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using the law to protect the natural and built environment

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Federal Funding Cuts Threaten Environmental Legal Services

The Federal government yesterday ended, without warning, funding for community legal services specialising in public interest environmental and planning laws. The shock cuts affect Environmental Defenders Offices (**EDOs**) across Australia, and threaten closure for smaller offices in Western Australia, Northern Territory, North Queensland and Tasmania.

Since 1995, EDO Tasmania has been funded to provide information, advice and representation to assist individuals and community groups throughout Tasmania to stand up for their local environment. EDO Tasmania president, Roland Browne, is concerned yesterday's announcement will spell the end for these services.

"EDO Tasmania has played an important role in raising awareness of environmental laws and assisting communities to secure stronger environmental outcomes in relation to forestry, urban planning, mining, coastal development and marine farming. Many Tasmanians who care about protecting the environment will be alarmed about losing the EDO," he said.

Across Australia, EDOS have also run a number of landmark court cases for community groups including high profile cases against new coal mines, pollution of the Great Barrier Reef and over-development. EDO Tasmania has been involved in cases against the Ralphs Bay canal development, conversion of rural land to an industrial use, removal of heritage listing and mining in the Tarkine. The office continues to provide assistance to rural landholders in the Midlands concerned about potential impacts of oil shale gas developments on local water resources.

Calling on the Federal government to restore the funding, EDO Tasmania's Principal lawyer, Jess Feehely, said the cuts undermine access to justice policies that have supported community legal assistance programmes. She warned,

"Without EDOS, defending the environment, community amenity and cultural heritage could become unaffordable for many Australians."

"This is an extremely disappointing decision for hundreds of grassroots community organisations around Australia. For many people threatened by a well-resourced development project, their local EDO is the only place they can afford to go for expert legal advice about their options."

"The cuts come on top of the recent decision to hand back environmental powers to state governments and threats to reduce rights of appeal. At a time when natural resources are under increasing pressure, removing access to free legal advice about environmental laws is short sighted and further skews the playing field in favour of developers."

Ms Feehely said that EDO Tasmania is determined to find a way to continue as a strong advocate for environmental protection measures which support the health, wealth and wellbeing of our community.

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For more information about EDO Tasmania, visit www.edotas.org.au