

# Living in a 'national park' no use to grazier stymied by wild rivers



Scott Harris, above, and with wife Kerry below, runs 50,000 cattle in the area of Cape York protected from development by wild rivers legislation

PICTURES: BRIAN CASSEY

## SARAH ELKS

FOR Cape York cattleman Scott Harris, the repeal of Queensland's wild rivers preservation law cannot come soon enough.

His vast run, Strathmore, is bordered by the Staaten River, which was declared wild by the Labor state government in 2007.

Mr Harris says it made his already hard life immeasurably more difficult. "It's had a huge effect," the third-generation graz-

ier said during a break from mustering some of the 50,000 Droughtmaster-Brahman-cross cattle on his 931,000 hectares.

"There's roughly 66 per cent of this place that's covered with (the declaration) and the restrictions are unbelievable. You may as well be living in a national park, without the compensation."

Mr Harris, 43, says he has had to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on lawyers' fees to comply with the regulations imposed by the declaration. "You can run cat-

tle, but that's it, you can't control your weeds. If you want to put a fence up, to stop cattle from flogging a river to death... it can take months to get a permit."

Mr Harris was encouraged by the Newman government's announcement that it would begin revoking the four declared river basins in favour of a new statutory plan to fast-track mining and development. He hopes it will make it easier to clear weeds and feral animals, increase cattle numbers and buy stock from indigenous-

run cattle stations further north. "It'll be a great relief to be able to get some sort of normality back. But the damage that's been caused will be felt for generations."

"All of a sudden, what we could do before — control weeds, ferals, fencing — we were stopped from doing that. Consequently, our development is six years behind."

The laws have been divisive. Aboriginal leaders such as Noel Pearson claims they stifle indigenous economic development while environmentalists bemoan a

"scare campaign". The Wilderness Society's Tim Seelig said there were still misconceptions about what was permitted and what was banned. "People believe wild rivers stops everything, from hunting and fishing and cultural practices to fencing and weed management. But in reality nothing of the sort is the case. Wild rivers only stops big development: intensive irrigation, mining, in-stream damming. Everything else that might exist as a regulative (restriction) was already there before."

Dr Seelig fears revocation of the laws will lead to new mines, such as Cape Alumina's planned Pisolite Hills bauxite development, which was stymied by the declaration of the Wenlock River in 2010.

"Wild Rivers has stopped nasty development while not preventing sustainable development. It's the only thing that's giving government the power to protect (rivers) by stopping mining and other destructive development."

Aboriginal leader Gerhardt Pearson said the process was

about restoring balance to the community. "The last 12 years, the emphasis was around dealing with indigenous groups and the green groups," he said. "I think the previous government left out the other sectors, the economic development sector, the tourism sector, the pastoral sector."

Premier Campbell Newman said he had been contacted by some traditional owners who wanted bauxite mining developed on the cape. "Aboriginal people who live on Cape York want a real

future, they want real jobs, they don't want to be on welfare forever," he said. "That's what comes from having sensible, appropriate mining of bauxite and other commodities on the cape."

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