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MEDIA RELEASE:

5th May 2016

Government targeting advocates not culprits

Environmental philanthropists are being punished by a government intent on kowtowing to big businesses, claims the North Queensland Conservation Council.

“We are concerned that the recommendations of the inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations make it much harder for organisations like ours to speak up on behalf of the environment, to challenge dodgy decisions, or provide constructive advice to policy makers,” says NQCC President Gail Hamilton.

A key recommendation from the report is that organisations including NQCC must spend a quarter of the money they receive on “environmental remediation works” or risk losing their tax deductibility status.”

Environmental remediation works include activities including tree planting, weeding and litter collection.

“While this work is important, it isn’t the focus of our organisation. NQCC targets conservation issues *before* the environmental impacts are so devastating that they require remediation work. This is actually saving the community millions of dollars by preventing environmental harm. Its common sense that its cheaper not to make a mess in the first place.

We are experts in advocacy and contributors to the wider public debate, not on-ground bush regenerators. To take on that additional work would be an administrative burden and take us away from the core of our work.”

“This is an attack on our rights to participate freely in the public debate, and would look suspiciously like a deliberate effort by politicians to be less accountable for their decisions and actions. It’s an attack on free-speech that singles out groups advocating for the protection of nature and the climate”.

With miners avoiding massive rehabilitation costs across Australia, the government is targeting conservation organisations that try to prevent this sort of destruction. It’s quite cynical that we should be burdened with landscape rehabilitation instead of those who are actually causing the damage.

A second recommendation in the report is that conservation groups would face sanctions if they encourage, support, promote, or endorse illegal activity by

employees, members, volunteers and even others without any formal connection to the organisation.

“This sort of front-line activism isn’t something we do at NQCC but we do acknowledge the importance that civil disobedience has had in some of Australia’s most successful environment campaigns, such as blockading at the Franklin River Dam project and actions against Japanese whaling boats. The current laws already police individual illegal behaviour” Ms Hamilton said.

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