

Fraser Island 4WD tours cause government grief



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A COMMUNICATION breakdown between two government ministers this week is placing the Fraser Coast's annual \$100 million backpacker business in jeopardy.

The Yes Minister-like row is over the Coast's 4WD operators on Fraser Island wanting to introduce tag-along tours of up to four vehicles to improve safety and prevent more deaths - like the two foreign backpackers who died in a crash in April this year.

But while Transport Minister Rachel Nolan says tag-along is legal and can go ahead, Climate Change and Sustainability Minister Kate Jones says it isn't and it can't.

"For 10 years we have been lobbying various government departments to let us introduce tag-along tours on Fraser Island," said a fed-up Fraser Island 4WD Operators Association secretary Dave Robertson yesterday.

"Tag-along means one professional driver in the lead vehicle carrying everyone's luggage and then 10 people max in each of up to three vehicles following him, with those vehicles being driven by backpackers.

"This would absolutely save accident injuries and even lives.

"In April we met with the climate change and sustainability minister, Kate Jones, and she told

■ Department of Environment and Resource Management tourism and visitor services director Anne Greentree yesterday said: "Tag-along tours on Fraser Island are a commercial activity under the Recreation Areas Management Act 2006 that can be authorised by DERM. However, the department has not approved additional commercial activity permits for the island in recent years."

DRIVING FORCE

- Between 2003 and 2009 there have been 41 serious accidents from which people needed medical treatment.
- In April two backpackers died.
- Eight 4WD hire companies operate out of Hervey Bay.
- Each backpacker pays \$250 for a three-day island self-drive.
- The estimate is that will rise by \$100 under the government's new laws.
- If tag-alongs are later allowed but for only seven passengers per vehicle the cost will go up by another \$75 per passenger.

us she would give tag-along tours 'very serious consideration'.

"But three months later we see a media release from the transport minister that completely ignores the tag-along issue and if her plans go ahead without tag-along approval, our business will crash, jobs will be lost here and operators will move out of town."

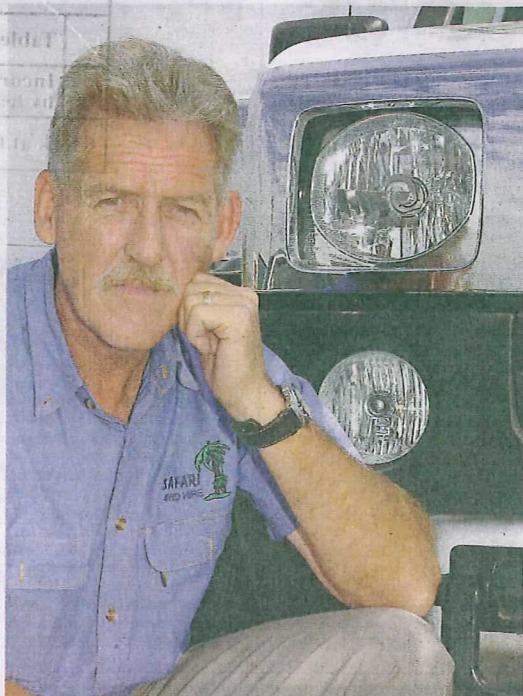
On Tuesday the Chronicle spoke with Mr Robertson and then contacted Ms Nolan's office for comment.

In July Ms Nolan announced major changes to 4WD travelling on Fraser, which included decreasing passengers from 11 to seven per vehicle and moving luggage off the roofs.

Late on Tuesday a media aide to the minister phoned the Chronicle to say our information was "completely wrong" and that tag-alongs were allowed on the island.

So we pulled the story from the paper to make further investigations.

Yesterday morning a frustrated Mr Robertson said he had made and received several phone calls overnight and that morning from both the transport minister's office and the climate change and sustainability minister's people.



David Robertson from the Fraser Coast 4WD Operators Association says confusion between government departments could cost the industry millions. 09h1801e

"Transport has got it completely wrong," he said.

"We can't do tag-alongs because we haven't got approval under the Recreation Management Act, which falls into the Department of Environmental Resources Management.

"This is a typical case of one department not knowing what the other one is doing and we, the operators, are the ham in the sandwich, which is going to end up costing the Fraser Coast \$100 million a year in backpacker business.

"We have no problem with non-tag-along hire going under the minister's new rules but if she doesn't give us the tag-along option as well and allow us up to 10 passengers per vehicle, we will

lose 30% of our yield, our prices will have to go up 30% and I already have one association member who vows he will pack up and move to his other businesses at Airlie Beach. He has about 30 locals here working for him so they'll be out of jobs.

"And what the government's move means to Hervey Bay is the 75,000 backpackers who go on self-drive island trips each year will drop significantly and they won't come here to spend in our hostels, supermarkets and liquor outlets."

State member Ted Sorensen said tag-along tours would make travel on the island "much safer" and he added the stuff-up between ministers was a sign of "incompetence".

FAST NEWS

■ **HOT AND COLD:** Katy Perry could have sung her hit Hot and Cold about the weather on the Fraser Coast. Bureau of Meteorology senior forecaster Geoff Dougal yesterday said up-and-down temperatures experienced on the Coast last week would give way to fine weather today. A north-easterly wind change could see early-morning showers while a rain band forming in central Australia will bring late thundery rain tomorrow to clear by early Saturday. Mr Dougal said the weekend should be fine, with another cloud system to bring thunderstorms on Monday afternoon. Temperatures will be about average. Mr Dougal said this week was the ideal time for people to prepare their properties ahead of spring's storm season.

■ **PENSION INFO:** Centrelink will hold free seminars at Hervey Bay this month to explain new pension reforms. "From September 20, 2009, the pension will increase by \$65 a fortnight for singles on the full rate and just over \$20 per fortnight for part-rate single pensioners and couples," Centrelink's Maureen England said. The Centrelink Financial Information Service seminars will be held at the Hervey Bay RSL Club today from 2pm to 4pm and September 16 from 6pm to 8pm. To book call 13 63 57.

■ **WAITING ON VERDICT:** A jury in a rape case yesterday retired to consider its verdict. Ben Michael Petersen, 26, has pleaded not guilty in the Maryborough District Court to two counts of rape, one of indecent treatment and one of unlawful entry. He is accused of raping an 18-year-old single mother in Maryborough on June 21 last year. The jury had not returned a verdict at the time of print.

■ **INVITE ONLY:** The Fraser Coast council will host an invitation-only breakfast for federal Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government Minister Anthony Albanese in Hervey Bay today. The minister will then drive to the site of the proposed Hervey Bay Community Centre about 9am.

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