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**Review of Rural Land Use Planning
Constraints and Opportunities in the BRC.**

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Introduction

Like many of the regional council areas in coastal Queensland, there is a history of legacy settlement patterns and associated subdivision policies that constrains current and future land use and which can be difficult to 'fix' without essentially rezoning the rural areas to other than rural uses. Some of the current rural areas which have well defined landscape and tenurial values that limit other forms of use have been 'zoned' away from rural uses to environmental or other forms of resource protection.

The commercial rural land use areas that form the back bone of the rural economy and socio economic outcomes are not well defined by the current sets of Bundaberg's Rural Zone strategies and overlays. Whilst consistent with various State Planning Policies, they do not necessarily reflect both the constraints and opportunities that rural land use offers to the region.

Land Quality

The BRC contains 613,000 ha of land. Of that land, the agricultural overlay shows that 19% of the area is Agricultural Land Class A1 (land suited to a wide range of crops), 2% ALC A2 (suited to horticulture crop only), 10% ALC B (limited crop land suited to a narrow range of crops) and 69% is pasture quality land or non agricultural land. These ALC's as shown in the overlay data for the region are provided by the state and are not a product per se of the council regional planning process. They do form one of the technical bases for rural planning by council.

There are a number of issues with this material.

1. The ALC data from the state includes areas not zoned as rural. However, the overlay table of assessment only applies to land in the rural zone, whilst the Strategic Framework map (SFM-005) only maps Important Agricultural Areas (not ALC) and cuts out land in an urban or rural rezoning.
2. The ALC's are derived via an opaque process of assigning land suitability based on 7 separate soil mapping reports at accuracy scales ranging from 1:1 million to 1:50,000 and with differing land suitability frameworks. Land suitability in some of these reports is based on the assumption that irrigation resources are available. This can expose planning decisions to challenge in appeal processes if irrigation is not available.

Precinct and Important Agricultural Areas

There are planning approaches that could circumvent the need to totally disassemble the SPP ALC system. As discussed later in this paper the current rural zone should be divided into precincts areas which reflect current land use. The current ALC mapping covers a very wide range of commercial rural land use and the deficiencies in that coverage ought to be corrected where rural land use forms that are commercially significant are concentrated. For example, those areas (precincts) with extensive sunk investment in irrigation ought to have their own overlay system and any obvious errors in ALC assignments ought to be corrected. It is likely that a separate set of land use outcomes and performance objectives and RoL policies will be needed for these high value precincts.

Outside of these areas, the ALC overlay could be simplified so that areas that are non irrigable are not classified as if they are able to be irrigated. A separate set of land use outcomes and performance objectives and RoL policies will be needed for these areas to ensure that inappropriate subdivision does not result simply because an area is not ALC A or B.

Rural Zone Fragmentation

The fragmentation of rural land in coastal and south eastern regions is a historic legacy bequeathed to current planners by policies put in place well over a century ago. Policies such as soldier settlement schemes after the first world war, kanaka based subdivisions in the cane sector, cane expansion, irrigation development schemes and family right subdivisions have largely fragmented rural land holdings in the higher value and productive cropping areas.

This fragmentation extends across the higher value commercial rural land use areas or precincts and has become an increasing source of reverse amenity impact and conversion of commercial rural land uses to semi commercial and rural lifestyle use forms. The problem Councils face in managing these situations is that they are restricted to using buffer policies and various building codes to manage these changes whilst the areas remain in the rural zone. The precinct based approach discussed in this report may offer a better approach.

The scope of this study does not include undertaking an analysis of this fragmentation. However, it is recommended that this analysis is critical to a future planning scheme project and the characterization of precincts and associated IAA's.

Whilst hard data on the level of fragmentation may appear a luxury given the obvious extent of the problem, such data is critical to informing and underpinning future rural land planning by means other than the current blunt instruments of ALC and minimum lot sizes.

It is highly likely that such an analysis will show the following:

- That a majority of lots (possibly as much as over 50%) of the best quality cropping lands has a lot area more consistent with rural living lot sizes of less than 20ha. This will result in increased non commercial forms of so called rural land uses that council is unable to manage by than by methods as building, access, buffering and design codes.
- That the number of lots of a size greater than the 200 ha which could be subdivided to the minimum lot size of 100 ha is likely to be minor after environmental, terrain and geotechnical constraints to subdivision are satisfied. Not only is such a minimum lot size a blunt instrument it could also be largely irrelevant.

This combination of legacy impediments and SPP settings are in effect very blunt tools to assist in developing and implementing innovative strategies such as land consolidation, lot reconfiguration, development right transfers and value adding tertiary rural land uses.

Commercial Rural Land Use

The Bundaberg Regional Council commercial rural land use relies on a combination of both private and public sector investment.

Whilst such combinations are not unusual in coastal regions of Queensland, the diversity of rural land use forms in the Bundaberg region is rare in Queensland. Regions like the Burdekin have benefited from major public sector investment in irrigation along with a relaxed approach to ground water use. It has been predominately the cane sector that has benefited and which has also invested in milling and transport infrastructure.

In the Burnett, Kolan and Isis areas, cane production based on groundwater, riparian diversions and pumped command schemes has dominated. However, the Burnett has also become a leader in high value horticulture production and the region has played a major role in ensuring that industries such as these have been able to relocate and expand out of high cost land and water environments of South East Queensland.

On farm value adding within those sectors is increasingly attracting new and high technology investment from the private sector. Given that water security is maintained in the region and that the erosion of high value commercial cropping land is contained, the Burnett will continue to be a critical commercial cropping rural area.

The challenges facing the commercial sector can be simply summarized as follows.

- Current levels of fragmentation will continue to allow non commercial forms of rural land use to erode the production base. The current blunt planning instruments will remain somewhat ineffective and unless refined to specifically address the high value commercial cropping area, their effectiveness will not change.
- The current rural zone has a number of spatial components which remain ill defined in the plan. Without better definition and spatial focus, targeting of planning initiatives will still have to rely on blunt tools.

Defining Precinct/Important Agricultural Areas (IAA)

The concept of Precinct based planning is well established in non rural settings. Its rough equivalent is IAA, but there does remain some conflict between SPP settings (based largely on ALC and associated RoL settings) and the actual needs of the important production areas.

IAA's which have a significant amount of sunk public sector investment associated with their land use (essentially regulated surface and groundwater irrigation areas and cane railway corridors) ought to be clearly identified within the rural zone as discrete planning areas¹ and policy specifically targeted at these areas should be articulated.

Infrastructure uses that value add or support commercial cropping in these areas should be assessed on a case by case basis. In the Bundaberg region, there are significant parts of these areas that are not suited for intensive cropping and could thus support rural land uses

¹ In some regions State Development Areas have been gazetted covering parts of these areas and the flexibility of councils to manage land use change in such areas may be compromised.

that do not conflict with adjoining cropping areas, but which would value add or support commercial cropping. The ALC issues discussed earlier in this paper would help resolve this planning dilemma and a well-documented needs analysis would also be wise.

Outside of these sunk investment IAA, there will be areas of quality cropping land which ought to be targeted by planning – but they may require a different focus.

Beyond the above two types of IAA, there is the broader rural landscape which does not or cannot be reasonably expected to support commercial cropping. The land use outcomes for these areas need to be more clearly defined so that the landscape and land use of these grazing and forested areas are recognized.

Areas of conservation and environment values and areas of instability ought also to be identified. To a large extent such areas are already 'zoned out' or the data (such as slope and coastal environment) are already defined.