

Farmers blamed for reef pollution

By JOANNA MATHER

CONSERVATIONISTS have called for a tighter rein on farmers following the release of a report confirming in-shore coral reefs are being destroyed by massive loads of land-based pollution.

The report, released by Environment Minister Robert Hill yesterday, reveals massive increases in sediment and chemical run-off on to the Great Barrier Reef over the past 150 years.

It says the World Heritage-listed wilderness is experiencing the type of pollutant patterns that have led to the collapse of reef systems worldwide.

Sediment loading in some catchments adjacent to the reef has increased by up to 900 per cent since 1850 and nitrogen run-off has risen by 200-400 per cent, the report said.

Even more concerning was "the fact that almost all pollution loads are increasing annually and showing no sign of abatement".

"These sediments



Robert Hill

have been demonstrated to seriously impact on the health and reproductive capacity of the corals, seagrasses and fauna of the in-shore reefal areas," the report said.

Sediment export and total phosphorous export are classified as high risk in the Burdekin River catchment, and in the Herbert River catchment nitrogen exports are at a high risk level.

Compiled by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), the report recommends 10-year pollution targets for all 26 catchments along-

side the reef. The World Wide Fund for Nature welcomed the targets but said they would fall well short of restoring the reef to pristine condition. It wanted farming regulated under environment legislation, tighter restrictions on farm chemicals and a moratorium on land clearing.

GBRMPA chairwoman Virginia Chadwick said no single sector or group was being blamed.

She said of major concern was the fact heavy metals had been found in the tissue of dead sea mammals such as dugongs. The report was a "wake-up call".

Senator Hill said the Queensland Government needed to take action to ensure the pollution targets were met.

North Queensland Conservation Council co-ordinator Nicky Hungerford said the figures were astounding. "What it's saying is that our reef is dying and we need action from both governments right now."