

Media Release

7 June 2013

THE FACTS ON DREDGING

Ports North manages and operates ports located in or adjacent to areas of high conservation values which include protected areas such as the Torres Strait, Trinity Inlet Marine Park, Cairns Tidal Wetlands (National Estate), Fish Habitat Areas and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Ports North Chairman, Brett Moller said “Ports North is proud of its long and successful track record in environmental management and we acknowledge the obligation to effectively manage environmental impacts that come with operating port activities in these areas of high ecological value”.

Mr Moller said “there has been much discussion in the community in relation to dredging in the Port of Cairns and therefore important for people to be fully informed of the facts”.

- Dredging has taken place in the Port of Cairns since its establishment over 100 years ago.
- Each year maintenance dredging is undertaken to remove sediment that has accumulated in the channel to ensure ships can access the wharves.
- Being a port city, periodic channel improvement works are vital to the growth of the Cairns community and their businesses. From time to time, the channel has been deepened to allow larger ships to enter the port with the last major dredging project taking place in 1990.
- Although Trinity Inlet is a natural harbour, access to the sea is across a broad shallow mudflat. Since the inception of the Port in 1906, there has been a need to maintain an access channel through these mudflats by regular dredging to remove the sediment that naturally collects in the deeper channel.
- This material is deposited in the channel from sediments already in Trinity Inlet’s waters and if dredging did not occur the channel would slowly silt up, cutting off Cairns from access to deep water and important shipping routes.
- The dredge material, after the completion of comprehensive testing to ensure that it is uncontaminated, is moved offshore to a designated area about 4 kilometres from the end of the existing channel. This location called the Dredge Material Placement Area (DMPA) is distant from coral reefs inshore seagrass meadows and other environmentally sensitive areas and has been approved for this use by the State Government and Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA).
- Ports North have a long history of undertaking scientific research and environmental monitoring especially in the area of dredging. Dredging and sea disposal activities have been studied and monitored since 1991 by engineering and environmental consultants, James Cook University, the CRC Reef Research Centre and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.
- Extensive studies and monitoring undertaken have found that use of the current DMPA site does not have any long term effects and that it supports seabed communities similar to those occurring in nearby undisturbed areas. In fact, the current location of the DMPA was chosen in 1990 following an assessment of all potential placement sites. An important reason for its selection is that the material dredged in Trinity Bay, which is very soft fine clay and silts, is very similar to the seabed at the DMPA. This ensures clean marine sediment is returned to the same marine environment and is rapidly colonised by nearby marine fauna.

- A 5 year James Cook University study on the 'Environmental Sedimentology of Trinity Bay' completed in 2002 concluded that *'the existing offshore dredge material placement site is in an optimum location'*.
- Field monitoring results of the DMPA in 2011 confirm previous results that the bulk of the material is retained within the bounds of the placement site and that any plume was not detectable greater than 1km from the DMPA.
- Ports North have a Long Term Management Plan for managing and monitoring of dredging which has been approved by GBRMPA and an independent Technical Advisory Consultative Committee. Based on this Plan, Ports North was granted a 10 year Sea Dumping Permit in 2010 to cover maintenance dredging activities until 2020.

In relation to the Cairns Shipping Development Project, Mr Moller said "Port North has commenced the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in accordance with the Terms of Reference set out by both the State and Federal Governments. This comprehensive EIS will be prepared for the Project which, amongst other things, will thoroughly examine dredging options and management, use of dredge material both at sea and on land and any potential impact on the marine life in Trinity Inlet".

Mr Moller said "while demonstrating the environmental acceptance of the sea disposal of maintenance dredging through numerous scientific studies over many years, Ports North is not prejudging the outcome of the EIS in relation to the disposal of dredged material associated with the Shipping Project.

"It is only once the EIS is completed that we will have a better understanding of the best way to manage the dredged material" he said.

Ports North takes very seriously the World Heritage values of the reef and its importance and the responsibility we all have to assist in its protection for future generations. We do not undertake any port planning or operations which have not been assessed and approved through a rigorous study and approval process – this includes dredging.

Further information on the Cairns Shipping Development Project including fact sheets and other media releases can be found by visiting the Ports North website at www.portsnorth.com.au

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