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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON P J KEATING MP
PRESENTATION OF CHEQUE FOR WET TROPICS TREE PLANTING
SCHEME AND OPENING OF THE KAMERUNGA ENVIRONMENTAL PARK
CAIRNS, WEDNESDAY, 20 JULY 1994**

Ladies and Gentlemen

It's a pleasure to be here today in such a beautiful location to demonstrate my Government's support for such a worthwhile scheme as the Wet Tropics tree Planting Scheme and to officially open one of the fruits of the scheme's labour, the Kamerunga Environmental Park.

As many of you will know, the Wet Tropics Tree Planting Scheme has been operating successfully since 1989 when it was established as part of The Wet Tropics Structural Adjustment Package. Commonwealth funding for the scheme has totalled some \$6.3 million. When you consider the benefits both in terms of the employment generated and the environmental improvements, to my way of thinking, that has been money well spent.

To date the scheme has operated successfully in four shires, Hinchinbrook, Eacham, Douglas and Mulgrave. Through the development of infrastructure, including four nurseries, and expertise in nursery operations and tree planting, the scheme has done a superb job in reducing soil erosion, improving water quality and replacing lost rainforest habitat. These achievements are a credit to the commitment and energy of all those who have participated in the scheme.

But the scheme will not stop there. Like any dynamic program, the scheme is experiencing exciting changes, changes that will see the scheme restructured into a community-based employment company, providing training and work experience opportunities for long-term unemployed people.

I have to say that the scheme's track record in environmental repair and management and the enormous amount of expertise that it has developed gives me great confidence in its ability to provide on-the-job training and supervision as part of the Commonwealth's Labour Market programs -

especially the regional environment employment program announced as part of the announcing the White Paper on employment.

I also have great confidence in its ability to operate independently of recurrent Commonwealth funding from the 1996-97 financial year.

As an illustration of my Government's confidence in the scheme, I am here today to present the first instalment of a total of \$3 million that the Federal Government has committed to assist the scheme in its transition to independence.

As part of the new arrangements, the management of the Wet Tropics Tree Planting Scheme will be transferred to the North Queensland Afforestation Program joint board. This will see seven councils — Thuringowa, Cardwell, Johnstone, Cook, Mareeba, Atherton and Herberton — join the original four participating shires to manage the scheme. The joint board is well placed to manage the scheme. It was established in 1992 specifically to pursue and coordinate tree planting throughout the region, for both environmental and commercial purposes.

The board will now have responsibility for the future restructuring, operation and success of the scheme. The Government trusts that the new arrangements will see a continuation of the cooperative approach that has so far characterised the scheme's operations in employment, environmental successes and training.

I'd like to congratulate all participating councils in the scheme for having taken such positive action in addressing the environmental challenges of your region and through this, doing so much for the region's unemployed. It would be difficult to find two more deserving activities than creating jobs and reversing environmental degradation.

But as you all know I am not only here today to hand over a cheque. I am also here to officially open the Kamerunga Environmental Park, a perfect example of the kind of work being done by the Wet Tropics Tree Planting Scheme. This glorious 54 hectare park which you can see all around you, extends for more than 2 kilometres on both banks of the Barron River. It is here that the Mulgrave unit of the scheme joined forces with the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service and others to involve community groups in preserving, restoring and reconstructing the naturally occurring vegetation along this part of the river.

I've been told that when they first began work, the river foreshores were in a terrible state. Rubbish had to be removed, exotic plants controlled, noxious weeds removed and the area where sand had been mined, filled and levelled. Since that time, more than 30,000 trees have been planted to restore the river foreshore, and paths and picnic areas have been developed.

From what I have seen today, I can say that the original aims of the project — providing a mixed forest demonstration plot and education site, enhancing the public amenity of the area, and improving the scenic value of the park — have been well and truly met.

The restructuring of the Wet Tropics Tree Planting Scheme will enable the valuable work of replacing lost rainforest habitats to continue. It will also provide opportunities for additional projects to be undertaken by local councils and other Commonwealth and State agencies, adding to the scheme's potential to create long term employment in the region.

The scheme has built up a significant store of expertise and has become a very popular initiative. Restructuring now offers great potential for meeting environmental, labour market and industry development objectives in the region. In 'Working Nation' the Government spelt out its plans for providing support for the regional coordination of labour market initiatives. The Wet Tropics Tree Planting Scheme has the potential to be a model for other regions.

I am very pleased to launch this new phase of the Wet Tropics Tree Planting Scheme and have great pleasure in handing over this cheque for 1/2 million to Mike Berwick, the chairman of the North Queensland Afforestation Program Joint Board.

I am also very happy to declare the Kamerunga Environmental Park open.