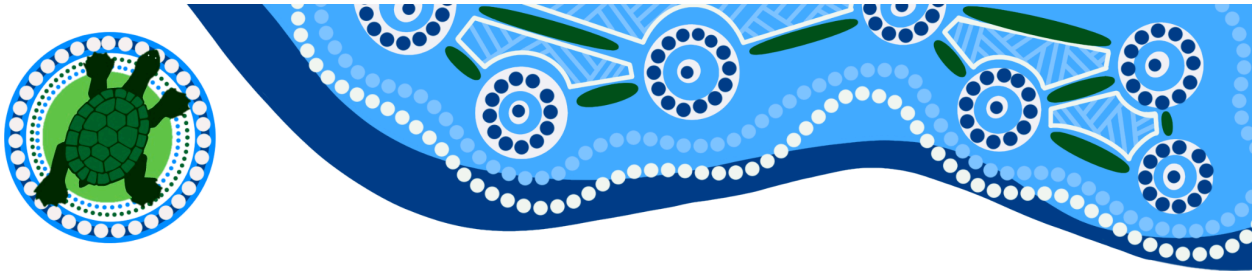

Submission to the State Development and Regional Industries Committee
RE: Planning (Social Impact and Community Benefit) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2025
Submitted by: Capricorn Conservation Council
Date: 18th May 2025
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Acknowledgement of Country

Capricorn Conservation Council (CCC) acknowledges and pays deep respect to all First Nations peoples across Queensland and Australia. We honour the Traditional Custodians of the lands, waters, and skies, and the Elders past, present and emerging. Our conservation efforts are guided by the knowledge, custodianship, and sovereign rights of First Nations peoples.

Introduction

CCC welcomes the intent of the Planning (Social Impact and Community Benefit) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 to strengthen community outcomes in the planning system. However, we raise concerns that parts of the Bill impose undue burden on the renewable energy sector, fail to embed First Nations leadership, and offer exemptions that undermine ecological and cultural protections.

This submission draws from CCC's Renewables Framework Submission (January 2024), the Planning (Social Impact and Community Benefit) submission by the Queensland Conservation Council, the First Nations Clean Energy Strategy 2024–2030, CCC's Moonlight Range Wind Farm Submission (March 2025), and CCC's Crocodile Control and Conservation Bill Submission (March 2025).

Uneven Regulatory Burden on Renewables Projects

The Bill introduces mandatory Social Impact Assessments (SIAs) and Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) for solar and wind projects above specified thresholds, yet smaller-scale coal and gas projects continue to enjoy exemptions from Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). This regulatory imbalance creates a situation where renewable energy proponents are

held to stricter standards than those operating fossil fuel projects. The Queensland Conservation Council's submission highlights this inconsistency by stating, "There is a loophole that allows a coal mine which extracts less than 2 million tonnes per annum to avoid full environmental impact assessment when a solar farm of 2 hectares would be impact assessable." This imbalance actively discourages investment in renewable energy and contradicts the Queensland Government's stated commitments to reduce emissions and protect biodiversity. CCC recommends that consistent assessment standards and CBA obligations be applied across all large-scale industrial developments, including resource extraction projects.

Risk of Delays to Renewable Energy Rollout

CCC supports social and ecological safeguards as a matter of principle. However, we are concerned that retrospective SIA and CBA requirements for projects already submitted may create legal uncertainty, financial risk, and unnecessary delays. The QCC planning submission clearly identifies that “projects which were submitted before this requirement was introduced will be deemed not properly made applications.” Retrospective application of new rules undermines investor confidence and could delay urgently needed emissions reductions that are critical to Queensland’s climate targets. CCC recommends the introduction of transitional provisions that allow projects already in the system to proceed under existing guidelines. We also support the development of Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) planning tools that streamline regional coordination and avoid duplication.

First Nations Leadership and Cultural Heritage Protection

While the Bill includes references to social impact, it does not sufficiently reflect the standards set out in the First Nations Clean Energy Strategy. That strategy affirms that cultural heritage is more than sites and artefacts; it includes language, rituals, shared values, and enduring connections to land, water, and sky. In our submission to the Moonlight Range Wind Farm proposal, CCC called for free, prior, and informed consent processes, the protection of culturally significant landscapes, and benefit-sharing agreements that respect the principle of self-determination. Therefore, CCC recommends that early and broad engagement with Traditional Owners be mandated in all project planning. Consultation should extend beyond legally recognised Native Title holders to include all relevant knowledge holders and Custodians. Cultural Heritage Management Plans should be co-designed and embedded in approval processes. First Nations liaison officers should also be embedded within the Office of the Coordinator-General to ensure culturally competent decision-making.

Biodiversity Protection Must Be Strengthened

The proposed Bill does not ensure adequate protection of Queensland's unique biodiversity. High-value ecosystems, including mapped biodiversity corridors and wetlands, are not sufficiently accounted for in the proposed planning framework. CCC has previously highlighted the need to protect Shoalwater and Corio Bays—areas critical for migratory birds and marine biodiversity. Our Moonlight Range submission detailed the potential clearing of over 1,000 hectares of habitat for threatened species, including koalas, greater gliders, and squatter pigeons. These impacts are unacceptable in the context of a global biodiversity crisis. CCC recommends that cumulative impact assessments be mandated for all major projects. Planning schemes must integrate mapped biodiversity corridors to maintain ecological connectivity. Offset frameworks should prioritise avoidance first, minimisation second, and only allow offsets as a last resort. These frameworks must be co-led by Traditional Owners and reflect both ecological and cultural values.

Planning Integrity Undermined by Olympic Exemptions

CCC strongly opposes the provisions within the Bill that allow Olympic developments to bypass over 15 environmental and planning laws. This sets a dangerous precedent and undermines the rule of law. As noted in the QCC submission, significant sites such as Barrambin (Victoria Park) and the Redlands Whitewater Centre risk being approved without appropriate environmental or cultural assessments. Such exemptions not only violate community trust but also jeopardise Queensland's international reputation as a place of natural and cultural richness. CCC recommends that all developments, regardless of their association with international events, be held to the same planning, environmental, and cultural heritage standards. This is fundamental to ensuring integrity, transparency, and community accountability.

Best-Practice Models for Equitable Development

CCC's submission to the Crocodile Management Inquiry highlighted the success of Traditional Owner-led programs in managing conservation outcomes. In Arnhem Land, for example, Indigenous rangers lead community education, conduct scientific monitoring, and manage Country according to cultural law. These programs provide a template for broader co-management models in Queensland. One Yolŋu ranger explained, "We don't see them [crocodiles] as dangerous. They're part of our story. They look after us, so we look after them." This philosophy embodies the principle of caring for Country and should guide planning reforms

across sectors. CCC recommends that all major development proposals be co-designed with Traditional Owners and communities from the outset. This approach ensures that development aligns with cultural law, environmental science, and social justice.

Conclusion

Capricorn Conservation Council urges the Queensland Government to amend the Planning Amendment Bill to address serious gaps in fairness, cultural protection, and ecological integrity. The Bill must ensure consistent and fair application of social impact and community benefit assessment requirements across all sectors. Retrospective penalties for renewable projects must be removed to avoid disrupting the transition to clean energy. First Nations leadership and Traditional Knowledge must be embedded in all planning processes. Biodiversity protections and cumulative assessment standards must be strengthened. Finally, exemptions for Olympic-related developments must be repealed to ensure all developments are subject to equal scrutiny. By aligning this legislation with the First Nations Clean Energy Strategy, the Renewables Regulatory Framework, and lessons from practical case studies such as Moonlight Range and crocodile conservation, Queensland can deliver a planning system that protects Country, serves community, and delivers climate action.

Respectfully,

S George

Capricorn Conservation Council

Sophie George (BEnvS BSciBio)

Coordinator (Executive Officer)

We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and waters we conserve and protect. We pay respect to the Elders and Ancestors for they hold the memories, the culture and the dreams of Country.