

18 May 2006

Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy  
Department of Planning  
Via email: northcoast@planning.nsw.gov.au



Dear Sir or Madam

**Submission re: Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy**

This letter sets out the comments of OceanWatch Australia Ltd (OWA) in relation to the Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy (the Regional Strategy). OceanWatch Australia is a national environmental, not-for-profit company that works to achieve sustainability in the Australian seafood industry through protecting and enhancing fish habitats, improving water quality and advancing sustainable fisheries through action based partnerships with the Australian seafood industry, government, natural resource managers, private enterprise and the community.

The Strategy provides a very basic, broad brushed approach to planning for and responding to future growth and development on the Far North Coast.

OWA understands that an array of sub strategies will underpin the over-arching Regional Strategy. These sub strategies should be statutory and should be completed before the Regional Strategy is finalised. These need to provide the Regional Strategy with the detailed backing and strategic direction required for local Councils to amend their LEPs such that development can proceed in a sustainable manner and the local terrestrial and aquatic environments will be protected (consistent with the proposed outcomes of the Regional Strategy).

Standing alone, the Regional Strategy is inadequate in terms of detail and strategic direction.

There are a number of areas that OWA believes require further attention within the Regional Strategy in order to progress towards ecologically sustainable development and ensure that a holistic approach is taken to planning, in sympathy with the natural environment and within natural resource constraints for the far north coast region. These are outlined below.

**Protection of the aquatic environment**

It is paramount that adequate protection is afforded to remaining aquatic habitats in NSW, given that 60% of aquatic habitat and 90% of floodplain wetlands have already been lost across NSW, attributing to significant declines in fisheries production. Furthermore, the recently released Millennium Assessment Synthesis Report, (2005) has identified the loss or modification of coastal habitats as one of the greatest threats to coastal systems due to



coastal urban sprawl, development, aquaculture, industrialisation and poor understanding of coastal processes and mismanagement of our coastal resources.

However, the Regional Strategy may provide assurance to developers for future development, but it does not afforded the same level of certainty for the protection of the aquatic environment (eg seagrass protection, protection of all 3rd and 4th order streams). There is no detail of how these developed areas are to be managed such that these receiving sensitive aquatic environments will be protected. There are no details as to how aquatic habitat will be managed outside marine parks. It needs to be recognised that all activities within a catchment impact on the aquatic freshwater, estuarine and ultimately marine environments. Effectiveness of marine parks in protecting our marine environments is compromised by poor management of activities such as development higher up in the catchment – there is no point in having a marine park if catchment management is poor. The Regional Strategy should provide principles for the sub plans regarding the management of developed areas. For example, future infrastructure development needs to give better consideration to impacts on aquatic habitat, such as impacts on fish passage in the construction of road crossings etc in consultation with the Department of Primary Industries (DPI).

Additionally, the impacts of the Regional Strategy, particularly in terms of future development on aquatic habitat, water quality need to be monitored (before and after). Following from this, there needs to be a commitment to remediation or compensation (if remediation not possible) to mitigate any detrimental impacts experienced, prior to approval of developments.

#### **Offsets/ biodiversity banking and no net loss**

The Strategy fails to deal with biodiversity banking and offsets. The plan assumes that areas delineated for development are “green light” areas.

Any regional planning strategy should require a “no net loss to aquatic habitat” policy that is enforced, given the scarcity of valuable remaining habitats as mentioned above. Where habitat losses are inevitable, suitable trade-offs, as required under Part 7 of the Fisheries Management Act 1994 should be identified to ensure overall river and ecosystem health does not deteriorate. It is imperative that economic aspects of developers and the government and logistical difficulties are not favoured at the expense of environmental and social considerations of the community relating to aquatic habitat loss.

#### **Cumulative impacts**

The Regional Strategy does not adequately address the management of cumulative impacts across NSW from proposed and existing development within the far north coast region. A fundamental flaw within the planning framework for NSW is the failure to consider the cumulative environmental and social impacts arising from new developments. With the increased expansion of 2,500 people per year to the far north coast, the pressure on our natural resources, particularly water and the strains on social and environmental values increase. The consideration of cumulative impacts needs to extend outside of the metropolitan region to regional areas in terms of water quality (e.g. the impacts of deep ocean outfalls on



regional communities through oceanic current impacts), air quality, water flows, fish production associated with the poor flushing of rivers and degraded wetlands and swamps. The Regional Strategy should include a suitable method for identifying and managing cumulative impacts. Although this is unlikely to be an easy task, it is a critical one and should not be overlooked because it is in the “too hard basket”.

### **Aboriginal/indigenous heritage**

The Regional Strategy does not refer to how indigenous heritage will be recognised and preserved in the context of the new planning strategy. It is presumed that existing management regimes will continue. A key shortcoming presently is the failure to adequately incorporate indigenous knowledge of ecosystem processes and principals of natural resource management into government planning processes. This Regional Strategy provides a suitable forum with which to change the mindset and give adequate recognition of indigenous knowledge into the planning process where appropriate.

### **Amalgamation of existing plans**

It is not clear how this Regional Strategy links with other regional and local plans such as the Northern Rivers Catchment Action Plans, nor is clear how inconsistencies between plans will be resolved, for example, zoning conflicts. With the planning reforms currently proposed and occurring within NSW, it is imperative that cost efficiencies are maximised and conflicts resolved to ensure that consistency is achieved between and within planning scales.

### **Specific Comments on the Regional Strategy**

#### *Section 2 – Regional challenges*

##### *Environment*

The Regional Strategy recognises the importance of protecting farmland from development. However, the strategy needs to also recognise the importance of protecting fisheries from development. Commercial fishers are also primary producers that rely on healthy productive aquatic habitats. These habitats need to be protected (eg. saltmarsh, mangroves, seagrass,).

##### *Economy*

The Regional Strategy fails to recognise the vital role of commercial/recreational fishing in sustaining the regions economy either directly or indirectly through employment, retail (eg. seafood outlets, restaurants, bait and tackle shops) and tourism. In 2001 the Richmond River experienced severe fish kills which resulted in an eight month closure of the river to fishing. The economic impacts experienced as a result extended beyond the fishing industry, to tourist industries and retail industries. This failure to recognise the value of the fishing industry is evident in the inadequate protection afforded to aquatic habitat and water quality within the strategy.



Furthermore, ensuring the sustainability of the fishing industry is a win-win for regional economies and the environment, both recognised as a key initiative of the Regional Strategy - *“The Regional Strategy must promote ways to improve economic performance without compromising environmental values or the quality of life within the Region.”*

### *Section 3 - The strategy at a glance*

It is encouraging that the Regional Strategy aims to *“Prevent development in places constrained by coastal processes, flooding, wetlands, important farmland and landscapes of high scenic and conservation value.”* However, the Regional Strategy needs to go further such that buffer zones and setbacks are enforced which take into account the impacts of sea-level rise (eg setbacks of 100m from estuaries).

Provision of adequate buffer zones for protection of aquatic habitat and water quality is critical for the maintenance of river health and thus the industries that depend on river health (e.g. fishing, tourism), together with the maintenance of the cultural and social values intrinsically related to river health. These buffers need to provide for the impacts of climate change, in particular sea level rise. The Regional Strategy or related statutory sub strategies need to have requirements for the incorporation of buffers within LEPs. It is imperative that consistency is applied across regions and that inappropriate buffers are not imposed at the expense of continued loss of aquatic habitat and deterioration of water quality. Again, conditions imposed by DPI relating to buffers and environmental safeguards must be adhered to.

### *Section 4 Key features of the Regional Strategy*

*“The Region includes over 2200 square kilometres of State and regionally significant farmland.”* What about areas significant for commercial fishing – does this Regional Strategy extend out to 3nm to fall in line with Catchment Action Plans? Commercial fishing also takes place in a number of estuaries on the far north coast. Recognition should be given to regionally significant fishing and oyster grounds.

It is positive that the Regional Strategy promotes an approach to reduce development pressure in the “coastal area” which includes coastal wetlands, estuaries and lakes however, it is not clear how this is to be achieved. The Regional Strategy states that *“The suitability of land identified for future urban release strategies was reviewed by the Department of Planning in accordance with the following principles...”*. It is of concern to OWA that these principles do not include and should include "proximity to fragile aquatic habitats eg. wetlands and seagrass."

### *Section 5 - Settlement and housing*

The Regional Strategy states that *“The suitability of land identified for future urban release in local council land release strategies was reviewed by the Department of Planning in accordance with the following principles:...protection of water quality in rivers and estuaries”*

OWA cannot stress enough the importance of building in aspects to ensure no net deterioration of water quality across the region within the Regional Strategy. There are many



examples across the state, such as Evans Head, where councils continue to approve developments that exceed the carrying capacity/assimilative capacity of receiving waterways. In Evans Head, the STP servicing the area discharges into a coastal lake within a national park. The system is at full capacity, yet Council continues to approve developments placing increasing pressure on the fragile lake system, (a factor in the recent fish kill event). Provisions need to be in place to ensure that this situation does not recur. Another illustrative case, with considerable economic implications for industries that rely on the health of the receiving waterways is in the Bellingen River. In late April 2006, oyster harvesting was banned in the river due to high levels of faecal coliforms. This was linked to the septic tank run-off from adjacent properties. This situation needs to be avoided.

Additionally, measures should be taken to address the deteriorating water quality in the region's river systems due to modification/drainage of the region's acid sulphate soils/floodplains to make way for urban and agricultural development. Currently, the Richmond River is showing signs of very poor river health evident by recent fish kill events, low DO, low pH etc.

The Regional Strategy states that rural residential development will avoid areas with "significant natural resources." These significant natural resources need to include aquatic habitat, wetlands etc. To make such decisions requires the provision of accurate/appropriately scaled maps of aquatic habitat, which OWA understands have not as yet been completed.

#### *Section 6 - Settlement character and design*

The actions proposed within the Strategy relating to section 6, include "new and changing urban areas should provide access to natural features, such as coastal foreshore and riparian land in a manner that is consistent with the maintenance of ecological values." However, the Regional Strategy/sub strategies need to ensure that public access is not provided at the expense of the natural vegetation that protects the receiving waterways and their aquatic habitats. This situation occurred on the south coast of NSW whereby the local council approved and constructed a walkway/cycle way at the expense of supportive lakeside vegetation around Coila Lake.

Sewage and storm water must be managed in such a manner that the receiving waterways and the industries that rely on the good quality water such as the oyster and fishing industries are protected.

#### *Section 8 – Environment and natural resources*

##### *Background*

The area shown as Environmental Assets and Rural Land on the draft Regional Strategy Map identifies areas with environmental, landscape and agricultural production values. However, the Regional Strategy, once again omits significant recreational and commercial fishing and oyster harvesting areas (as identified by NSW Food Authority Sanitary Surveys).

## *Outcomes*

*“The Regional Strategy recognises the importance environmental and rural lands have to the Region’s economy, character, and scenic and cultural value. The Strategy will ensure local environmental plans protect these areas from future development.”*

The Regional Strategy also needs to ensure protection of commercial and recreational fishing industries.

## *Actions*

*“Prepare a regional Conservation Plan to guide local councils in implementing conservation outcomes. The Regional Conservation Plan will be prepared by Department of Environment and Conservation, working with the Department of Planning”*

DPI need to be involved in the preparation of the Regional Conservation Plan to ensure that aquatic habitats and aquatic biodiversity is given adequate protection. The Regional Conservation Plan needs to identify and provide conservation corridors linking high conservation value areas, akin to the proposed “Green Corridor” for the Lower Hunter. These corridors are critical for the survival on native flora and fauna in the face of climate change. It is imperative that these high conservation value corridors are identified within the overarching planning strategy for the far north coast region to ensure conflicts do not arise across planning scales.

Together with the provision of biodiversity corridors, native and riparian vegetation policies need to be developed that afford adequate long-term protection for all significant native species and ecological communities. This will require the completion of comprehensive mapping of existing native vegetation (terrestrial and aquatic) on the far north coast, combined with an assessment of all publicly owned land in the region.

The Regional Conservation Plan needs to identify and earmark appropriate areas for future environmental rehabilitation so as to return environmental, economic and social benefits to the community (in consultation with the Conservation Managers/Aquatic Rehabilitation team within DPI, and with WetlandCare Australia. Both organisations undertake many aquatic rehabilitation projects that benefit farmers, fishers and the environment).

## *Section 9 – Natural Hazards*

Implications of climate change need to reflect the current research findings and adapt to emerging scientific findings.

## *Water*

OWA supports the outcomes identified such as:

“improved water cycle management to increase reuse of effluent and reduce the impact of sewerage and stormwater”



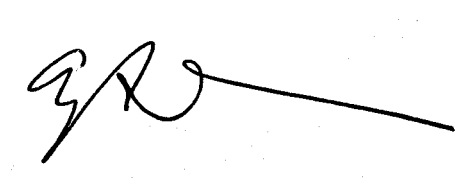
Existing and future storm water and sewage treatment needs to be of a higher quality and opportunities for recycling maximised (consistent with the Healthy River Commission recommendations). This is imperative for the survival of the remaining oyster industry and fisheries. There needs to be protection of receiving waters with retention of flood and buffer zones around creek lines. The priority to establishing water flows to a river that mimic natural environmental flows must be set higher.

### Conclusion

OceanWatch Australia supports the general direction the Regional Strategy is heading, however recommends that the above issues and concerns raised be addressed for a more holistic integrated, sustainable plan for the future growth. It is imperative that any future development on the far north coast does not exceed the region's carry capacity.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 9660 2262 should you require further information regarding these comments made.

Yours sincerely



**Anissa Lawrence**  
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