



MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

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Dr Bill Freeland
Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority
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Dear Dr Freeland

**RE: RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING PRESERVATION OF
THE THREATENED BIODIVERSITY OF THE HOWARD SAND PLAINS SITE
OF CONSERVATION SIGNIFICANCE**

Thank you for your letter dated 1 October 2015 advising me of Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority (NT EPA) concerns about the threatened biodiversity of the Howard Sand Plains Site of Conservation Significance. The Government has considered the Environmental Quality Report: Biodiversity of the Howard Sand Plains Site of Conservation Significance that the NT EPA prepared under section 28 of the *Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority Act* (the Act), and the accompanying advice under section 25. This letter is the response to that advice as required by section 27 of the Act.

The Northern Territory Government has decided to protect an area of the Howard sand plains which will incorporate key habitats that support the significant biodiversity values of the sand plains. The identified area will be consistent with Option 2 in the advice of the NT EPA (see map at Attachment A). Government considers this area offers a high level of protection to all of the key biodiversity values in the Howard sand plains, allows mineral extraction to continue in a large number of tenements, is practical to implement from a regulatory and operational perspective, and is a design amenable to future management of a range of threats.

The Department of Mines and Energy has identified a range of mechanisms that it will implement to reduce mining activity in the identified area and which are intended to achieve a cessation of mining activity in the area within 5 years, thereby addressing the most immediate threat to biodiversity values of the Howard sand plains.

In addition, Government will establish a stakeholder reference group to further consider the NT EPA's recommendations regarding management of the sand plains, and the threats affecting biodiversity values within the identified area, including water extraction, expanding rural residential development, spread of serious environmental weeds, uncontrolled fire, and disturbance from inappropriate recreational use. The group will identify the best options to manage these threats, and ensure there is adequate consultation and collaboration in relation to the future management of the area. It will be led by the Department of Land Resource Management (DLRM) and comprise representatives from other Northern Territory Government agencies, industry and non-government organisations.

In 2015, the Northern Territory Government commissioned Dr Allan Hawke AC to conduct a review of the Northern Territory's environmental assessment and approval processes. Specific actions that the NT Government has committed to as part of the subsequent environmental regulatory reform process include:

- Modernisation of the environmental assessment system ensuring that responsibility for referring projects rests with proponents and introduce different levels of assessment that can be used according to the level of risk posed by the project;
- Introduction of an environmental approval issued by the Environment Minister for projects that would not otherwise be subject to an environmental approval where those projects may have significant environmental impacts;
- Development of an accreditation system to test and accredit environmental approval legislation. This framework will act as a quality assurance system to ensure that legislation that assesses or manages environmental impacts is appropriately clear, robust and enforceable;
- Improved requirements for monitoring and assurance activities by the NT EPA in relation to assessment and approval processes; and
- Significantly improving confidence in the assessment and approval system by improving transparency by releasing statements of reasons for decisions, and publishing approvals and reports of compliance against conditions of approvals.

Each of the NT EPA's recommendations relating to environmental impact assessment will be considered and addressed as part of Government's broader environmental regulatory reform program.

Government is committed to water allocation planning, and through DLRM has recently invested in the assessment and mapping of water resources in the Howard East area.

DLRM has also established the Howard East Water Allocation Committee to advise on the development of a water allocation plan for the Howard East Water Planning area. A draft plan is expected to be released for public comment by the end of 2016.

A core role of the DLRM Flora and Fauna Division is to maintain a high quality information system that comprehensively captures all relevant NT biodiversity, and which is readily accessible to a broad range of NT and external stakeholders. This has involved compiling biodiversity data from a very broad array of sources (including museum and herbarium specimens, systematic flora and fauna surveys, research and monitoring projects, historical records, literature and published reports, environmental impact assessment reports, Birdlife Australia bird atlas records, other citizen-based observations and on-line atlases) into GIS-based Flora and Fauna Atlases.

An additional database of all known point records for invertebrate species will be added in 2016. These data are publicly available through the NR Maps NT web portal, which can be interrogated to show, for example, records for listed threatened species within a selected area.

DLRM encourages the submission of plant and animal species observation records and datasets, and has recently developed a user-friendly web portal (NT Wildwatch). DLRM will continue to investigate methods to improve the comprehensiveness and currency of the Flora and Fauna Atlases. This will include working closely with industry and environmental consultants to ensure that the mutual benefits of access to detailed and accurate biodiversity data are recognised.

I am confident the measures outlined in this response will enable Government to protect and conserve the key habitats and species in the Howard sand plains. I look forward to continuing to work with the NT EPA to improve environmental management outcomes in the Northern Territory.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'GARY HIGGINS', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

GARY HIGGINS

4 AUG 2016

