

Submission to the EPA regarding Project Ares

I am writing as a Northern Territory resident concerned about the scale and potential long-term environmental and climate impacts of Project Ares.

I support carefully considered new industries and investment in the Territory, but a project of this scale must not proceed without the highest level of independent environmental assessment. Project Ares is not simply a data centre. It is a major industrial development involving a 1 GW computing facility, extensive land clearing, groundwater extraction, thousands of hectares of solar infrastructure, large-scale battery storage, gas-fired generation, roads and other supporting infrastructure.

At a time when Australia and the world need to **rapidly transition away from fossil fuels and reduce greenhouse gas emissions**, we need to be particularly cautious about approving enormous new sources of energy demand that could prolong or increase our dependence on gas.

My primary concerns are:

1. Groundwater and water security

The proposal allows for extraction of up to 4 GL of groundwater each year from the Wiso Basin. Before any approval, the EPA should require robust independent assessment of recharge rates, aquifer connectivity, impacts on springs and groundwater-dependent ecosystems, cultural water values, other water users and the effects of prolonged extraction over several decades.

Importantly, this assessment must consider cumulative impacts. Project Ares could establish a precedent for further hyperscale data centres in the NT. Water availability should therefore not be assessed as though this project will necessarily remain the only major industrial user.

2. Land clearing, habitat fragmentation and biodiversity

A preliminary disturbance footprint of approximately 19,150 hectares is substantial. The assessment should consider not only direct clearing but fragmentation caused by roads, solar arrays, fencing, power infrastructure, workforce facilities and other development.

Particular attention should be given to threatened and significant species, including the Greater Bilby, Grey Falcon, Yellow-spotted Monitor and Northern Blue-tongued Skink, as well as the broader ecological function of intact habitat. Surveys should cover appropriate seasons and climatic conditions rather than relying on limited snapshots of species presence.

Avoidance of high-value habitat should be prioritised over offsets.

3. Climate change, enormous energy demand and fossil fuels

The climate implications of this project require particularly rigorous assessment.

Climate science makes clear that greenhouse gas emissions must fall rapidly and that we need to transition away from fossil fuels. Yet Project Ares would introduce an enormous new source of electricity demand while including gas-fired generation as part of its proposed energy supply.

Renewable energy and battery storage are welcome components of the proposal, but they do not remove the climate concern if gas is required to provide significant firming or baseload generation. The relevant question is not simply how much renewable generation will be constructed, but **how much fossil fuel will actually be consumed over the life of the project and what additional greenhouse pollution will result.**

The EPA should require transparent modelling of:

- expected annual and lifetime gas consumption;
- Scope 1, Scope 2 and material Scope 3 emissions;
- methane emissions associated with the project's gas supply;
- the proportion of energy supplied by fossil fuels at each stage of development;
- whether renewable generation is genuinely additional; and
- an enforceable pathway and timeframe to eliminate, rather than merely reduce, reliance on fossil fuels.

The project should also be assessed against Australia's climate commitments and the NT's emissions-reduction objectives.

Of particular concern is the possibility that Project Ares and subsequent data centres create a **new long-term market for NT gas at precisely the time we need to be transitioning away from fossil fuels.**

If multiple hyperscale data centres follow, their collective energy requirements could be enormous. Development on this scale risks locking in new gas generation and associated infrastructure for decades, increasing emissions and making the transition to a zero-carbon energy system more difficult.

Climate change is itself already placing the Territory's people, biodiversity and water resources under increasing pressure. Approving developments that substantially increase greenhouse emissions can therefore compound many of the environmental impacts the EPA is charged with considering.

4. Waste, contamination and fire risks

The project could generate significant quantities of electronic waste, batteries and eventually end-of-life solar panels. The proponent should be required to provide a fully funded lifecycle waste and recycling plan, including financial assurances so future remediation costs do not fall on Territorians.

Large battery facilities, fuels, chemicals and electrical infrastructure also require rigorous assessment of fire, spill, contaminated runoff and emergency-response risks, particularly given the project's remote location.

5. Traditional Owners and Country

Impacts on Country cannot be reduced to archaeological sites alone. Assessment should properly consider sacred sites, cultural landscapes, water places, access to Country and living cultural relationships.

Affected Traditional Owners should be meaningfully involved from the earliest stages of assessment and decision-making.

6. Cumulative impacts and the precedent for the NT

This is my strongest concern.

Project Ares may become a precedent for a new large-scale data-centre industry in the Northern Territory. Assessing each future proposal separately risks allowing the cumulative impacts on groundwater, biodiversity, energy demand, greenhouse emissions, gas development and land clearing to grow beyond sustainable limits.

The EPA should therefore consider not only the environmental footprint of Project Ares in isolation, but the **reasonably foreseeable cumulative consequences of establishing a hyperscale data-centre industry in the NT.**

Before projects of this magnitude become established across the Territory, we need to understand how much land, water and energy such an industry could ultimately consume, how much additional fossil-fuel demand it could create, and what ecological limits must not be crossed.

I urge the NT EPA to require a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement and to apply the precautionary principle throughout its assessment.

The Northern Territory should welcome innovation where it delivers genuine and lasting benefits, but **our land, water, biodiversity and climate cannot be treated as unlimited resources for an unlimited expansion of computing infrastructure.**

We are entering a period in which we must rapidly decarbonise our economy, protect increasingly vulnerable ecosystems and safeguard water for communities, Country and future generations. Major new developments should help achieve that transition, not make it harder.

Digital development must operate within the Territory's ecological and climate limits — those limits should not be expanded or compromised to accommodate unlimited digital development.

Jacqui Taylor

Rapid Creek

Northern Territory