NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT
Department of
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Our ref: DEPWS2021/0192
Your ref:

Ms Kylie Fitzpatrick
Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security
GPO Box 3675
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Dear Ms Fitzpatrick kylie

Re: Referral– Native vegetation clearing on Ucharonidge Station, NT Portion 307

The Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security (DEPWS) has assessed the information contained in the above referral and provides the following comments:

Flora and Fauna Division
Terrestrial Ecosystems
Biodiversity: Ucharonidge Station covers an area of approximately 245,000ha on the northern Barkly Tableland. The property is predominately situated within the Mitchell Grass Downs Bioregion, with the northern and eastern portions overlaying the Sturt Plateau, and the Gulf Fall and Uplands Bioregions. A total of 5,479ha has been previously cleared or approved for clearing on the property. The total cleared land represents approximately 2% of the total area of the property. The majority of the approved clearing is associated with the pending development of dryland cropping (4,916ha) adjacent to the proposed clearing extent.

Regional scale mapping of grassland vegetation communities for the NT is available at approximately 1:1,000,000 scale. Despite the notional scale limitations associated with spatial data of this resolution, the stark contrast in vegetation structure and floristics associated with the boundaries of grassland systems means that this scale of information relatively accurately reflects the actual extent of these formations at a finer spatial resolution.

The grassland vegetation on Ucharonidge Station is largely mapped as a mid-tussock grassland of variable composition, but dominated by *Chrysopogon fallax*, *Iseilema vaginiflorum* and *Dicanthium fecundum* (Mapping Unit 98 in Wilson et al. 1991). This grassland vegetation is typical of the northern parts of the Mitchell Grass Downs Bioregion and further north into the adjacent Sturt Plateau, Gulf Fall and Uplands and Gulf Plains Bioregions. Towards the south of the station (and further south on the Barkly Tableland), this community transitions towards an *Astrebla* dominated low tussock grassland (Mapping Unit 96 in Wilson *et al*, 1991) with *A. pectinata* being the most dominant species in the community.

Vegetation descriptions provided with the application describe the dominant community as a variable *Astrebla sp. +/- Paspalidium retiglume, Iseilema vaginiflorum* low tussock grassland with sub-dominant *Sorghum timorense +/- Astrebla sp.* mid-tussock grassland. This is broadly consistent with mapping unit 96 (Wilson *et al.* 1991), although it is likely that seasonal conditions as well as the sampling methods may have influenced the comprehensiveness of the floristics descriptions within the clearing areas. Despite this limitation, the information provided is considered adequate to enable an assessment of the regional implications of the proposal on grassland communities, in the context of the previous and proposed clearing applications.

Recent revisions of the land systems mapping and associated geomorphic surfaces in the area suggest that the vast majority of grasslands occurring on clay-dominated substrates are associated with the Mitchell Grass Downs Bioregion (Barkly Tableland Subregion), rather than the Nicholson and Newcastle Subregions of the adjacent Bioregions. As such, it is therefore appropriate to perform an analysis of the cumulative impacts of vegetation clearing, by considering the grassland extents across each of the identified subregions (Barkly Tableland, Nicholson and Newcastle) holistically.

Currently, the extent of permitted clearing within the bioregion represents approximately 0.1% of the mapped extent of the relevant vegetation communities (Map Units 96 and 98) within the Barkly Tableland, Nicholson and Newcastle Subregions. The clearing proposed in the current application represents a net loss of an additional approximately 0.09% of the mapped extent of these vegetation communities. To date, the total clearing for the property is approximately 6,240ha. The addition of 4,898.52ha brings the total proposed cleared extent in the region to approximately 11,138ha or approximately 0.2% of the native tussock grasslands within the region. The Flora and Fauna Division considers that the current proposal, as well as cumulative impacts, are unlikely to significantly reduce the extent of the relevant vegetation communities in the regional context.

Threatened Species

There have been no comprehensive biodiversity surveys in the proposed area. Based on a search of DEPWS databases within 30km of the boundary of the proposed clearing extent, expert knowledge of species' habitat requirements, and information about habitats occurring within the site, the following threatened species may occur within or immediately adjacent to the area proposed to be cleared. The likelihood of these species occurring and the risks to each is discussed below.

Common Name	Scientific Name	TPWC Act*	EPBC Act**
Gouldian Finch	*Erythrura gouldiae*	Vulnerable	Endangered
Grey Falcon	*Falco hypoleucos*	Vulnerable	
Floodplain Monitor	*Varanus panoptes*	Vulnerable	

*TPWC Act – *Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976*

**EPBC Act – *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*

Gouldian Finch: Habitat preference of this species changes seasonally, preferring rocky upland woodland dominated by *Eucalyptus tintinnans* (or similar species such as *E. leucophloia*) and within proximity of persistent waterholes or springs in the breeding season, and moving to lowland grassy systems with the Wet season. While there are no records of the species from Ucharonidge Stations, there are DEPWS database records 45km from the proposed clearing area.

Potentially suitable feeding habitat for the species has been identified within the clearing footprint and from adjoining areas. Due to sustained grazing pressure on Ucharonidge Station, the suitability of grassland habitat for Gouldian Finch is expected to be low. The proposed clearing would remove up to 4,898.52ha,

representing only a small reduction of feeding habitat locally available to this species. The Flora and Fauna Division considers that the potential impacts on Gouldian Finch from the clearing proposal is low.

Grey Falcon: This species is highly nomadic and sparsely distributed with few known nesting locations. It prefers timbered lowland plains, especially those that are acacia-dominated, and interspersed with tree-lined watercourses, but may forage open grassland areas. Despite the presence of suitable foraging habitat the likelihood of significant populations in or adjacent to the area proposed for clearing is considered to be low due to their low densities.

Floodplain Monitor: This species may occur within or immediately adjacent to the proposed clearing, and is most likely to occur around wetlands and riparian habitats in the southern section of Ucharonidge Station. DEPWS database records reveal a cluster of >10 recent records of Floodplain Monitor on neighbouring Mungabroom Station in low tussock grassland used for cattle grazing.

The species was historically common across its range but has recently undergone significant declines due to the spread of cane toads. The species is known to forage in agricultural and modified environments and the proposed land use may still provide some suitable foraging habitat for the species within or immediately adjacent to the proposed clearing. Due to this factor, there is a moderate likelihood of occurrence of the species, however as this species commonly occur in low densities, the number of individuals potentially using the area is expected to be low. Due to the large area of intact suitable habitat in the surrounding region and the low number of individuals likely to use the area, the Flora and Fauna Division considers the risk to Floodplain Monitor from the clearing and future land use to be low.

Recommendation
The Flora and Fauna Division has considered the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts on the relevant values associated with the Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority's (NT EPA) Environmental Factor – Terrestrial Ecosystems. Based on the available information the division considers that the risks and potential impacts from the proposed clearing and future land use are low.

Rangelands Division

Development Coordination Branch

The Development Coordination Branch has no new comment raising concerns for the NT EPA regarding the referral of the proposed land clearing on Ucharonidge Station. As per the previous comment produced for this pastoral land clearing application (see DENR2020/0460), implementation of appropriate soil conservation and land management practices will be necessary to minimise the risk of erosion. As such, a general permit condition for appropriate erosion and sediment control measures was recommended.

The pastoral land clearing application assessment process has been deferred pending the outcome of the referral to the NT EPA. Following the referral outcome, the pastoral land clearing application will resume. If the NT EPA approves the referral, this does not grant a permit to clear native vegetation. In accordance with section 38(1)(h) of the *Pastoral Land Act 1992*, a lessee is not permitted to clear any pastoral land except in accordance with the written consent of the Pastoral Land Board.

Pastoral Lease Administration Unit

Ucharonidge Station is under Perpetual Pastoral Lease 1072 and is located in the Barkly Pastoral District. It is subject to standard lease conditions and reservations set out in sections 38 and 39 of the *Pastoral Land Act 1992*.

The lease area under title is 2,455km^2 and excludes a strip of land 100m in width, being the land 50m each side of the line from Ucharonidge Station Homestead to the boundary of Tandyidgee Station, containing a road constructed by or on behalf of the Northern Territory Government as a public road.

The Pastoral Land Board is the consent authority for clearing of pastoral land under section 38(1)(h) of the *Pastoral Land Act 1992*. On 21 November 2019, the Pastoral Land Board issued clearing permit PLC19/03 and on 24 February 2020 issued PLC20/01.

Water Resources Division

The division provided the following comments (DENR2020/0460) on the land clearing application, and they still apply:

There are no significant surface water features in the proposed clearing area. The buffer proposed for a drainage line near Rita Holdings is appropriate.

It is noted that the proponent has stated that no surface water and groundwater are required to be taken during the clearing process and cropping if developed during the wet season.

Should you have any further queries regarding these comments, please contact Maria Wauchope by email maria.wauchope@nt.gov.au or phone (08) 8999 3692.

Yours sincerely

Luis Da Rocha
Executive Director, Rangelands

30 September 2021