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MEDIA RELEASE

DSSG calls on candidates in the upcoming Federal election to support the upgrading of existing stand-alone power systems for residents and businesses in the Daintree coast area.

DSSG believes that upgrading existing stand-alone power systems is the only rational plan to improve power availability to the Daintree coast, - it would have little environmental impact, be a fraction of the cost, would face no regulatory hurdles and could begin immediately.

The DSSG proposition follows the announcement by Member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch on the 7 March 2022; that work would soon begin on providing reticulated power for the Daintree Coast, to be provided by a central solar-array, battery and “clean” hydrogen backup. This will involve laying and burying 160 kms of cable in a World Heritage environment.

In agreement with other groups, DSSG is opposed to providing such subsidised reticulated power, as this will promote development in a World Heritage area where conservation should be top priority. Therefore, DSSG has called for the more environmentally preferable alternative, proposed by the Queensland Government in their 2019 assessment “The Daintree Electricity Supply Study¹. That study said the supply and maintenance of the proposed reticulated power system is no longer cost effective. Thus, DSSG believes that upgrading existing stand-alone power systems is the only rational plan to improve power availability to the Daintree coast.

Stand-alone upgrades would effectively eliminate environmental impacts on the predominantly World Heritage listed area that would come with providing reticulated power. Indeed, the State government report argues that upgrading the more reliable stand-alone systems could be implemented at a fraction of the cost, and have almost no environmental and cultural impact. Furthermore, in comparison with the costs and complexity of the proposed electric grid, upgrades of stand-alone systems should be a far more straightforward exercise, especially once any equity issues for participant households and businesses are resolved.

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

Recipients would include home and business landowners who agree to a conservation covenant protecting natural habitat on their properties. 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. Not only does this emphasise the conservation values of currently unprotected land, it means that major infrastructure, such as reticulated power, would trigger an EPBC Act review that would assess the future cumulative impact on the region, including that of increased development pressure.

The last detailed environmental impact assessment of reticulated power in the Daintree (1998 GHD), 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 new Endangered Ecological Communities listing will likely reinforce those findings.

DSSG spokesperson Mike Berwick said, "We acknowledge that the State's policy is to supply power only to those who pay the connection (and associated) costs. So, if there's a major subsidy, then requiring an added tangible public dividend directed to encouraging conservation, is warranted. Furthermore, since most people want to protect the environment anyway, this should be a minor issue. However, assistance should also be offered to landowners to help manage their conservation values.

"We suspect that the Australian government's reticulated power proposal has no real hope being funded. It would have a major environmental impact and connection costs to residents would appear to be considerable, so most people would be better off with high-quality, standalone systems. Most have already invested in them. They work well and make far more sense than reticulating power in a region with very low population density. In the Daintree, the some 400 potential customers are widely scattered over 40 kms of rugged terrain."

"The Australian government's proposal is to be funded by \$19 m grant (subject to an equal matching allocation by commercial providers), from the budget forward estimates. However, the outcomes of the existing \$980,000 Federally-funded study remains under wraps. Freedom of Information (FOI) applicants were informed that the report was "commercial in confidence".

Berwick added that, "The \$19 m 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. We know, too, that many, if not 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. 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."

ENDS

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