

Dear Dr Vogel,

I am a resident of Mparntwe, who works, votes and pays tax in the Northern Territory.

I am seriously concerned that the Singleton horticulture proposal poses a significant and unacceptable impact to the environment. Please take this submission as consensus with the environmental concerns raised by the Central Land Council and Arid Lands Environment Centre.

Beyond environmental concerns, I do not believe the proposal meets the required risk assessment standards to ensure confidence in amelioration mechanisms; it lacks rigour to meet the certainty of perceived social and economic impact benefits; it does not comply with best practice Aboriginal community engagement and there has been a significant lack of broader community consultation.

While I believe there are other members of public and experts alike have expressed their concerns on the environmental impacts of this proposal, I am choosing to emphasis these other factors in my submission to you today.

Risk Assessment

As the largest groundwater licence to ever be issued in the Northern Territory, and one of the largest in the country, this opportunity presents a chance for the Northern Territory Government and specifically the Environmental Protection Agency to set a strong precedent of responsible economic development for the Territory that delivers long term benefits. As such, any project of the size and significance being proposed should automatically qualify for a Tier 3 environmental impact assessment to ensure the NT EPA can guarantee with confidence the accuracy, currency and rigour of the information provided to

- A) *'assess potentially significant risks', and*
- B) *'assess the effectiveness of proposed strategies to ameliorate risks'.*

The necessity of a Tier 3 requirement is demonstrated through the conflict of interest which exists through the proponents internally funded risk assessment, outsourced to GHD consultants. It is impossible for the public to have any confidence in the rigour of this assessment, when every residual risk rating has been listed as 'low' or 'medium', with zero residual risks that have been classified as 'high' or 'extreme'.

This development is defined by significant risk and uncertainty. Whether it is related to salinity, cultural values, groundwater dependent ecosystems, the groundwater resource or many others, there is outstanding uncertainty and significant risk.

What fills me with concern is that if this risk is felt by the public and traditional owners alike, then the impartiality of a Tier 3 environmental impact assessment should be the standard set to ensure the NT EPA can make a well-informed decisions that is ultimately respected by all stakeholders – the proponent, the land councils, and the public alike.

Social and Economic Impact

The proposal provided by the proponent suggests that 110 permanent jobs and 1350 seasonal jobs will be created, generating serious economic impacts for the Territory. However, the information provided has serious limitations, as outlined by the University of South Australia's economic analysis report 'Review of the Singleton Horticulture Project's water entitlement provision costs, benefits and employment impacts'. This provides a comparative analysis to other agribusiness opportunities in the Northern Territory, and estimates that due to the relative likelihood on NT employment opportunities going to international and interstate applicants, that a more realistic estimate of employment opportunities would be that only 26-36 full time equivalent jobs will likely be filled by residents of the NT of which only 5-8 full-time equivalent jobs are expected to be from Aboriginal communities in the Barkly region.

Following this logic, the report also suggests that the flow on economic value to the NT economy will be significantly lower than as estimated by the proponent. Their proposal claims a significant \$110million a year in economic activity, while the University of South Australia's report indicated that due to a significant proportion of employees not living in the Territory, it is far more likely that the economic contribution will be between 10 – 30% of this figure.

Such substantial discrepancy surely requires an independent assessment of the highest rigour. A Tier 3 environmental impact assessment should ensure social and economic variables are included, enabling the NT EPA to guarantee with confidence the accuracy, currency and rigour of the information provided to

- A) *'Assess the significance of the potential impact of the proposed proposal';*
- B) *'Assess the potential significant impacts of the proposed proposal, taking into account the extent and currency of existing knowledge';*

It beggars believe that the NT Governments investment (in the form of a gift of water, with an estimated value between \$70 million and over \$300 million) would be given to a project that has not had an impartial social and economic value assessment prior to NTG investment.

Cultural Impact

While the proposed site of the agricultural project outlined in the proposal is on land not yet recognised as being First Nations land through Land Rights or Native Title legislation, it is well recognised that the resulting environmental impacts will be felt in neighbouring areas, thus impacting land recognised as culturally significant.

The proposal provided by the proponent takes a relaxed and non-systematic approach to consultation with local Aboriginal community and the assessment of Aboriginal cultural values impacted by the proposal. This lack of detail is highly concerning, and resulted in the Central Land Council themselves undertaking to commission a report (The Aboriginal Cultural Values Assessment) which assesses the potential impact to culturally significant sites by the proposal. This report suggests that the proposal threatens up to 40 sacred sites within its drawdown area.

It seems astounding that this information is not being recognised by the proponent, when their website cites that they are engaging with the Central Land Council. The ability of Traditional Owners and land councils to participate in the co-design of the impact assessment framework would ensure that the NT EPA and all stakeholder alike can trust in the process, specifically, that a Tier 3 environmental impact assessment would enable the NT EPA to guarantee with confidence the accuracy, currency and rigour of the information provided to

- A) *'Assess the potential significant impacts of the proposed proposal, taking into account the extent and currency of existing knowledge';*

In an era of federal and Territory labour - who will be supporting a Voice to Parliament, progress towards Treaty, and a national truth telling, and who are already party to numerous agreements committing this government to endorsing local Aboriginal decision making - it seems unfathomable that this process towards a water licence being granted could so fundamentally undermine local Aboriginal decision making.

Community Consultation

As noted above, the proponents website would suggest to the public that they are working collaboratively, and in good faith with Traditional Owners, key stakeholders such as land councils, and the public alike. This engagement is reiterated within the proponents proposal, yet community, traditional owners and representative bodies alike do not feel this way.

As a baseline, it is unacceptable that the NT Water Act 1992 does not provide the same level of public involvement as the NTEPA Act. In 2023, in the Northern Territory, how can we not recognise in legislation the essentiality of water to our future? This technicality has marginalised the voices of the 23,355 people who petitioned the Controller to refuse the licence, not even being acknowledged in the Controller's Notice of Decision. How can this process claim to meet the highest standard relating to the NT EPA requirement of:

- A) *'certainty in the extent of community engagement that has occurred in relation to the proposed proposal';*

The community which primary need to be engaged in this proposal are the

- Kaytetye Traditional Owners from the Anerre, Waake-Akwerlpe, Iliyarne and Arlpwe groups associated with the drawdown area across Singleton PL, Neutral Junction PL, Warrabri ALT and Iliyarne ALT
- members of neighbouring groups Anterrengey (Alyawarr), Jarra Jarra and Warlapanpa (Kaytetye), Kelantjerrang, Karlu Karlu, Jalyjirra, Miyikampi and Kanturrpa (Warumungu/Warlpiri)
- members of other groups across the region Warupunju and Kunapa (Warumungu); Thankgenerang and Etwerrpe (Kaytetye) and Ngappa (Jingilli/Mudburra), and
- residents of affected communities including Alekarenge, Wauchope, Barrow Creek, Tara, Wilora, Anerre, Waake, Mungkarta, Kalinjari and Imangara.

Concerned in the lack of systematic and thorough community engagement by the proponent, the Traditional Owners instructed the Central Lands Council to contract independent experts to produce a *'Singleton Water Licence Aboriginal Cultural Values Assessment'*. This process made considerable efforts to ensure consultation with all these groups, which includes but it not limited to engaging over 80 Traditional Owners, and 22 visits to sacred sites which will be impacted should the licence be granted.

The concern expressed by Traditional Owners and their representative bodies over the insufficient community consultation with relevant cultural groups makes it hard for members of the public, and surely the EPA to confidently say the engagement has met standards required for low-tier classification of environmental impact assessments. When a report as extensive as the Donaldson report, expresses contradicting feedback and recommendations resulting from a far more extensive community engagement approach, how can we have:

- A) *'certainty in the extent of community engagement that has occurred in relation to the proposed proposal'?*

Despite my educational attainment, English literacy and relative privilege, I have struggled to access reliable information about ways of participating in consultation, and ensure I can reach a position of informed participation. With the NT being one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the world, and with an estimate as high as 70 percent of people living in remote areas having minimal English literacy, I struggle to have faith in the consultations conducted by the proponent. I would imagine that the EPA would agree in this lack of certainty, with a particular focus on the:

A) *'the capacity of communities and individuals likely to be affected to access and understand information about the proposed proposal and its potential significant impacts'*.

It fills me with concern to think that this capacity of informed consent could be brushed over with a simple 'tick and flick'. The lack of certainty here would again suggest that a Tier 3 impact assessment would enable the NT EPO, Traditional Owners and the public alike to participate in further consultation and consultation co-design.

Specific Ask

I respectfully request that you ensure that the most rigorous level of environmental impact assessment (Tier 3) is applied.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this letter. I look forward to your response.