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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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GOVERNMENT'S NEW APPROACH TO CONSERVATION AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

I am announcing today a series of new principles and processes to apply in future conservation and development decisions. A copy of the principles is attached.

Existing decisions, such as those on the Wet Tropics of North East Queensland and Tasmanian forests, will not be affected by today's announcements.

The new processes involve:

- . the establishment of a Resource Assessment Commission (RAC), an independent body to inquire into major, complex land use decisions;
- . streamlining and enhancing the operations of the Australian Heritage Commission (AHC);
- . the negotiation of a Forest Accord;
- . the development of a National Forests Inventory;
- . a review of existing environmental data bases, with a view to filling identified gaps; and
- . increasing the environmental expertise of industry councils and enhancing community understanding of conservation issues.

I see today's announcements as the beginning of a more harmonious approach in the resolution of conflicting demands on Australia's natural resources. Agriculture and mining contribute more than 70 per cent of our export income, yet Australia contains some of the world's most valuable and fragile environments.

Ultimately, of course, final decisions must rest with governments. The new processes will assist in informing governments, as well as those in the community seeking to participate in discussions on major land use issues.

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Our new approach builds on the National Conservation Strategy for Australia (NCSA), which was developed by the Commonwealth in consultation with other interested parties in 1983. It provides a framework within which industry can operate with confidence, and achieves a balance between the need to develop our natural resources and to preserve our environment for future generations.

Sometimes hard choices have to be made between environmental protection and resource development. The Government's concern is to see that its decisions are timely, well informed and, above all, that all interested parties - State and local governments, industries, unions, and community groups and individuals - have the opportunity for their views to be taken into account.

I will be writing to State Premiers, the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory and interested groups on consultative mechanisms to give effect to the NCSA.

The Resource Assessment Commission (RAC) will be responsible to me. The Government will initiate inquiries and determine terms of reference and timetables. The Commissioners for each inquiry will be appointed by the Government on the recommendation of the Chairs of the Australian Science and Technology Council and the Industries Assistance Commission. The RAC will draw on the resources of the Government departments and agencies as appropriate for each inquiry. RAC hearings will be public and all interested parties and individuals will be able to put evidence before the Commission. The Commission will produce draft reports which will be available for public comment. The final report will also be published.

The Government has reviewed the Australian Heritage Commission and has decided to streamline and enhance its operations. Legislation will be introduced to improve procedures for compiling the Register of the National Estate, including better arrangements for notifying owners and other interested parties of intentions to list places on the Register.

The AHC's annual budget will be increased by \$2 million, and staff levels will be boosted substantially to remove backlogs in the Commission's work.

The Government has agreed to Senator Cook's proposal for a Forest Accord. Senator Cook has maintained close contacts with interested groups in developing the proposal put to the Government. He will now conduct negotiations with the aim of concluding a Forest Accord.

Because it shares community concern about the conservation of forest resources, the Government has decided to develop a National Forests Inventory, including a survey of old growth forests. The Departments of Primary Industries and Energy and the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and

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Territories will co-operate on the survey and will seek the co-operation of State Governments in compiling the inventory. A sum of \$2.9 million has been allocated over three years for the Survey.

Senator Richardson has been asked to undertake a more general review of existing environmental data bases and their availability to Commonwealth decision makers and to advise on action to fill identified gaps.

The Government will also increase environmental expertise of industry councils and begin a program to enhance community understanding of conservation issues.

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The three policy principles to be publicly promoted and used as a guide to Commonwealth Ministers in resolving conflicting land use claims are that:-

- (i) there should be an integrated approach to conservation and development by taking both conservation and development aspects into account at an early stage;
- (ii) resource use decisions should seek to optimise the net benefits to the community from the nation's resources, having regard to efficiency of resource use, environmental consideration and an equitable distribution of the return on resources; and
- (iii) Commonwealth decisions, policies and management regimes may provide for additional uses that are compatible with the primary purpose values of the area, recognising that in some cases both conservation and development interests can be accommodated concurrently or sequentially, and, in other cases, choices must be made between alternative uses or combinations of uses.