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Garrett steps in to protect cassowary

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FEDERAL Environment Minister Peter Garrett has pulled the plug on a planned housing subdivision in Queensland's tropics to save the endangered cassowary.

The unprecedented intervention, under amendments to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, puts developers on notice that the Rudd Government will step in to ban any project it considers of "national environmental significance".

The proposal to subdivide 24ha of privately owned rainforest at Wongaling, near the resort town of Mission Beach south of Cairns, into 40 housing lots was still being evaluated by the local council when Mr Garrett vetoed the development a week ago.

The Gold Coast-based developer Willmatt Holdings was told of the Minister's ruling yesterday morning, just a few hours before Mr Garrett announced it to the Queensland Media Club.

Describing his intervention as "serious and unusual", Mr Garrett said he did not believe there would have been any way to have minimised the development's impact on the rare cassowary.

The site was "essential habitat" for the flightless bird, which was declared an endangered species in 1999.

"This development would have had an unacceptable impact on the chances of the species' survival," he said.

"But the clincher was the impact that it would have on the survival of the rainforest itself."

Many rainforest plants cannot germinate until they have been digested by a cassowary.

The federal Environment Department estimates only 1500 of the giant birds remain, while Mission Beach environmentalists claim 99 live in the area.

Willmatt Holdings director Matthew Manton yesterday said he was "frustrated" by Mr Garrett's intervention. "I'm not a

big-shot developer," he said. "I'm a local person from Mission Beach who tried to do something."

"I have the same belief that Mr Garrett has — I want to preserve the area and I want to protect cassowaries."

"We restricted clearing to 18 per cent of the site, donated five hectares to the Crown and banned domestic animals."

Mr Manton said Queensland's Department of Natural Resources had told him it had no jurisdiction over the site because it was in an urban area.

And a new regional planning scheme had designated the development for higher density housing, he said. "They (the Queensland planning agencies) are saying you can knock every tree down if you want — but that's obviously not something we want to do," he said.

Mr Garrett's intervention is the first time a federal environment minister has vetoed a development as "clearly unacceptable".

Under the EPBC Act bureaucrats can intervene to assess projects affecting World Heritage or National Heritage properties, wetlands of international importance, threatened or migratory species, commonwealth marine areas or uranium mines.

The Howard government changed the act last year to give the minister the power to veto projects he deems to be "clearly unacceptable".

Mr Garrett said yesterday the act "should not be a barrier to development", and vowed to "apply due process" in all his considerations.

"In my role as Minister, I am determined to ensure that developments with potentially significant impacts on matters of national environmental significance are carried out in an ecologically sustainable manner," Mr Garrett said.