Office of the Hon Bob Katter MP
Federal Member for Kennedy

A SUBMISSION TO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, PORTS NORTH

Securing the Future of the Gulf: An Economic Mandate for the Port of Karumba Land Use Plan

2026

Submission by Hon Bob Katter

Executive Summary

This submission addresses the Port of Karumba Land Use Plan Statement of Proposal under the Transport Infrastructure Act 1994 (Qld).

The Port of Karumba serves as the primary maritime gateway for the Gulf of Carpentaria, anchoring critical supply chains across the North West Minerals Province and regional agricultural sectors. While Ports North manages maritime operations efficiently, it is an assertion in this submission that the port's future capacity, commercial viability, and supply chain resilience is extremely dependent on the quality of its inland transport connections.

In this regard, this submission considers that for the port to transition from a seasonal commodity asset into a resilient, year-round northern logistics hub, immediate and sustained infrastructure upgrades are required. Specifically, this submission advocates for:

1. **ACCESS:** Actions to improve the usability of the port, including waterside logistics and dredging.
2. **USERS:** Consideration of new and emerging users, including the immense opportunities for growth and development within the greater port catchment area.
3. **LINKS:** Advocacy for critical land-based connections, including the formal inclusion of the Gulf Developmental Road, Gregory Developmental Road, and Kennedy Developmental Road onto the National Land Transport Network (NLTN). Formal designation is a critical mechanism required to unlock long-term, ongoing Federal funding.

It is asserted that land-use zoning within the Waterfront Port Industry Precinct must be explicitly aligned with the macro-economic reality of Queensland's northern mining and agricultural sectors. Indeed, the port has national significance as it forms a key component in the chain of infrastructure required to transport goods and services from Australia to Asian markets and beyond.

Waterside Logistics & Dredging

For too long, regional communities have watched resource wealth flow south while local infrastructure lags behind. When innovation and expansion has been achieved it has been done on a piece-meal basis, suited to a particular need of a private investment rather than a coordinated effort to maximise the growth and potential of the entire region.

Figure 1. Location of Karumba on map of Central and Northern Queensland. (Wikipedia Commons)

By way of example, the operation of Century Mine at the Port of Karumba proves what regional innovation can achieve when given the opportunity:

- By moving zinc concentrate via a 304km pipeline and utilizing the shallow-draft vessel M.V. Winma to load deep-water ships offshore, this operation bypasses expensive coastal shipping bottlenecks.

- Century Mine built its own pipeline. However, the many new ventures including the next generation of local miners, farmers, and cattle transport operators have been stalled as they rely entirely on existing sub-standard flood-prone public roads and the existing port infrastructure.

We commend Port North on this initiative to develop the infrastructure and increase the useability of Karumba Port. It is considered that such a development, coupled with an ongoing federal government commitment to upgrade and maintain land-based road infrastructure, will be a significant boost to the local, state and national economies given the exceedingly large potential for growth in the region.

With this mind, we trust that any expanded port facility at Karumba will:

- Include regular channel dredging of the Norman River to prevent current severe vessel draft restrictions, noting that current operations rely heavily on transshipment methods, using specialised transfer vessels to ferry cargo to deep-water ships anchored offshore;

- Allocate a dedicated space within the expanded port boundaries (such as Lot 500 on SP348523) to allow local transport operators to safely decouple road trains and stage bulk cargo;

- Allow previously stalled mining ventures and agricultural businesses, including junior mining ventures, phosphate supply chains (e.g., the PhosOne project), and expanded live cattle exports, to reconsider their business cases for investment in growth and development, see figure 2; and

- Develop inbound freight capacity via marine barging to provide the region with cost of living relief by offering a direct method to lower the cost of fuel and consumer essentials for remote inland communities.

Figure 2. Mining Operations with the Ability to Utilise the Port of Karumba. (North West Star)

Connecting Regional Wealth to National Prosperity

The update of the Port of Karumba Land Use Plan must be viewed through a clear lens that acknowledges the importance of the far north to the national's economy and the significant untapped wealth that we have in the region – with vast swathes of fertile soils, significant volumes of water and some of the world's richest mineral reserves. The port is an essential component in unlocking this multi-generational potential.

To this end, it is considered that regional northern communities cannot, and should not, continue to bankroll the nation's economy while being left with second-rate infrastructure.

Looking to the future and developing a business case for investment in the port of Karumba and the associated land-based road network, should include consideration of the vast, almost, untapped mineral, agricultural and water wealth of the surrounding region.

The Port of Karumba is the natural trading gateway for two world-class resource regions and the Northern Foodbowl:

The North West Minerals Province

The region surrounding Mount Isa is transitioning to supply the critical minerals needed for global technology. This includes massive, unmined deposits of vanadium, molybdenum, and rare earth elements. With the construction of the CopperString power line, operational costs are falling, and production is ready to scale up. Our transport, including road and port, network must be ready to support this growth.

The total value of resources in the province—including known deposits, newly identified targets, and valuable tailings—is estimated to be between $680 billion and $750 billion.

The Chillagoe Minerals Province

The Chillagoe region is experiencing a modern mining revival, with major discoveries of copper, gold, silver, and zinc. These projects can breathe new life into historic northern towns, but they depend on reliable road corridors to transport material westward to Karumba for export.

Figure 3. Highlights the numerous deposits of critical elements - an emerging and strategically important market - located in the Chillagoe Minerals Province and North West Minerals Province.

The Northern Agricultural Foodbowl

The Northern Foodbowl encompassing the existing agricultural regionals along the coast and Tablelands and extending out the floodplains of the gulf and central west have significant potential for agricultural development. The catchments of the Gulf receive roughly 95,615 gigalitres of water per year, which is four times the annual volume of the Murray-Darling Basin yet remains vastly underutilised. Improvement of the road network, Karumba port and capture and control of the flood-waters in these catchments is essential to grow and develop agricultural production in these regions.

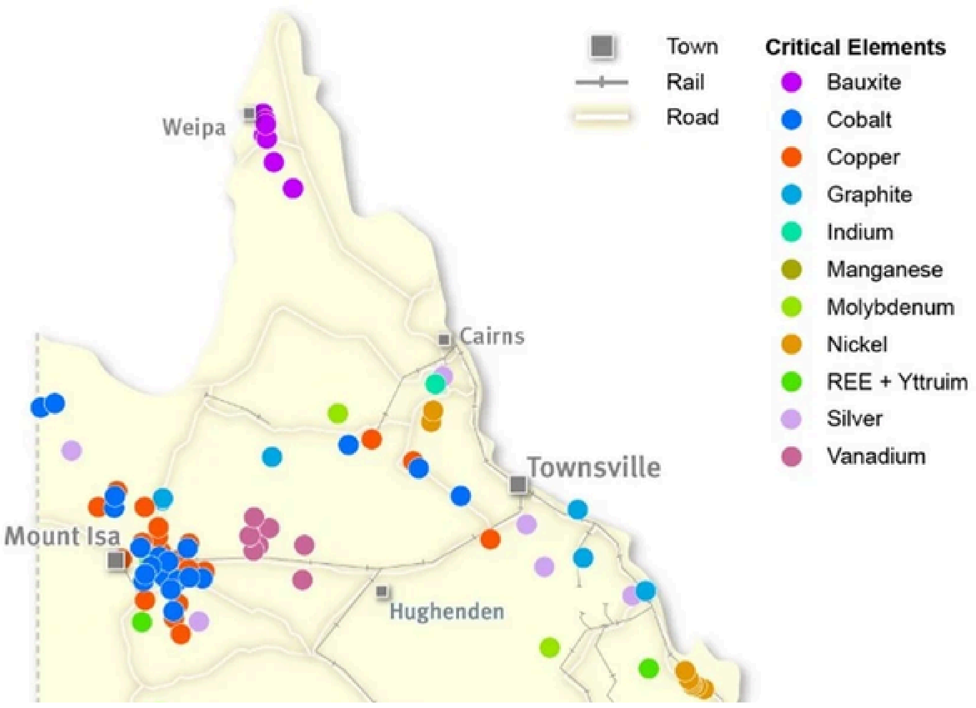

Figure 3. An overview of Queensland new economy mineral deposit. (AusIMM)

Inland Highway Connections & Improved Port Usability

While this Statement of Proposal correctly identifies the physical boundaries of Strategic Port Land, it treats the port as an isolated asset. In reality, the Port of Karumba is a vital economic gateway for Northern Australia. Its success depends entirely on the landside highways that connect it to the rest of the country. The maritime functionality of the Port of Karumba is directly capped by its landside access. Currently, the inland highway network lacks the structural resilience needed to sustain high-productivity freight combinations.

On this point, we would strongly support Ports North using this statutory update to send a clear message to Brisbane and Canberra. The economic growth of the Northern Eastern Australia, including the Gulf region, is being held back by a:

- sub-standard road network that is vulnerable to seasonal weather; and
- lack of collective agreement, not merely on the importance of this land-based connection, but on the allocation of funds required to upgrade and maintain this connection.

It is acknowledged that Ports North primary focus in the submission is the development of Karumba Port, but we do not consider that this should be done in isolation without regard to these essential land-based connections.

Indeed, one could argue that there is no sense in upgrading the port if it can only be accessed by sub-standard, flood prone roads that require significant works to be undertaken on an ongoing basis to provide the 2 lane highways required with sufficiently wide road verges to allow for safe overtaking and minimise the risk of heavy vehicle rollovers.

For many years these key transport links have been gazetted state-controlled roads managed by the Queensland Government with funds for upgrades, sealing and heavy maintenance coming from state and federal allocations rather than local council rates. Despite various government reports highlighting the importance of these roads funding is piece-meal, only being delivered for key sections and often consumed to repair wet-season damage.

A summary of the key strategic corridors, the current structural bottlenecks and their strategic economic function is provided below.

Gulf Development Road

- **Current Structural Bottlenecks:** Contains highly vulnerable, single-lane river crossings (e.g., the Gilbert River Bridge) that restrict Higher Mass Limits (HML).
- **Strategic Economic Function:** Direct east-west link connecting the Port of Karumba to the logistics networks of Cairns and the eastern seaboard.

Gregory Developmental Road

- **Current Structural Bottlenecks:** Features narrow, historic sealed pavements prone to severe edge-break when heavy vehicles pass. Vulnerable to extended seasonal flooding.
- **Strategic Economic Function:** Serves as the primary north-south inland freight spine, bypassing coastal bottlenecks to move bulk minerals and cattle southward.

Kennedy Developmental Road

- **Current Structural Bottlenecks:** Unsealed gaps and historic single-lane formations south of The Lynd Junction limit high-capacity configurations.
- **Strategic Economic Function:** Forms a vital section of the broader Outback Way corridor, linking Northern Australia directly to southern freight hubs in Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne.

With the Federal government proposing a new arrangement for the delivery of disaster funds, that will see a wind back in federal monies available, there is a very real fear that these roads will have even less funds for maintenance in the future. The fear is even further amplified by the significant Queensland Government spend on infrastructure for the Olympics in Brisbane, leaving limited funds for the remainder of the state.

In this context it is considered essential that these roads be placed on the Federal National Land Transport Network (NLTN), above all other roads in Queensland. This designation is essential to unlock ongoing, multi-decade Federal capital for landside freight links. Without formal inclusion on the NLTN, funding for these corridors remains fragmented, relying on piecemeal state allocations or time-limited regional funding pools. Formal NLTN designation guarantees access to enduring, non-corporate Federal capital under the National Land Transport Act 2014, establishing a co-funded baseline for continuous maintenance, pavement widening, and flood immunity works.

The strategic benefits of inclusion of these roads on the NLTN include:

- **Year-Round Freight Certainty:** Upgrading these three developmental highways prevents systemic supply chain collapses during the wet season, ensuring uninterrupted export and import flows through Karumba.

- **Improved Heavy Vehicle Safety:** Widening, dual-lane sealing, and bridge strengthening will significantly mitigate severe accident risks associated with multi-trailer road trains navigating narrow passages.

- **National Productivity Gains:** Seamless integration between northern marine ports and inland road networks minimises per-tonne transport costs, directly increasing the global competitiveness of Australian resource and agricultural sectors.

To unlock permanent, ongoing Federal funding for these roads under the NLTN, it is our assertion that all key stakeholders including Port North, relevant Councils, the mining and agricultural sectors and transport operators provide united advocacy with the Queensland MP Robbie Katter and my office – Federal MP Hon. Bob Katter.

Key Recommendations

In developing the final Land Use Plan we strongly support Ports North in ensuring that such development promotes and accelerates regional growth.

To this end, we are keen to advocate and support a final Land Use Plan, which provides a commitment to:

1. **Promote Regional Access and Connectivity:** Acknowledging the importance of the Port to current and future users and ensuring long-term functionality for the betterment of the local community, regional users and national economy.
2. **Provides a detailed analysis and plan for future users:** The Karumba Port is essential to unlocking the vast potential for growth and development in the far north. Given the port proximity to key mining and agricultural areas, the economic value of a port that can be expanded significantly cannot be understated and any development should include capacity for further and significant expansion.
3. **Advocacy for land-based links on the NLTN:** The Karumba Port is not an isolated asset, rather it is a vital economic gateway for Australia, and its' success and usability depends on the highways that connect it to the rest of the country. In the regard, we seek the support of Ports North in a request to formally incorporate the Gulf, Gregory, and Kennedy Developmental Roads into the NLTN framework, and establish an 80:20 Federal-State funding agreement dedicated to systematic pavement widening, high-mass bridge upgrades, and comprehensive flood mitigation across these three corridors

Acknowledgements

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It is greatly appreciated.

Cover Page Photograph: North West Weekly. (2025, June 25). Plans to make Port of Karuma a major NQ harbour [Photograph]. Retrieved from North West Weekly.