

5.5. RIVER IMPROVEMENT TRUST FUND

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DEPARTMENT Infrastructure

RECOMMENDATION

Council resolve that:

- 1. Douglas Shire Council continue using the current framework administered through Terrain NRM and Queensland governments Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements for streambank restoration, in preference of making application to the Minister of Department of Resources to constitute a new River Improvement Trust.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Douglas Shire receives some of the heaviest rainfall in Australia. Historically breakouts in reaches of the major rivers creeks and tributaries have occurred impacting on the productive lands on which our agricultural economy is based.

The purpose of this report is to complete the 2020/2021 Operation Plan Initiative - Undertake a review of alternative funding and governance models and conduct targeted stakeholder engagement to understand the challenges and opportunities.

BACKGROUND

River Improvement Trusts (RIT) are established to protect and improve rivers. They are responsible for:

- Repairing and preventing damage to rivers; and
- Preventing or mitigating riverine flooding of land.

The previous Douglas RIT was established in 1982, before merging with the Cairns RIT in 2008. There is a long history of successful restoration works following flooding and severe cyclone and monsoonal rainfall events. During this time, the Trust had developed a proven reputation for getting the job done for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Over 100 examples of previously completed RIT projects are evident throughout the Douglas Shire Council area. These works have provided successful outcomes and benefits for the local farmers, the environment and the community as a whole.

With the de-amalgamation of Cairns and Douglas Councils, the issue of whether Douglas should constitute its own RIT was explored. A report to council was tabled at the Ordinary Council Meeting 28 June 2016 resulting in Douglas Shire Council no longer being constituted under the Cairns RIT.

Figure 1 – River improvement trust areas

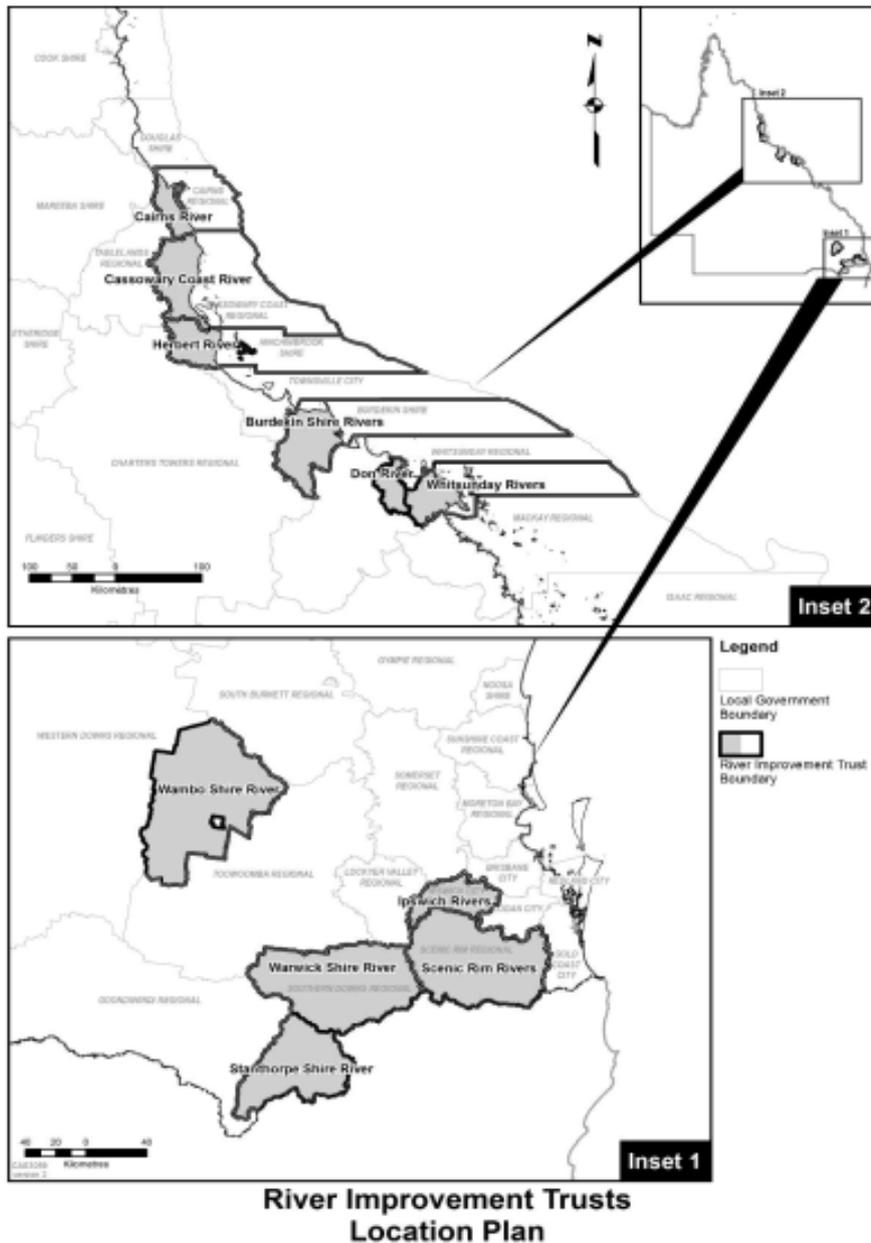


Figure 1: Source: Queensland River Improvement Trusts Summary of Annual Reports and Financial Statements 2015-2016.

COMMENT

Alternative funding and governance models have been servicing the Douglas Shire since 2003, with the formation of 54 NRM bodies around the country that act as a conduit between governments, local groups and landholders. Our region is serviced by Terrain NRM.

Priorities are outlined in the Wet Tropic Plan for People and Country. Terrain NRM have completed many projects in the Douglas Area with a key focus on Waterways Restoration.

Recent 2020/2021 examples of projects in Douglas are as follows:

Mossman Integrated Catchment Repair Project

Overview

This project is strengthening stream banks in the Mossman catchment to prevent soil loss caused by erosion during wet season floods and to restore vegetation along creek and riverbanks. The project is implementing a range of solutions that combine the latest science and engineering techniques with local knowledge of the landscape.

Background

Extreme flooding events in early 2018 caused significant stream bank erosion, washing away productive farmland and increasing sediment loads in waterways flowing to the Great Barrier Reef.

Solutions

- Engineered erosion remediation works
- Revegetation
- Workshops for landholders

Locations

Cassowary and Saltwater sub-catchments in the Mossman area.



Figure 2: Restoration works

Partners

Landholders, Douglas Shire Council, Mossman Canegrowers, Mossman Agricultural Services, local contractors and service providers.

Funders

This four-year \$1 million project is funded by the Queensland Government's Natural Resources Investment Program.

Achievements so far

- 2 rock walls built
- 2 revegetation sites completed
- 30 landholders engaged
- 2 workshops to gather local landscape knowledge



Figure 3: Tree planting Cassowary Valley

Riverbank Disaster Recovery Project

Overview

This project is repairing monsoon-battered river and creek banks across four catchments in the Wet Tropics region. Terrain are implementing a range of engineered solutions combined with revegetation work.

Background

Extreme flooding events in the 2018-19 wet season caused significant stream bank erosion, washing away productive farmland and increasing sediment loads in waterways flowing to the Great Barrier Reef.

Solutions

- Engineered rock walls
- Benching
- Battering
- Revegetation

Locations

Daintree and Mossman catchments in the Douglas region.

Partners

- Landholders
- Douglas Shire Council
- Local contractors and service providers

Achievements so far

- Stage 1 and 2 programs are now completed, including earthworks, rock works and tree-planting to stabilise river and creek banks.
- Repairs completed on four sites

Funders

This project is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and Queensland governments under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). As at the end of 2020 calendar year a total of a total of \$6.3 million had been spent in the Douglas Shire Council Area through this project.



Figure 4: Restoration works Daintree River

PROPOSAL

Douglas Shire Council continue using the current framework administered through Terrain NRM and Queensland governments Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements for streambank restoration, in preference to making application to the Minister of Department of Resources to constitute a new River Improvement Trust.

FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

River Improvement Trusts (RIT) are established under the provisions of the River Improvement Act 1940. Under the Act, local government is required to contribute an annual precept (contribution) to the RIT.

Generally, these funds are utilised by the RIT to cover items such as audits, consulting fees for the engineering designs and construction costs.

It is reasonable to expect that if Douglas Shire were to constitute its own RIT it may be required to contribute in the order of \$100,000 per annum in precept.

It is also anticipated that the administration costs to manage a Douglas RIT is up to \$50,000 per annum. Additional project funding is also obtained through partnering with landowners who will benefit from the RIT project.

Generally, RIT seek a contribution from the landowner of up to 50% of the project costs.

The alternative model (Terrain NRM) currently in place, has no financial impact on council or the landowner. The projects are 100% funded through external grants administered by Terrain NRM and Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

There has been significant investment (\$7.3 million) in Douglas catchments during the 2020/2021 financial year by supporting the current model.

RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Without a local Douglas Shire Council River Improvement Trust, private infrastructure may not be eligible or meet the criteria for certain funding opportunities.

There are a number of other project funding models available to Council that may support landholders in river improvement projects. Council lead grant submissions, partnering with property owners and using Council funds when appropriate are considered more contemporary approaches.

These approaches allow Council to be adaptable and does not lock Council into the RIT model.

Council staff will continue to work with private landholders wherever possible to explore other funding options for projects that do not meet eligibility criteria through Terrain NRM.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Economic: Tourism and Agriculture are significant industries in the Douglas Shire and the improvement of riverbanks and rural drainage channels can be beneficial to both industries.

Environmental: Reducing sediment run off and stabilising riverbanks will improve environmental outcomes across the shire and the region. In particular works that reduce the runoff of sediment laden water into the fringing reef systems and the GBRMP can have a significant impact on ensuring the reef systems in close to the Douglas Shire remain healthy. Successful improvement programs can increase biodiversity along out river systems, provide areas for the establishing riparian vegetation and improving habitat, including fish habitat and nursery areas.

Social: Collaboration between DSC, Terran, Canegrowers and landowners to facilitate drainage and river works will benefit the wider community by maintaining and improving recreational and natural areas.

CORPORATE/OPERATIONAL PLAN, POLICY REFERENCE

This report has been prepared in accordance with the following:

Corporate Plan 2014-2019 Initiatives:

Theme 3 - Leading Environmental Stewardship

Our visitors and residents deeply value the unparalleled environment in which we live. We recognise our responsibility in protecting and preserving our natural world for generations to come. We understand the strong link between the environment and the economy: they are interdependent. Douglas Shire will be at the forefront of environmental protection by developing strategies, setting policies, and working with all stakeholders to become the envy of and to inspire locations across Australia and the World.

Goal 1 - We will protect our sensitive environment and plan for the impact of climate change.

Operational Plan 2020-2021 Actions:

3.1.5 - Undertake a review of alternative funding and governance models and conduct targeted stakeholder engagement to understand the challenges and opportunities.

COUNCIL'S ROLE

Council can play a number of different roles in certain circumstances and it is important to be clear about which role is appropriate for a specific purpose or circumstance. The implementation of actions will be a collective effort and Council's involvement will vary from information only through to full responsibility for delivery.

The following areas outline where Council has a clear responsibility to act:

Advocate Council makes representation on behalf of the community on important issues, funding opportunities, projects and programs. Council will use its influence to seek the best outcomes for the community.

CONSULTATION

Internal: Infrastructure Team
Sustainability Team
Councilor Workshop 8 June 2021

External: Vanessa Drysdale, Terrain
Ruginia Duffy, Project Coordinator Terrain NRM
Hannah O’Kane Membership Engagement Terrain NRM
Travis Sydes, FNQROC
Canegrowers – Local farmers.
Graziers

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Over the past 12 months a substantial amount of consultation and community engagement has occurred regarding river improvement projects and initiatives. Terrain NRM conducted a total of seven workshops with 48 participants.

Council’s Coordinator Public Spaces conducted targeted consultation with key stakeholders including the funding providers, other neighboring councils and most importantly the actual landholders who manage the land adjacent to our river systems.

The challenges and opportunities were discussed in depth and can be summarized as follows:

- Challenges – Obtaining permits, approvals, engineered designs. Transparency in the prioritization process
- Opportunities – No cost to the landowner or council, as works are funded through Terrain. Sharing of local knowledge and expert opinions on ground.

Feedback on continuous improvements to the process was provided to Terrain via a Partnership Satisfaction exercise on 21 June 2021.

ATTACHMENTS

Nil