



## **PROSPECTIVE STATEMENT OF REASONS FOR REFUSAL OF CABLEWAY DEVELOPMENT IN OR ADJACENT TO THE GONDWANA RAINFORESTS OF AUSTRALIA WORLD HERITAGE AREA (SPRINGBROOK NATIONAL PARK)**

**Proposal:** Construction and operation of a cableway in the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area (Springbrook National Park)

**Decision:** Refusal

**Date of Decision:** 02 October 2025

**Responsible Authority:** Respect Springbrook Mountain Coalition

### **1. Introduction**

This Statement of Reasons sets out the basis for the decision for refusing the approval of a proposed cableway development in, across or adjacent to the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area (Springbrook National Park) (GRAWHA). This decision has been made in consideration of relevant environmental, planning, and heritage legislation, and with reference to Australia's obligations under the World Heritage Convention.

### **2. Grounds for Refusal**

#### **a) Unacceptable Fire Risk**

The proposed cableway corridor and associated infrastructure would traverse one of the highest bush-fire locations on the Gold Coast. The introduction of large numbers of visitors to remote and rugged terrain would significantly increase the difficulty of evacuation during fire events and place lives of both passengers and emergency service personnel at risk. In 2000, the independent Queensland Coordinator-General (C-G) found that bushfire posed a significant risk to the environment and visitors, particularly those riding on the cableway should a fire break out. The C-G report also showed that introducing tourism infrastructure to the area would imply a duty to protect life and property, changing the fire management principles for maintaining species and vegetation communities in keeping with its World Heritage status.

In the context of the 2019/2020 bushfires that impacted 50% of the GRAWHA and escalating fire severity due to climate change, the current proposal is unable to provide sufficient emergency planning or demonstrate how the elevated fire risk could be mitigated to an acceptable level, particularly without compromising the integrity of the world heritage area. Placing infrastructure and visitors into this landscape represents an unacceptable hazard.

#### **b) Pollution of Water Catchment from Human Waste**

The cableway development would introduce significant human visitation into an important and pristine water catchment area that forms the head of the Gold Coast's water supply. The Springbrook township and the proposed cableway lack appropriate sewage and waste management infrastructure, raising serious concerns about the contamination of waterways. This poses a threat to downstream communities that rely

on this catchment for drinking water, as well as to aquatic ecosystems that are highly sensitive to nutrient loading and pollution.

In 2000, the City of Gold Coast submitted that the cableway proposal would “create risks where none presently exist ... the protection offered by Springbrook National Park to Little Nerang Dam and the Gold Coast Catchment area as watershed protection is intangible and not reflected in any cost benefit analysis.”

Increased heavy vehicle movements on mountain access roads for manual disposal of sewage would present hazards for other vehicles and protected wildlife, and would increase pressure on historically vulnerable infrastructure.

### **c) Landslide Vulnerability**

The construction footprint, including towers, footings, and access tracks, is located in geotechnically unstable terrain prone to landslides and erosion. The original cableway assessment in 2000 expressed concern about the historical geological instability, with numerous locations that have a high risk of landslide, particularly in high rainfall events, and the potential for mass movement events triggered by excavation, vegetation clearing, and altered surface water flow. This potential remains. A landslide event in this area could not only endanger lives and infrastructure but also cause long-term degradation to ecosystems and landscape stability.

### **d) Impact on Threatened Species and Habitats**

The proposed development would result in significant impact on habitat critical to the survival of several listed threatened species under both the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and the *Nature Conservation Act 1994*. Notably, the original assessment found a cableway would impact the breeding and foraging habitat of at least 9 threatened plants and 24 rare, vulnerable and/or endangered fauna species, including for example, the Red Goshawk, Marbled Frog, Koala and Albert's Lyrebird (a species with evolutionary links to Gondwana and one of the values for which the area was World Heritage listed).

Within the overall Springbrook plateau, experts identify up to 200 rare, threatened and endemic species. The proposal fails to demonstrate how it would avoid or adequately mitigate impacts on these species. Clearing of vegetation for construction, infrastructure and cableway maintenance would open the forest canopy and increase susceptibility to invasive species, impacting native species movement and viability.

### **e) Threat to the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the World Heritage Area**

The World Heritage Committee inscribed the GRAWHA on the World Heritage List based on its Outstanding Universal Value, which includes exceptional ecological integrity, wilderness quality, and biodiversity. The construction and operation of the proposed cableway would fragment the landscape, introduce intrusive visual and noise elements, and facilitate large-scale tourism in areas previously defined by solitude and natural processes.

The scale and nature of the project are fundamentally incompatible with the conservation of the area's Outstanding Universal Value, and its approval would set a precedent for future incremental encroachment. In 2000, the C-G's report found it was likely that the cableway would present a significant risk of direct and indirect adverse impacts on the flora and fauna values of the World Heritage Area, both during construction and in the longer-term operation of the proposal.

These impacts are exacerbated, as indicated by the 2020 Conservation Outlook Assessment (UNESCO) that downgraded the GRAWHA to “significant concern”, due to threats posed by climate change and vulnerability to invasive species.

The cableway proposal poses a direct and cumulative threat to the integrity of the World Heritage property and Australia's commitments under the World Heritage Convention to protect and conserve World Heritage sites.

#### **f) Incompatibility with Indigenous Cultural Heritage Values**

The proposed cableway development is incompatible with the ongoing cultural, spiritual, and ancestral connections that Indigenous peoples maintain with this landscape. The area in question holds exceptional Indigenous cultural heritage value, including but not limited to places of spiritual significance that are part of living cultural traditions, and cultural landscapes that embody millennia of stewardship and customary lore.

The proposed works would cause irreversible damage to these intangible and tangible values, compromising not only the integrity of specific cultural sites but also the broader cultural narrative and connection to Country that sustains community identity and resilience.

#### **g) Failure to Obtain Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)**

Formal submissions and public statements from Traditional Owners, Indigenous Native Title applicants and members, as well as representatives of First Nations NGOs and businesses, have clearly expressed their opposition to the project. This opposition is rooted in both spiritual obligations to protect Country and legitimate concerns about the erosion of culture, identity, and heritage.

The principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and increasingly recognised under both domestic and international heritage law, has not been met. Consultations with Traditional Owners have been inadequate, non-inclusive, or conducted in a manner that has not fully respected traditional decision-making structures.

Without meaningful and documented FPIC, the development cannot proceed ethically or legally in areas of known cultural significance.

#### **h) Financial viability, insurance, public liability**

A pre-feasibility assessment undertaken by Council in 2020 suggested that a cableway to Springbrook could attract approximately 580,062 passengers per annum and had the potential to provide \$36.6 million value to the Gold Coast economy annually through operation with a total contribution to the Tourism Industry of \$48.3 million per annum and 409 jobs. The pre-feasibility assessment did not effectively address the environmental impacts of the proposal, the carrying capacity of national park to sustain that level of increased visitation (whether or not the cableway terminated at the park), or the potential associated costs related to water sewage treatment, upgrades to electricity infrastructure, offsets for impacts on matters of state and national significance, additional management costs borne by park rangers and landholders associated with infrastructure in natural areas (such as fire and weed management) or the liability of the State or Council with regard to fire damage to infrastructure, loss of income to the proponent and risk to cableway users from fire or smoke inhalation. Neither did it consider the necessary insurances for risks associated with construction, commissioning, operation and decommissioning, nor public liability insurance.

With reported potential proponents asking Council to de-risk a proposed Cableway, there is no indication of who would bear these costs, or if these costs would render the proposal financially unviable.

#### **i) Stranded Asset Risk**

In the event of a fire, landslide and/or extreme weather event, there is significant risk of infrastructure becoming a stranded asset and decommissioning presents a significant and unaccounted for cost.

### j) Alternative Means of Access Not Adequately Explored

There is insufficient evidence that the applicant has seriously explored or proposed alternative locations or alternative means of public access, tourism management, or cultural interpretation that would avoid the substantial risks of this location, and both respect the natural and cultural heritage of the area and provide authentic nature-based visitor experiences. Development should not proceed where less intrusive, environmentally appropriate and culturally safe alternatives exist or could be developed in partnership with communities.

### 3. Conclusion

Having regard to the above concerns—specifically, the unacceptable fire risk, risk of pollution to water catchments, geological instability, adverse impacts on threatened species, lack of consent by the Traditional Owners of the area, threat to the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Area and uncertainty on insurability and liability—the proposal is fundamentally inconsistent with principles of ecologically sustainable development and international heritage protection obligations.

**Accordingly, the proposal is refused.**

