BirdLife Northern Queensland

To:
Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

EPBC Amendment (Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012

We are writing to support the **EPBC Amendment (Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012**, as we feel strongly about the continued role of the Federal government in environmental regulation. If the Federal government hands over its approval powers under the EPBC Act to the States, as it is currently legally able to do, more than 30 years of important gains in environmental protection could be lost.

Strong environmental laws are a critical part of a healthy society. They protect our land and wildlife, and ensure that our air and water are not polluted by destructive development. These essential protections for our ecosystems and communities should not be removed simply to "fast-track" development proposals.

History has shown us that the Federal government has a critical role in protecting matters of **national** environmental significance, which it must not abdicate. Short-sighted development proposals have threatened Australia's natural heritage several times in the past and the federal government has stepped in to prevent irreversible harm. Some important examples include preventing a dam on the Franklin River, a coal port in Shoalwater Bay and oil rigs in the Great Barrier Reef. The wisdom of hindsight generally leaves Australians feeling grateful for these Commonwealth interventions.

State governments are by their very nature unsuited to assess development proposals in the national interest. When it comes to mining and major infrastructure projects, history has shown states are more likely to prioritise short-term profits and political interests over the environment. The current Queensland government is pursuing an aggressive development agenda, which has already led to the Commonwealth exercising its powers in relation to the protection of the Great Barrier Reef. Although all governments are ultimately answerable to the people, the maintenance of Commonwealth powers and oversight is an important safeguard against fast-tracked overzealous development that has not adequately considered its true costs on our environment and communities.

We all know that States' budgets are under stress. Recently in Queensland, more than 10,000 public servants have been made redundant. How will our increasingly stretched State resources be able to cope with additional responsibilities for doing an even better job of assessing and protecting our critical environmental values? Giving Federal powers and more responsibilities to States will stretch their resources to breaking point, and "short-cuts" and inadequate protection would no doubt be the result.

The Great Barrier Reef is one example of an environmentally important site already facing impacts from warmer ocean waters causing bleaching, weakening of coral and other invertebrate structures as a result of water acidification, the potential for increased onslaught from extreme weather events associated with warmer weather conditions, and nitrification and other stresses from terrestrial runoff. Seabirds are showing decreased breeding success as warmer water causes their feed fish to stay lower in the water column, beyond the reach of many species. These systems are under stress. It is not the time for reducing their protections.

Every year the National State of the Environment report shows Australia is going backwards in environmental protection for our watersheds, landscapes and unique biodiversity. Now more that ever we need the Federal government to uphold and strengthen environmental laws to safeguard Australia's natural heritage for future generations.

We call on your committee to support the proposed amendment to the EPBC Act to retain federal approval powers and to remove the option for the Federal government to hand over these federal approval powers to the States. This is to ensure that we all must stop and think very carefully before we agree to destroy yet more of our Australian heritage, for limited financial gain by

favoured sectors. The Federal government must continue to play its important role in protecting our land, water and wildlife for all Australians.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Shurcliff
Convenor and on behalf of
the Executive Committee of BirdLife Northern Queensland