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Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority  
Level 1  
Arnhemica House  
16 Parap Road  
PARAP NT 0801

Mode of delivery

Email to: [ntepa@nt.gov.au](mailto:ntepa@nt.gov.au)

To Whom it May Concern,

## **Sun Cable Pty Ltd – Australia-Asean Power Link Project Environment Protection Act (NT) Referral**

The Environment Centre NT (**ECNT**) is the peak community sector environment organisation in the Northern Territory of Australia, raising awareness amongst community, government, business and industry about environmental issues and assisting people to reduce their environmental impact and supporting community members to participate in decision-making processes and action.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a comment on the referral (**Referral**) of Sun Cable Pty Ltd's (**Sun Cable**) Australia-ASEAN Power Link Project for assessment under the *Environment Protection Act NT (2020)*.

### **1. Introduction**

ECNT has long advocated for the transformation of the Northern Territory's economy into one grounded in renewable energy production, rather than continued reliance on fossil fuels. ECNT's 10-point plan to "Repower" the NT with renewable energy, should see thousands of new jobs and lower power prices for Territorians. ECNT believes that the Northern Territory can capture an incredible opportunity to turn the Northern Territory's abundance of solar resources into jobs, drive economic growth, and secure an affordable energy future for all Territorians.

Sun Cable's project is an important step towards that goal. Nevertheless, any project of this scale will have impacts on the environment, some of them significant. To achieve a social licence to operate, it is vital that best practice is adopted by Sun Cable in its approach to developing this project in the Northern Territory, including throughout the environmental impact assessment process.

ECNT congratulates Sun Cable for proactively taking the initiative to self-refer its proposal for an assessment at the highest level of environmental impact statement under the Northern Territory's new *Environment Protection Act*. ECNT encourages Sun Cable to use best efforts to adopt best practice throughout the environmental impact assessment process, and hopes that Sun Cable's approach to environmental impact assessment of this project will provide the benchmark for assessments of other projects under the Northern Territory's new environmental legislation. This is an opportunity for Sun Cable

to lead the Northern Territory out of its previous poor reputation with respect to its handling of environmental assessment and management of major projects.

## **2. Climate Justice, free prior and informed consent and local engagement**

Sun Cable's proposed solar farm is located in the remote Barkly region of the Northern Territory, and proposes to deliver power via overhead transmission lines and undersea cabling to Singapore. ECNT notes that large projects in the remote Northern Territory (for example, mines) have a reputation for extracting the natural wealth of the Northern Territory for overseas customers and/or corporate shareholders and executives, with little return for local Aboriginal people or local economies beyond those contained in native title agreements.

While Sun Cable's project is aimed at disrupting the world's reliance on fossil fuels for electricity generation, and thus by design has significant environmental benefits including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, the impacts of climate change are already being felt in the remote Northern Territory, including in areas where Sun Cable's project is to be located. Aboriginal residents in nearby Marlinja, Elliott and Tennant Creek are experiencing devastatingly high summer temperatures, failed wet seasons, and are forced to live in housing that is not fit for these conditions due to decades of government neglect. The cost of electricity in particular is extremely prohibitive in these communities.

The Northern Territory's recent climate justice summit statement, comprising a broad coalition of Northern Territory organisations, emphasised that climate solutions must be grounded in principles of justice and equity ([https://www.protectcountrynt.org.au/climate\\_justice\\_statement](https://www.protectcountrynt.org.au/climate_justice_statement)). A climate justice lens focuses attention on the historical and social genesis of climate change, examines its unevenly distributed impacts, and attempts to engage solutions that support those who have been traditionally marginalised and most affected by these impacts.

ECNT's constituents have raised concerns that Sun Cable's project, despite its clear benefits in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions, may be just another extractive project in the Northern Territory that delivers benefits elsewhere. ECNT encourages Sun Cable to work proactively with local communities to find solutions to their lived experience of the effects of climate change. For example, Sun Cable should commit up front to offsetting some of the environmental impacts of the project (including from land clearing, see below) by delivering local benefits such as solar energy and battery storage in local communities, and funding ranger groups to ensure communities remain connected to country. Sun Cable should investigate the option of supplying power for the Tennant Creek grid, as well as Darwin and Katherine. Local benefits in terms of jobs, investment and affordable energy must be embedded in the project design, as well as ways the community can participate in the project throughout its development.

ECNT emphasises the importance of Sun Cable obtaining free, prior and informed consent from traditional owners and affected communities for its project, including via obtaining indigenous land use agreements negotiated with the Northern Land Council. However, ECNT notes that obtaining such consent may involve going above and beyond the legal constraints of the *Native Title Act*. For example, Sun Cable notes that while the Larrakia people do not possess native title rights and interests with respect to Darwin harbour, it is absolutely critical that Sun Cable engages with and obtains the consent of the Larrakia people to the proposal. This applies equally to the solar farm, and the overhead transmission lines. ECNT seeks a public commitment from Sun Cable that it will obtain free, prior and informed consent from Indigenous land holders for the project in its entirety. Further, ECNT submits that a comprehensive and best practice social and cultural impact study be undertaken as part of the EIS, with a commitment to funding monitoring of these impacts (and their mitigation) for the life of the project, and possibly after its cessation.

### 3. Environmental concerns

As mentioned above, Sun Cable's project will deliver significant environmental benefits in the form of emissions reductions. However, the project will also have significant impacts on the environment.

ECNT is concerned about the proximity of the solar farm to Lake Woods, which is a sensitive ephemeral wetland with conservation significance, with the permanent Longreach waterhole at its northern end. Lake Woods has an extensive catchment area that encompasses at least part of the project area, and is an important habitat for migratory birds. Lake Woods and its catchment are also part of the old Murrnaji stock route, and thus part of Australia's pastoral history with heritage significance. Lake Woods is a sacred site within the meaning of the *Northern Territory Sacred Sites Act*.

ECNT is also concerned by the scale of land clearing required for the project, which will significantly increase the Northern Territory's greenhouse gas emissions, and cause the destruction of wildlife and their habitats.

It is vital that the terms of reference require an exhaustive and transparent study of the likely impacts of the project, including on the Lake Woods catchment and due to land clearing. Sun Cable should commit to offsetting these impacts locally. It is not sufficient to rely on greenhouse gas emissions reductions as an offset for these impacts.

ECNT submits that the terms of reference, and the environmental impact statement, should address the following matters:

- Calculation of life cycle inventory of greenhouse gas emissions caused by the project in its entirety, with a concomitant promise to offset these emissions locally to the extent possible;
- A requirement for baseline studies of native vegetation, threatened species and ecological communities, water quality and quantity, aquatic ecosystems, terrestrial ecosystems, and social and cultural studies, for an area within at least a 50km radius of the project (including the Lake Woods catchment);
- A requirement for a cumulative impact assessment of the Sun Cable project and impacts from other land uses and climate change;
- A requirement for a detailed study of the impacts of clearing 12,000ha of native vegetation, including greenhouse gas emissions, erosion, salinity, and run-off (including into Lake Woods);
- A requirement to establish wildlife corridors to preserve habitat for wildlife;
- A requirement for detailed studies of impacts on threatened species and ecological communities, including migratory birds. Lake Woods is a well known nesting site for migratory birds. ECNT is aware that other solar farms internationally have led to birth death (<https://www.wired.com/story/why-do-solar-farms-kill-birds-call-in-the-ai-bird-watcher/>). This possible risk must be extensively addressed;
- A requirement for studies of the impacts of any potential significant increases in ambient temperatures in or in the vicinity of the solar farm, which have occurred in other solar farms (<https://www.nature.com/articles/srep35070>);
- A clear description of the regulatory arrangements that will govern this project, including any sectoral approvals beyond the environmental approval. If Northern Territory regulatory reform is

needed to appropriately manage this project in accordance with best practice, this should be highlighted as soon as possible;

- Employment quotas for local people at every stage of the project, with any commitments costed and funded;
- Disclosure of whether any part of the project involves any partner organisations or industries such as the gas industry (including, but not limited to, the overland corridor for the electricity transmission, or the undersea cable to Singapore). If Sun Cable proposes to partner with the gas industry for any of the infrastructure required for this project, it is critical that this is disclosed as early as possible;
- Disclosure of how risks caused by intermittency of the power supply will be managed, including to Singapore, Darwin, Katherine and any other areas proposed to be connected to the project.

We look forward to seeing a Terms of Reference that addresses the above risks, and to engaging further with Sun Cable in relation to this project.

Yours faithfully,



Shar Molloy and Kirsty Howey

Co-Directors