

THE HON PETER GARRETT AM MP

MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

TRANSCRIPT

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
PRESS CONFERENCE
PROPOSED DECISION ON TRAVESTON DAM**

BRISBANE, QLD

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SUBJECT: - PROPOSED DECISION ON TRAVESTON DAM.

PETER GARRETT: Thanks everybody for coming in for this announcement today.

I take my duty as the Environment Minister very seriously to protect Australia's environment on the basis of the best available scientific evidence. And after considering the Traveston Dam proposal and the best available scientific evidence and other material that is in front of me, it's my intention to say no to the Traveston Dam.

My proposed decision is based on science. It's clear to me that the Traveston Dam cannot go ahead without unacceptable impacts on matters of national environment significance. In particular, the project would have serious and irreversible adverse effects on nationally listed species such as the Australian lungfish, the Mary River turtle and the Mary River cod, both of those endangered. And that these adverse effects would contribute to the further decline of the species.

In making my decision - a proposed decision, I've also considered the social and economic impacts of the proposal. I've determined that any possible economic or social benefits are likely to be out-weighed by the unacceptable impacts on listed threatened species.

Now, I know that there's been massive public interest in this proposal and I'm aware of many, many, submissions that have been made to the Government. I've looked very closely at the material provided to me by my department. I've visited the site. I've got a robust record for making sound decisions under the national environment legislation. This has been a difficult decision. I've considered it carefully, thoroughly and comprehensively.

It's important to note that I have made, already, decisions in favour of the construction of dams, the Wyaralong Dam here in southeast Queensland and additions to a dam in the ACT at the Cotter. But I've come to the view, after considering very closely all the relevant matters that I'm required to under the national environment legislation, including social and economic matters, that this dam, in my view, should not proceed.

There are specific and additional matters that I've taken advice, and received advice on. They are that the areas to be flooded and the affected river systems will impact on important and critical habitat of important populations of the Mary River cod, the Mary River turtle and the lungfish; that there's likely to be significant disruption to critical ecological processes for these species; breeding, recruitment and the connection between populations. And I'm not satisfied that the impacts on the long-term survival of these species would be adequately addressed by the mitigation and offset measures proposed.

The measures proposed such as fish passage devices and the proposed turtle ramp haven't been proven, and they can't be verified until after the dam is built and operating, and sufficient time passed so monitoring can be done.

And the Mary River turtle is likely to be seriously impacted to the extent that there could be a future decline in the species. Additional relevant matters that have informed my proposed decision include our international obligations to protect listed threatened species, that the economic benefits of this proposal were uncertain, and that under the

EPBC Act, I must consider the precautionary principle when making any decision of this kind. And I've done that.

The fact is that this proposal in my view will have unacceptable impacts on threatened species that are nationally protected, and as a consequence, I don't consider that the dam should proceed. And the precautionary principle, our international requirements, and considering broader social and economic interests as well, confirms that proposed decision for me.

I conclude by making a simple point. Australia's environment is of importance to all Australians, and those nationally listed species we need to protect to the best possible extent that we can.

That's my duty as Environment Minister, and my proposed decision that I'm making today is made in that context.

And finally, I recognise that the overall threats to freshwater species in our country are great. I take my duties as Environmental Minister very very seriously. And on that basis, I've made this proposed decision about the Traveston Dam proposal today.

QUESTION: Minister, there'll be a lot of people in the Mary Valley cheering at the moment looking at you as a hero. What have you got to say to them?

GARRETT: Well I've considered specifically the advice that's come to me. I've looked closely at the independent expert advice that we have. Of course I've been aware of the depth of feeling in the Mary River Valley. But it has been on the matters that have come to me by way of advice that I've made this decision, and I must stress it's a proposed decision, but what's absolutely critical about it is that I've made it in a way which is robust and consistent with the regulatory requirements that I have as Environment Minister.

QUESTION: What was the response from the Queensland Government?

GARRETT: We are now obliged to write to the proponent and to relevant ministers - there's 10 business days for a process of comments to come back to me. I consider those comments, and on that basis, then, formalise a decision making process or otherwise.

Let us wait for those 10 business days to run their course. And on that basis, a final decision will be made.

QUESTION: Will you be going to visit the people of the Mary Valley?

GARRETT: I don't have any intention of doing anything other than continuing with my job as Environment Minister. I don't intend to visit the Mary Valley. I've looked very closely and very carefully at a range of submissions and representations that we've had from that community.

I'm very well aware that this was a hugely important issue for people in that region, but my role, as the national Environment Minister, is to protect the nationally listed and threatened species. And that's what this proposed decision is all about.

QUESTION: The - what about the independent experts at Queensland water infrastructure [inaudible] said that this would actually improve the situation for some of these species?

GARRETT: Well the advice to me from my department was clear, as was the advice from independent and credible experts, that these particular measures that were proposed for the Traveston Dam would not have the effect of improving the survivability or prospects of those threatened, endangered species. And I took this decision on the basis of that advice.

QUESTION: Minister, you say it's proposed decision, but do you accept now you've put this out there, it's very hard for the dam to go ahead.

GARRETT: Well I'm fulfilling the requirements under the Act. That is what I've done ever since I took this position. When Minister Turnbull had made a series of preliminary decisions, I was required as minister to make my decisions on the basis of what he had previously decided, and I did that. In this instance, the nature of this decision making process is such that it's a proposed decision. I'll leave the commentary to you.

Doing this job properly means having high levels of public faith and confidence in the way in which I make the decision. Of course I'm aware of the atmospherics around this decision, particularly in Queensland, but it's a national issue of importance.

But I will always focus very very forensically on what my requirements are as regulator. That's what I'm doing now.

QUESTION: Did you take into account the environmental consequences of the alternative to this dam, which is, the building of a couple of desalination plants on the coast.

GARRETT: In terms of making the decision about the Traveston proposal, the advice to me was clear that that dam would have a significant impact on listed and threatened species. Yes, in terms of a wider contemplation, I'm aware that issues about alternatives may arise, but they're not in front of me for decision making, and I haven't made a decision on the basis of them.

QUESTION: Should the residents have been put through this in the first place given the fact that the, you know, you're saying the environmental, potential environmental impacts [indistinct]?

GARRETT: Look, I think it's really important for us to square up to some of the very difficult issues that we have in this country in terms of long-term security of water supplies. And the best way in which we can guarantee that our populations, our landscapes, and our environment have adequate water for sustainability.

You went through an extremely tough drought here. Those decisions about the provision of long-term water supplies are rightly in the hands of the Queensland Government. In this case, the particular location that was determined, and the nature of the proposal meant, that when I took the advice from my department, that when we considered what independent experts had said, and when we looked at what our primary responsibility under the legislation is - listed and threatened species, Mary River cod, Mary River turtle, Lungfish - really important and clearly identified national responsibilities come into play.

That's why I've made the decision that I have.

QUESTION: You're a long-term campaigner for the environment. Do you commend the people in the Mary Valley for [indistinct] for two and a half years?

GARRETT: I reckon that it is a good thing when we have a very strong involvement from the Australian public in decision making processes around the environment generally.

I welcome it. And I welcome the opportunity to hear what people have to say, how they feel about it. And I welcome the fact that there were significant and substantial submissions from some parts of that community around that issue.

Governments always - particularly under this Act - have got difficult decisions to make. And this isn't an easy decision. But it's one, in terms of its proposition, that I make clearly. I recognise that there was strong public concerns and interests. I haven't taken that into account as my reason for making that decision - because it's not appropriate for me to do that under the Act. I'm aware of it, but I'm making the decision on the basis of the advice that's come before me - and that advice is clear.

QUESTION: As Environment Minister you've had to make some pretty tough decisions. How does this [inaudible]?

GARRETT: Well what I'd say about my decision making is that each time I try and set the bar as high as I can for protection of the environment, and I do it consistent with the responsibilities I have as a national Environment Minister, and subject to the legislation that I'm bound by.

I mean, the facts are that a federal environment minister has to fulfil the requirements under his or her national environment legislation. That's what I've done in the decisions so far.

And my predecessors made some decisions which got knocked off in the courts which I've had to fix up. I want to make decisions which aren't knocked off in the courts. I want to make decisions that are robust, and stay for the long term.

QUESTION: Are you confident this won't be knocked off in the courts?

GARRETT: I'm absolutely confident that this proposed decision has been done in a way which is entirely consistent with the legislation and entirely consistent with my responsibilities under the Act.

QUESTION: Will you sleep a lot easier in 10 days, 10 business days time, [inaudible] final decision?

GARRETT: Look, I sleep pretty easily every night I've got to say at this stage of the game.

QUESTION: The Premier, sorry, said that south-east Queensland is going to run out of water. Do you think they should go back to recycling, the recycling option which they've put on hold?

GARRETT: Well look, matters for the long-term provision of water supplies in Queensland and in the south-east are for the State Government.

I make one observation. From the material that was presented, including through the coordinator general's report, and that is that the

availability of supply meant that the water that was identified in this proposal wouldn't really have been needed until perhaps 2026. I think there's plenty of opportunity for long-term planning to take into account long-term needs. And this decision shouldn't affect that.

QUESTION: Minister, do you accept that in Gympie today you'd be like a bit of a pop star? [Laughter]

GARRETT: Well, I'd be the last person to start making references and comments on the basis of that question. And I think the fact of the matter is that, whilst you know that there are great passions, enthusiasms and strong feelings around an issue of this kind, my task at the end of the day is to be totally faithful to my duty as Environment Minister and to the laws, the national laws, that make very clear how decisions ought to be made and what ought to be taken into account when they are made. I'm absolutely confident that I've done that today.

QUESTION: Are you surprised that the Queensland Government pressed ahead with this? Because it was very clear from, you know, the expert advice in the last year that this [inaudible] to flood a valley and not protect these species. So why do you think they went ahead? For political reasons?

GARRETT: I'm not going to spend any time speculating about other atmospherics around this decision. I make this decision on the basis of material that's come forward to me. It's the advice of my department. It's the expert scientific advice. I visited the site. I felt that I had a totally clear and comprehensive understanding of the range of issues that I needed to consider. I don't make these decisions considering what other states or jurisdictions may do.

[Phone rings]

And that's not my phone.

[Laughter]

In fact, who's phone is this?

And as a consequence, I'm saying what I'm saying formally today.

QUESTION: And when did you tell Anna Bligh? When did you tell her, sorry?

GARRETT: We've provided advice to the proponents, the relative proponents over the period of the last half an hour before we came down to do this.

QUESTION: And what was their response?

GARRETT: Look, I haven't been provided that information, so I can't say what the response was.

QUESTION: Will the people who lost their homes and suffered mentally over the past three and half years - unfortunate for them. Is that something that really [inaudible]?

GARRETT: Look, I've got to say to you, gallery, that...

[Phone rings]

Can I give that phone to you, please. It's not mine.

Can I say to you, gallery, that I don't intend to be drawn on a range of other issues that have been noted in the media, and that communities are bringing forward around this issue, for the simple reason, that my role here is a straight forward one. It's to make sure that I make the decision properly and effectively. That I do it taking into account the matters that I'm required to and that I don't take into account the matters that I'm not required to. I've been really diligent about doing that, and it's important that I can communicate that through you to the public at large.

When you consider the decisions that we've made here in Queensland, the Waratah decision, the decision in relation to Great Keppel Island, the decision that I made in Western Australia in relation to the liquid natural gas facility on Barrow Island. Now some of these decisions of great importance and significance not only for the environment, but also for economic and social matters, and I have to weigh those up.

I will provide, ultimately, a statement of reasons, once there's a finalised decision. I've always done that with my decisions, and I'll provide it then, as and when the occasion arises, and people will have every opportunity to read through it very carefully.

QUESTION: Have you ever changed a proposed decision at this stage?

GARRETT: In terms of my proposed decisions and consultations that go out, the answer to that question is no.

QUESTION: Well, what can they do now? What can the Queensland Government or can the ministers do in this next, sort of, ten working days?

GARRETT: They can provide commentary on what I'm proposing. I can take that commentary into account before I make a final decision.

QUESTION: Did you ever consider that your reputation was on the line with this decision?

GARRETT: No, I didn't. And I have to say that questions about whether or not your reputation is or isn't on the line are not at all relevant.

I mean, let me absolutely, crystal clear about this. You know, through a media prism which picks up an image of someone and the life that they've lived over 30 years, I understand that debate. But I'm proud to be the Minister for the Environment in this Government and I want to

do the very best job I can, under the legislative framework that I'm required to do it.

Now, that's what I've done in the past. That's what I'm doing now, and that's what I'll do in the future.

QUESTION: Is it an indication of how strong that environmental legislative framework is that you operate under?

GARRETT: Well, look, national environment laws are very clear about the impacts on matters of national environment significance, and a listed and threatened species are specifically identified in that legislation and consequently the line between the legislation, my responsibilities and my proposed decision to say no to Traveston Dam is a very clear, and very straight line. I'll take one and then...

QUESTION: Is there any specific species that worried you most in your decision?

GARRETT: Look, I think the three that are identified. The Mary River turtle, clearly in terms of its capacity to continue to traverse that waterway and to have a habitat which would give it some security in terms of prospect - for breeding and the like. The Mary River cod. These are important identified species and the lungfish which I think scientists have already made reference to in terms of its unique and extraordinary lineage. All of those were primary focuses for me and the advice that I received about them and the need to protect them was absolutely clear. Thanks very much everybody.

[ENDS]