not suburbia. Given that the Daintree Coast and Great Barrier Reef are foundational to the Shire's and regional tourism, their conservation and presentation are also critical to our economy.

These forests — considered one of the world's most precious ecosystems, as well as being a critical tourism draw — were recently declared Endangered Ecological Communities under the Australian government's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act*. This emphasises the conservation values of currently unprotected land. The last assessment by the Queensland Government in anticipation of an EPBC review, in 1998, recommended no reticulated power until half the properties were placed under conservation regimes, with conservation measures introduced to cover the balance of the Daintree Coast properties.

The most recent significant government spending on planning and conservation was in the period 2004-2008. Since then spending has been on infrastructure supporting development rather than conservation. Conservation controls existing from that time are rarely enforced. Local, state and Federal government investment in infrastructure is now undermining conservation rather than supporting it.

Conservation and or restoration of this environment currently appears to be left to charities and not-for-profits to organise small pockets of reforestation, buybacks of allotments, and also tree planting to reduce invasive weed species. Where is the Government stewardship?

It is an accident of history that the Daintree Coast did not also become part of our world heritage listings. It was in the original nomination and recognised as one of the most valuable of all ecological communities within the proposed nomination, but was removed from the final nomination, not because it lacked value, but because of a need to be seen to appease the Bjelke Petersen Government and because the number of private holdings would make management difficult.

The presence of remaining areas of high value suggest that a business-as-usual approach might not be appropriate for a power project in a sparsely populated area of high environmental value.

No-one is currently implementing any form of overall planning to shape the future Daintree Coast region.

There is an urgent need for an integrated management plan with a separate implementation mechanism.

¹ https://www.epw.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/16008/daintree-electricity-supply-study-full.pdf

