

WORKS & SERVICES COMMITTEE**15 APRIL 2009****7****PROPOSED CREB TRACK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY – INTERIM REPORT – DIVISION 10**

Russell Wild: 13/1/2-15: #2010683

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council prepare a Management Strategy for the CREB track and engage key stakeholders in the preparation of this strategy.

INTRODUCTION:

The CREB (Cairns Regional Electricity Board) track was originally intended as a service track for the power line which provided electricity to Cooktown. It has since become a well known and well used recreational route for four-wheel-drive and motor cycle enthusiasts. Importantly, the track also provides access from the south to the Burungu Community at China Camp.

As the Cooktown service is now fed via an inland route, the section of the power line from Daintree to the McDowell Range has been de-energised. Ergon has informed Council that they do not intend to maintain the CREB track after their infrastructure has been removed in. The Wet Tropics Management Authority has also indicated that they have no interest in the track, and maintaining roads is not their core business.

As the CREB track is a gazetted road, responsibility to maintain the road falls to Council once Ergon has removed their infrastructure. Therefore Council must decide whether to take on this responsibility and associated costs or close the track.

BACKGROUND:

The CREB track was originally built by the Cairns Regional Electricity Board (CREB – now Ergon Energy) to service the electrical power line to Cooktown. The track traverses a spectacular, yet sensitive, part of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area from the Daintree River through China Camp to Wujal Wujal. The track has also been incorporated into the National Bicentennial Walking Track from Cooktown to Walhalla (Victoria).

The Cooktown service is now fed by an inland route, and the section of the power line from Daintree to the McDowell Range has been de-energised, although it is still physically in existence.

Ergon Energy has made provision in their budget to remove the power line infrastructure during the 2008/09 financial year. Until this time, Ergon Energy has a duty-of-care responsibility to maintain the line to a condition that provides safe access to the public, and they maintain the track to provide access to enable them to carry out that work.

Ergon Energy has written to Council and the WTMA to formally advise that they will be withdrawing from maintaining the track in the future.

Telstra have a repeater station at McDowell Range that is fed from an electricity supply to the north at Ayton. Originally the line was 66kV, but with the Cooktown supply now being fed from elsewhere, it has been down-graded to a 22kV supply. Ergon will continue to maintain this service to McDowell Range until such time as this service is no longer required or replaced with upgraded technology. Currently there is no supply to the China Camp settlement.

The track from Wujal Wujal to China Camp (the Zig-Zag track) is maintained by the Wujal Wujal Council.

COMMENT:

The CREB track is a designated road, with unrestricted access – a permit is not required to access it. The road has not been surveyed, and whilst it appears on the maps as a road reserve, much of the road is “off alignment”. It is steep, rough, and requires 4WD or trail-bike access.

The track closes during the wet season and reopens at the end of wet weather and once Ergon has completed track & powerline maintenance - usually occurs around June each year. Signs are located at Ayton, Daintree, and at each end of the track advising that the track is open/closed, with gates at each end of the track.

Although the track is closed for approximately six months each year, there is a high community expectation for it to remain open.

Access at both ends of the track is over privately owned land, and requires landowner consent. This is only due to the track being “off alignment”.

Future consideration into Council’s options for the track include:

- Maintaining the track to the current level of service (preferred);
- Upgrade the track to reduce the risks to users. This is an expensive option, costing approximately \$25million and may reduce the appeal to current recreational users;

or

- Close the track.

CONSIDERATIONS:Corporate Plan:

Key Goal 4 Caring for the Environment
Objective 4.1.4

Develop innovative arrangements and better relationships to integrate the efforts of all levels of Government and private landowners for biodiversity conservation activity on private land; aim for maximum retention of natural vegetated areas.

Key Goal 6 Health, Safety and Community Development
Objective 6.4 Equitable provision of a diverse range of sport and recreation opportunities for the residents of and visitors to Cairns.

Statutory:

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* is the Commonwealth Government's formal protection for nationally recognised threatened species. This legislation is considered important in the context of this report as it guides the requirement to protect the habitats of vulnerable species in the Wet Tropics Management area.

The *Nature Conservation Act 1992* lists the conservation status of the flora and fauna species that occur in the study area that have been identified as key target species. This legislation is considered important in the context of this report as it guides the requirement to protect vulnerable and endangered species in the study area.

The *Vegetation Management Act 1999* list the various vegetation communities and species that are protected in the study area.

Policy:

Council's Protection of the Natural Environment Policy addresses matters relating to the natural environment in the development of Council's Corporate Plan, CairnsPlan and related documents. It identifies specific actions to protect biodiversity where this is under threat and to enhance those areas identified as significant habitat linkages.

Corporate Sustainability Policy NO.1:04:01: A commitment to sustainability means creating objectives for sustainable practice which enhance the health of the community and our natural environment, while ensuring social justice, quality of life and holistic prosperity.

Financial and Risk:

The CREB track is currently maintained by a bulldozer at the start of the dry season. If significant washaways occur, then some pipe culverts are installed as required. The typical yearly costs for Ergon varies from around \$30,000 (minimum) up to \$200,000 – dependant upon the severity of the wet season. Overall costs to Council would be reduced due to the closure of many side tracks leading from the main track directly to power poles.

Sustainability:

A CREB track management plan will directly contribute to the sustainable development agenda that Council has adopted through CairnsPlan and supporting policies. The plan aims to deliver a number of management actions that address the concerns over the protection of key regional ecosystems whilst maintaining vehicular access to both residents and tourists.

CONSULTATION:

The Cairns Regional Councillors have visited the northern areas of Cairns Regional Council and were briefed on issues including the CREB track. Council officers have had initial discussions with WTMA, EPA and Ergon Energy. Council has also received correspondence from several 4WD & Motor Cycle user groups expressing their support for the maintaining the track.

The proposed project would require the guidance from the following organisations:

- Cairns Regional Council
- Ergon Energy
- Wet Tropics Management Authority
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Burungu Community
- 4WD & Motor Cycle user groups
- Daintree Tourism Inc
- Daintree Businesses

OPTIONS:

That Council proceeds in engaging key stakeholders with the aim to produce a management strategy for the operation of the CREB track.

OR

That Council does not proceed in engaging key stakeholders and does not commission a Management Strategy for the CREB track.

CONCLUSION:

By engaging key stakeholders with the aim of commissioning a management plan for the CREB track, Council will ensure this key recreational link will remain open for use by both residents and tourists.

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