

The Wrap

NEWSPIX



FORK IN THE RIVER: Legislation splits committee

Divisions remain over wild rivers

Consultation highlighted as an issue.

The House Economics Committee has rejected an attempt to override the Queensland government's wild rivers legislation, finding a bill to modify the legislation would be counter-productive. But opposition members of the committee have called for the private member's bill to be passed.

The majority report on the wild rivers legislation found Indigenous people in the region face a number of substantial economic challenges, but Queensland's wild rivers legislation was not one of them.

Committee chair Craig Thomson (Dobell, NSW) said although

implementation could be improved, the Wild Rivers Act 2005 preserves the natural values of wild rivers while still allowing Indigenous economic development.

The inquiry was sparked by a private member's bill from Opposition Leader Tony Abbott calling for restrictions on how a wild rivers declaration could be made on Aboriginal land.

Introducing the bill, Mr Abbott claimed wild rivers declarations have halted multi-million dollar projects which could have created hundreds of Indigenous jobs in the region.

"Then there are all the plans that are never made because Aboriginal

people in Cape York do not feel that they have the money, the time or the administrative skills to wade through these extra thickets of red tape which are now standing in the way of their development," Mr Abbott said.

"My bill ensures that these wild rivers declarations cannot have effect without the specific consent of the affected Aboriginal people.

"Under the Queensland legislation there is a requirement to consult. I am saying what we need is a requirement for consent."

Mr Thomson said the private member's bill would only result in confusion and division in the region.

The committee report recommended the Queensland government increase its engagement with Indigenous communities around the wild rivers legislation, noting criticism about a lack of consultation.

"The committee did find there had been some criticism about the lack of consultation on the wild rivers legislation," Mr Thomson said. "We also found there was a large degree of misinformation circulating about the Act."

Mr Thomson noted the Queensland government had already responded to the key recommendation before the inquiry was completed.

"During the course of the inquiry the Queensland government announced an important measure to improve its consultations and that was to establish Indigenous reference committees."

However opposition members of the committee said greater consultation does not go far enough. They produced a dissenting report calling for Mr Abbott's private member's bill to be passed.

"If the Wild Rivers Act (Qld) 2005 presents the greatest barrier to the economic development of Indigenous communities in wild rivers areas, then the passing of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010 provides communities with the best opportunity to fulfil their aspirations," the dissenting report states. •

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/economics
economics.reps@aph.gov.au
 (02) 6277 4587