

PLANNING OUR FUTURE

The Gympie Region Planning Scheme

Gympie Regional Council New Planning Scheme Project

Draft

Rural Land Policy Position Paper

23 March 2023



Introduction

Gympie's rural areas contribute significantly to the region's economic success. They support a wide range of industries and activities from horticulture to grazing, solar farms to forestry and tourism and recreation. They also support important biodiversity values, ecological functions and eco system services. These in turn underpin Gympie region's character, identity and attractiveness as a place to live and do business.

The new planning scheme settings will need to protect the natural resources, functions and values within rural areas and foster rural industries and other economic opportunities, consistent with State Planning Policy (SPP) requirements. It must also balance the region's need for additional urban land to accommodate the projected population growth and manage pressures for industrial and residential development that should be directed to the region's towns and rural residential living areas.

This paper documents:

- the main issues,
- the current position and trends including constraints and opportunities,
- desired outcomes, and,
- policy positions to address the issues.

The position paper, addressing rural land, is one of 13 position papers examining key aspects of future land use and development policy in Gympie Regional Council. The paper has been prepared as part of Stage 2 of the Gympie Regional Council Planning Scheme project and is intended to inform the drafting process to occur in Stage 3.

Other position papers prepared as Stage 2 are as follows:

- Housing
- Retail and Commercial Development
- Industrial Land
- Open space and Recreation
- Heritage
- Highway By-Pass Response Strategy
- Biodiversity Conservation
- Scenic Amenity
- Flooding
- Bushfire
- Land Stability
- Coastal Hazards.

Background – Current State, Regional and Local Policy Settings

State Planning Policy (SPP) 2017 requirements

- The SPP sets out a state interest policy for agriculture, identifying new categories of land which depart from the previous “good quality agricultural land” (GQAL) mapping used in the current planning scheme. The new categorisations are:
 - “Important agricultural areas” (IAAs) - areas identified in the Queensland Agricultural Land Audit 2013 as having all of the requirements for agriculture to be successful and sustainable; and
 - “Agricultural land classification” (ALC) – depicting the location and extent of agricultural land across Queensland that can be used sustainably for agricultural land uses. ALC classes A and B constitute the most productive agricultural land with soil and land characteristics that allow successful crop and pasture production.

Figure 1 shows the existing GQAL mapping contained in the planning scheme while Figure 2 shows the new SPP categories.

- The agriculture state interest in the SPP is set out in full in Appendix A. It requires that local government planning schemes:
 - promote agricultural activity in IAAs,
 - protect class A and B land from fragmentation, alienation and degradation,
 - protect fisheries resources,
 - accommodate hard to locate rural uses such as intensive animal industries, aquaculture and intensive horticulture and protect these from encroachment,
 - locate new development and sensitive uses to minimise conflict with agricultural uses (including through separation),
 - accommodate opportunities for compatible value adding development and support infrastructure and services, and,
 - protect the stock route network.

Draft Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan 2022 directions

- The draft regional plan places emphasis on the rural economy and opportunities for intensification and diversification, including through the take up of advanced technologies. It also reinforces the SPP policy requirements to protect important areas, including from take up by large-scale solar energy developments and the expansion of the mining and gas industry and further fragmentation driven by lifestyle demands.
- The potential for agroforestry in the western parts of Gympie region is identified – which is a form of carbon farming involving the reforestation of cleared agricultural lands or the addition of trees with crops or grazing livestock or selective clearing of regrowth vegetation. Other value adding, non-rural opportunities identified in the regional plan are discussed further under issue 2.

- The draft regional plan identifies “priority agricultural areas” (PAAs) (a concept established under the Regional Interests Act) which emphasises as the key areas in which to protect rural productivity, especially from mining activity. Within this area, the regional plan identifies priority agricultural land uses as including broadacre cropping, horticulture, intensive animal industry, plantation forestry and terrestrial aquaculture¹.
- The draft Regional Plan also identifies potential agricultural expansion areas (PAEAs) within which it intends to accommodate clusters of high value agricultural developments. It nominates a “Gympie to Bundaberg PAEA” which could support further cropping, horticulture, hardwood and softwood forestry plantations.
- Specific policy positions nominated in the draft regional plan are set out in Appendix B.

Current Gympie planning scheme provisions

- The current Planning Scheme for Gympie Region 2013 reflects the previous GQAL mapping, although it remains consistent with the SPP policy intentions in seeking to protect the productive capacity of this land. However, a range of issues have been identified in the implementation of the current scheme provisions. These include:
 - Unclear and inconsistent policy intentions - there appears to be a lack of clear limitations for growth in terms of where expansion will or will not be supported even where GQAL land is involved. This is particularly an issue for potential rural residential scale subdivision expanding into rural land.
 - A lack of clear policy dealing with the protection of non-GQAL rural land. The analysis shows that productive land and activities that contribute significantly to the rural economy extends beyond both previous and new mapping categories. Further, non-GQAL land (and the equivalent new categories) has landscape and ecological attributes, tourism and other natural resource values that warrant protection. Despite this, the current planning scheme (and the SPP) only establish clear protections for the mapped higher quality areas: if the land is not mapped as GQAL, there are few provisions that would limit the fragmentation or loss of that land to urban or other incompatible uses.
 - Despite some references within the strategic framework to rural character values and scenic vistas, these are not sufficiently carried through the planning scheme. Where character values are mentioned, they are not substantiated so there is no reference point as to what should be protected/managed.

Gympie may be better served by more comprehensive approach which protects all rural land (not just higher quality agricultural areas, however defined and mapped) and its associated values from unsuitable forms of development. This may include a clearly defined urban and rural residential footprint. However, clear direction is needed to accommodate value adding agricultural and tourism activities and other uses which may require a rural location. These aspects are discussed further in Issue 2: Diversifying, Value Adding and Managing Impacts.

¹ The draft regional plan formally defines priority agricultural land uses as including the following classes under the Australian Land Use and Management Classification (Version 8, October 2016) published by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES): 3.1 – Plantation forestry; 3.3 – Cropping; 3.4 – Perennial horticulture; 3.5 – Seasonal horticulture; 4.0 – Production from irrigated agriculture and plantations; 5.1 – Intensive horticulture; 5.2 – Intensive animal husbandry.

Issue 1: Protection of Rural Productivity and Resources

Discussion

Gympie rural values

- The Gympie region's rural areas are characterised by significant diversity:
 - Smaller scale rural landholdings, particularly in the Mary Valley and Goomboorian/Wolvi/Kia Ora localities, which support viable farm operations, including dairies, horticulture (avocados, macadamias, other fruit and irrigated cropping) and some aquaculture. Many of these activities also provide agri-tourism attraction (especially in the southern part of the Mary Valley). These areas are likely to diversify further into the future.
 - Western and northern areas which contain larger grazing areas and intensive animal industries ranging from boutique scale poultry and mixed livestock operators through to larger scale feedlots.
 - A growing food and rural tourism industry providing bespoke on-farm tourism experiences, accommodation and function facilities. This is occurring throughout the region, with established concentrations in the Mary Valley and Goomboorian/Wolvi/Kia Ora areas. The Cooloola Food Trail builds on its connections to the South East Queensland region and the Sunshine Coast hinterland.
 - Land and water based outdoor recreation opportunities more generally.
 - Landscape and scenic amenity values that provide the region with a sense of identity and support tourism.
 - Environmental values associated with native vegetation and habitat areas, the river and creek systems that traverse the rural landscape.
- Agricultural land use and likely rural industry potential was reviewed by consultants LRAM and Ethos Urban on Council's behalf in 2019. This analysis identified several precincts based on land characteristics, and future opportunities and pressures. These precincts are shown on Figure 3. The key attributes of these areas are summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Gympie rural planning areas

Precinct	Current Characteristic	Challenges for the future
Mary River	Lands of high quality soils, with some irrigation supporting the dairy, horticulture, forage and cane sector. Seventy per cent of this area is ALC A (that is, good quality land) and suited to a wide range of crops. The remainder is a mix of Limited Arable and Pastoral Land	Historic fragmentation means most lots are relatively small. The constraints of land use conflict and flooding limit non rural outcomes, however its attractiveness for rural living (through take up of small rural lots or pressure for subdivision) may be expected to continue to occur.
East Mary River	This area has a low proportion of ALC A areas. There is a high uptake of dwellings in the area and rural living dominates.	Rural living will increase and pressures on infrastructure will become greater. Bush fire and other landscape hazards are higher in some of this area.

Precinct	Current Characteristic	Challenges for the future
West Mary River	Similar to the eastern side, however residential uptake is lower.	Landscapes and access constraints are the most serious challenges.
Goomboorian	Approximately half of this area is ALC A and the remainder a mix of other ALCs. Tree based horticulture is common and less sensitive to land quality.	Historic fragmentation means that take up for rural living is increasing and likely to continue given the area's location and landscape values.
Inland agriculture	High productivity cropping and grazing land in the Goomeri/Tansey area.	Historic fragmentation means most lots are below viable size. The constraints of land use conflict and flooding limit non rural outcomes.
Forestry	Extensive areas of both plantation and native forests.	State land, much of which is subject to long term leases for forestry production purposes.
Balance Rural	Mostly broad hectare rural lots with some historic fragmentation. Largely grazing quality land.	Residential use is limited at the moment. The area is strategically positioned for intensive livestock uses.

Desired outcome

- Facilitation of highly productive and growing rural industry sectors, which continue to diversify and take up advanced technologies.
- Protection of rural land and other natural values and resources from loss or encroachment by incompatible activities or development that would be better located in other zones.

Policy positions

1. Providing greater clarity about the protection of all rural zoned land

Rural land in the Gympie region has a diverse set of attributes, potential for productive primary industries and development pressures that need to be managed. All rural land requires support for its productive capacity and protection from development that might undermine its use or the wide range of natural values present in these areas.

2. Recognising the wide range of rural values and economic contribution, including:

- The region's rural areas operate as a network– it is more than the sum of its parts
- That the continued ability for rural land to be utilised for farming purposes now and into the future should not be compromised, irrespective of an agricultural land quality assessment. This is particularly important along the Mary River and Goomboorian areas.
- The importance of rural production areas to remain 'intact' to support long-term food security.
- The important contribution Gympie's rural land and producers/operators of all sizes makes to tourism and the building of the food trail, agritourism and ecotourism initiatives.

- The scenic amenity and landscape values that contribute to tourism and the region's identity and attractiveness.
- The important role and 'place' for intensive animal industries - that these operate at different scales and are important to consider when siting future sensitive uses.
- The need to contain urban and rural residential growth within a defined footprint to ensure council's investment in infrastructure is maximised and rural values are protected.

3. Strengthening policy statements to protect rural land from subdivision for rural residential purposes and managing future pressure points for expansion.

Actions

- Develop provisions at strategic framework and zone level in the new planning scheme to better protect rural zoned land, including required separation of future sensitive uses from existing or potential intensive agricultural uses.
- Investigate the use of rural precincts to better articulate desired mix of uses, opportunities for diversification and particular values for protection, and tailor regulation of new land uses and development to add value.

Issue 2: Diversifying, Value Adding and Managing Impacts

Discussion

- The draft Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan identifies a range of opportunities for diversification and value adding to rural industries in the region. These opportunities may vary across the precincts described under issue 1 and include:
 - Controlled environment farming systems that incorporate various levels of control, cover and automation, in more intensive, often indoor built forms (such as greenhouses and vertical farming).
 - Agri-tourism.
 - Plant extractives, plant-based pharmaceuticals, artisan production and larger scale food processing.
 - Engineered wood products.
 - Bioproducts capitalising on agricultural by-products to create renewable energy or products (such as fuel, plastics, bioenergy, and chemicals).
 - Microgrids, closed networks serving agricultural uses.
- Many of these require co-location with the rural resources on which they rely or because they require separation from urban areas. Where they don't, they would be better located in Gympie's industrial precincts to optimise economic synergies and infrastructure investment in those areas.

For commercial reasons, some operators may be attracted to cheaper, unserviced rural land which could generate a range of impacts and pressures on rural roads.

The draft regional plan anticipates these pressures, saying:

Any non-agricultural use or resource activity seeking to operate in these areas will not be supported unless they can co-exist with the PALUs [priority agricultural land uses] for mutual benefit and without compromising the PALUs current or future ability to operate, including the infrastructure essential to the operation of the PALUs².

- Nature-based and culinary tourism opportunities are also likely to grow, particularly in the Mary and Goomboorian areas. These are supported by the draft regional plan. However, these can also generate impacts on local values, amenity and rural infrastructure which need to be managed.
- Renewable energy generation, transmission and storage, including solar and wind farms are also intended under the draft regional plan, including identified wind energy investigation areas (WEIAs) where it considers future commercial-scale wind farms may be appropriate shown in Figure 4. Generally, it states that these facilities should be supported where they do not compromise the regional agricultural production.
- Other hard to locate recreational (including motor sport facilities, industrial (including extractive industry) and waste facilities may also need to be accommodated within rural areas because they are unsuitable for urban areas.

Desired outcome

- The rural economy is encouraged to diversify and expand into new value adding activities.
- Rural production supports the emergence of new manufacturing industries in Gympie's key industrial precincts.
- The impacts of non-rural activities in rural areas are managed to protect rural production, natural and landscape values and infrastructure.

Policy positions

- Activities such as tourism and tourist accommodation, intensive animal industries, intensive horticulture, aquaculture and rural industry, extractive industry, renewable energy facilities and higher impacting recreational activities are considered appropriate provided they:
 - are for tourism activities and are directly associated with a rural use or natural area;
 - minimise impacts on nearby farming activities;
 - maintain water quality;
 - avoid or minimise impacts on values of environmental significance;
 - are within the capacity of the road network on which they rely and maintain the safety of those roads; and
 - are sufficiently separated from town areas and sensitive land uses.
- Industrial uses and waste management facilities are to be located in the industry zone rather than in rural areas, except where a rural industry, extractive industry, renewable energy facility or other use that requires a large footprint remote from urban areas.

² The draft regional plan defines priority agricultural land uses as set out in footnote 1 but generally says they include broadacre cropping, horticulture, intensive animal industry, plantation forestry and terrestrial aquaculture.

Action

- Establish practical and defensible development controls which allow for diversification but resist incompatible development or development better located in an urban area.

Issue 3: Subdivision Of Rural Land

Discussion

- Council has faced challenges associated with significant growth combined with a historically fragmented rural land area. Pressures have arisen for further fragmentation of rural land.
- Rural zoned land is significantly fragmented by past subdivision (although many smaller lots are held in combined landholdings).
- High levels of “de facto” rural residential living occurs in the precincts where there are high levels of fragmentation. These small rural lots fulfil a demand for lifestyle lots that are larger than typical rural residential subdivisions.
- Some rural activities may warrant smaller lots – such as cut flowers, horticulture, food trail facilities and equestrian operations in some precincts. However, these are more likely to occur in those precincts which already contain large numbers of small lots. The current 100ha lot size minimum remains appropriate in most instances.
- The draft regional plan reinforces the SPP intentions that rural land is protected from a proliferation of new or expanding residential uses and that sensitive uses should minimise their impact on rural uses through buffering.
- It also contains policies stating that rural residential development is to be contained in existing rural residential zoned areas.

Desired outcome

- Further fragmentation of rural land is only supported where there is a demonstrated need or where subdivision improves primary industry productivity or land management outcomes.

Policy position

- Accommodate subdivision of rural zoned land where it supports the achievement of measurably improved outcomes for either primary industry productivity or land management.

Actions

- The new planning scheme is to make it clear that boundary realignments and subdivision below the 100 hectare minimum lot size should occur only where it can be demonstrated that such action will result in improved primary industry productivity or improved protection and management of significant ecological values.
- Consistent with the draft Residential Land and Housing Policy Position Paper, the extent and location of rural residential zoning is to be reviewed.

Figure 1: Existing GQAL Overlay in Gympie Planning Scheme

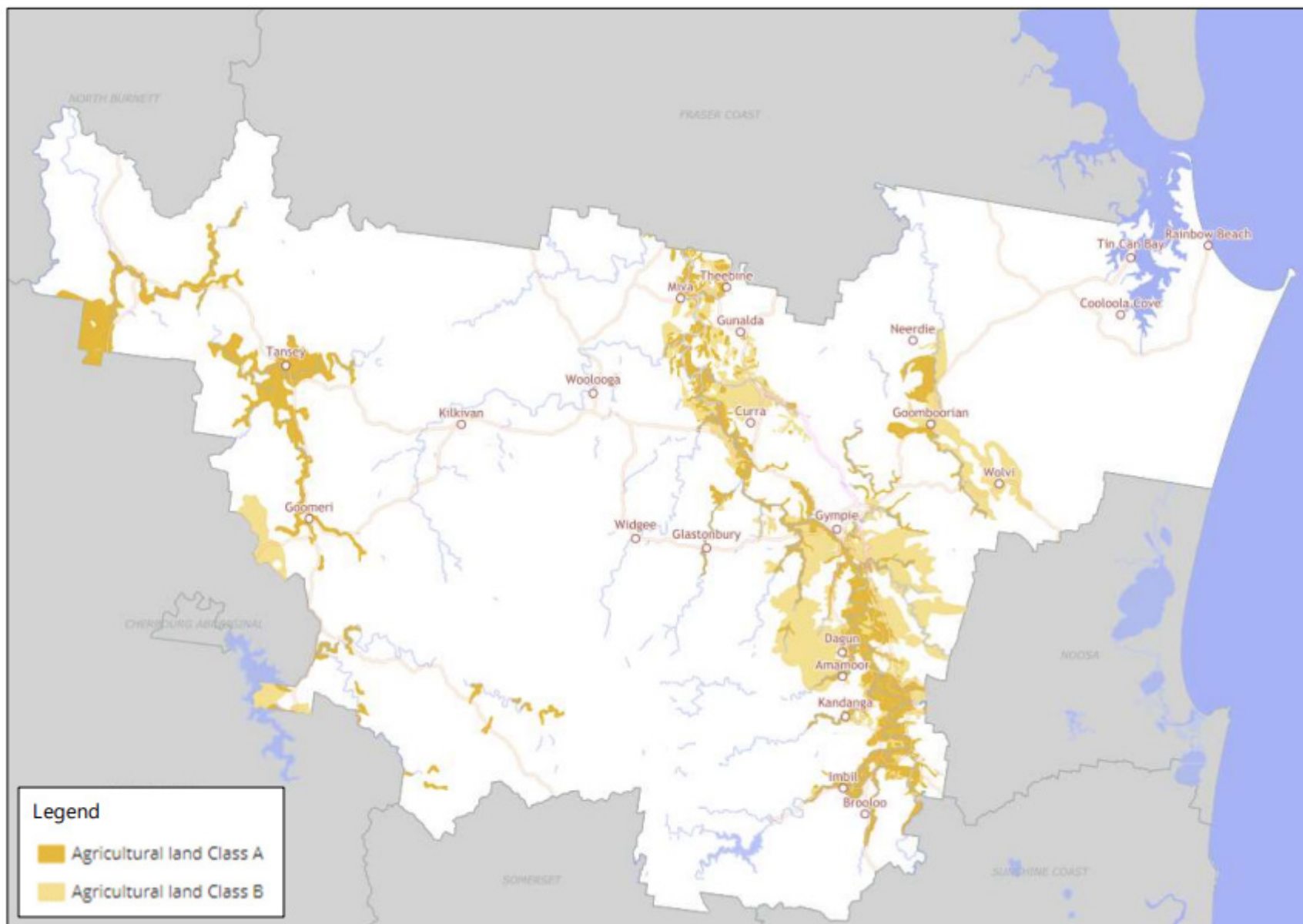


Figure 2: SPP mapping of important agricultural areas and ALC class A & B

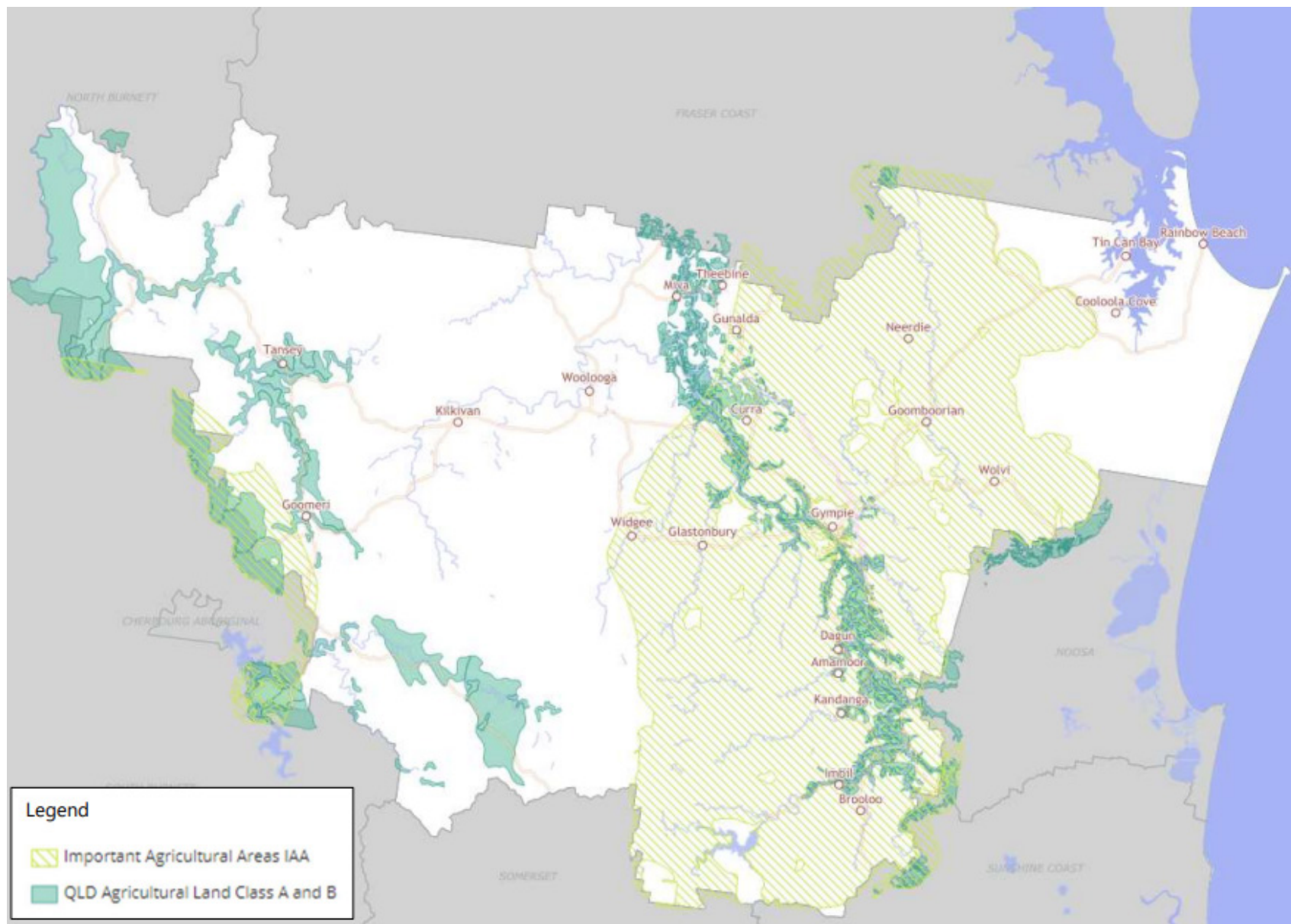


Figure 3: Gympie rural planning areas

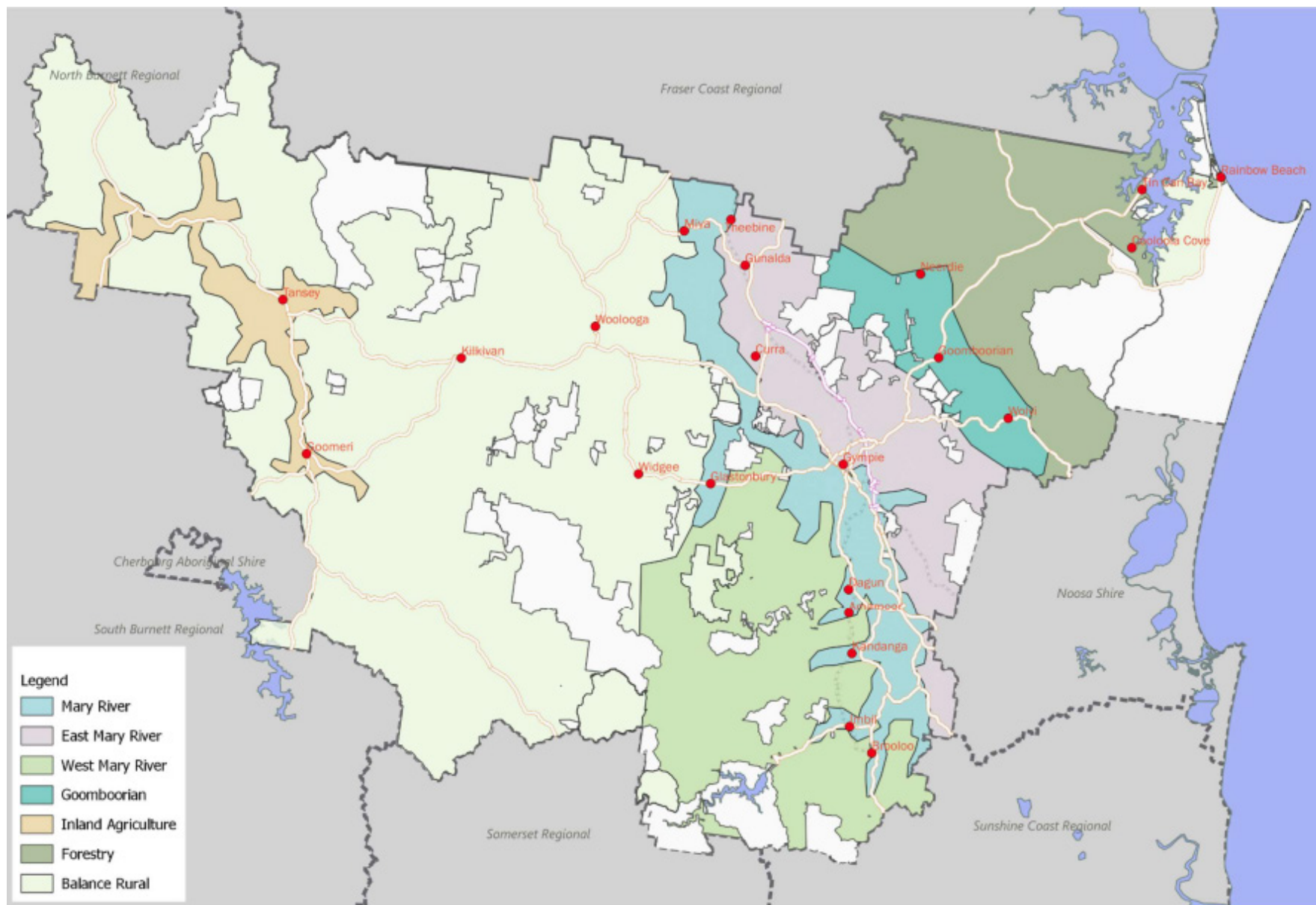


Figure 4 Draft WBB Regional Plan wind energy investigation areas



Appendix A: SPP - State Interest – Agriculture

The resources that agriculture depends on are protected to support the long-term viability and growth of the agricultural sector.

All of the following state interest policies must be appropriately integrated in planning and development outcomes, where relevant.

- (1) Agriculture and agricultural development opportunities are promoted and enhanced in important agricultural areas (IAAs).*
- (2) Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) Class A and Class B land is protected for sustainable agricultural use by:*
 - (a) avoiding fragmentation of ALC Class A or Class B land into lot sizes inconsistent with the current or potential use of the land for agriculture*
 - (b) avoiding development that will have an irreversible impact on, or adjacent to, ALC Class A or Class B land*
 - (c) maintaining or enhancing land conditions and the biophysical resources underpinning ALC Class A or Class B land.*
- (3) Fisheries resources are protected from development that compromises long-term fisheries productivity, sustainability and accessibility.*
- (4) Growth in agricultural production and a strong agriculture industry is facilitated by:*
 - (a) promoting hard to locate intensive agricultural land uses, such as intensive animal industries, aquaculture, and intensive horticulture in appropriate locations*
 - (b) protecting existing intensive agricultural land uses, such as intensive animal industries, aquaculture, and intensive horticulture, from encroachment by development that is incompatible and/or would compromise the safe and effective operation of the existing activity*
 - (c) locating new development (such as sensitive land uses or land uses that present biosecurity risks for agriculture) in areas that avoid or minimise potential for conflict with existing agricultural uses through the provision of adequate separation areas or other measures*
 - (d) facilitating opportunities for co-existence with development that is complementary to agricultural uses that do not reduce agricultural productivity (e.g. on-farm processing, farm gate sales, agricultural tourism etc)*
 - (e) considering the provision of infrastructure and services necessary to support a strong agriculture industry and associated agricultural supply chains*
 - (f) ensuring development on, or adjacent to, the stock route network does not compromise the network's primary use for moving stock on foot, and other uses and values including grazing, environmental, recreational, cultural heritage, and tourism values.*

Appendix B: Draft Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan Policies

- 2.2.1 Support greater flexibility for allied farming uses in PAAs, where positive overall benefits for agricultural production can be demonstrated and where development does not adversely impact local infrastructure networks. Allied uses may include processing, packing, agritourism/seasonal workforce accommodation and agricultural administrative functions.*
- 2.2.2 Non-agricultural uses (uses not directly allied to agricultural functions) are not supported in PAAs, unless the proposed use demonstrates net benefits for regional agricultural production or is for public infrastructure.*
- 2.2.3 Establishment of renewable energy systems for off-grid or site-specific uses may be supported within PAAs, where they directly support on-site agricultural production and processing activities.*
- 2.2.4 New and expanding agricultural operations (including controlled environment farming and protected cropping/horticulture) are supported within rural areas and other zones where appropriate.*
- 2.2.5 Promote and support increased use of agroforestry practices in the Agroforestry/Reforestation Areas identified on Figure 7 to achieve a more sustainable use of less productive land in grazing and cropping areas.*
- 2.2.6 Promote and support other natural capital markets and aligned activities, such as reef credits, biodiversity certificates and soil carbon.*
- 2.2.7 Support and facilitate future aquaculture development in suitable locations, including in ADAs [declared aquaculture areas] .*
- 2.2.8 Support retention and expansion of sustainable forestry, including the protection of forestry product, allied industry and haulage routes.*