Environmentalists criticise Australia reef protection plan

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Environmentalists have criticised a new Australian government plan to protect the Great Barrier Reef, saying it will not do enough to halt the marine park's decline

Environmentalists criticised a new Australian government plan released Monday to protect the Great Barrier Reef in the face of UN concerns, saying it will not do enough to halt the marine park's decline.

The draft plan, now open for consultation, comes after UNESCO threatened to put the reef on its World Heritage "in danger" list and gave Canberra until February 1, 2015 to submit a report on what it was doing to protect the natural wonder.

Australia's Environment Minister Greg Hunt said Monday the draft 'Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan' was an effort to balance priorities.

"Maintaining and protecting this iconic World Heritage area, while considering the needs for long-term sustainable development, is a critical priority," Hunt said.

WWF Australia chief executive Dermot O'Gorman said the draft did not set high enough targets for cutting agricultural pollution or provide "the billions of dollars required to restore the health of the reef".

"At this stage Reef 2050 lacks the suite of bold new actions needed to halt the reef's decline," O'Gorman said.

He described some elements of the Reef 2050 plan as positive, including the greater coordination between authorities.

The draft plan also bans any future port developments in the Fitzroy Delta, Keppel Bay and North Curtis Island near Rockhampton in Queensland state—some of the least developed areas of the reef described by environmentalists as key incubators marine life.

The release of the new plan comes just days after the government said it was reconsidering dumping dredging waste from a major port development into the waters of the reef.

Conservationists claim dumping the waste in the marine park would

hasten the demise of the reef, with dredging smothering corals and seagrasses and exposing them to poisons and elevated levels of nutrients.

Although a major tourist attraction, the Great Barrier Reef has supported a range of commercial activities for many years while the adjacent catchment area has also undergone significant development including land clearing, farming and mining.

The colourful coral faces a number of pressures including climate change, poor water quality from land-based run off, the crown-of-thorns starfish and the impacts of coastal development and fishing.

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