

Refuse a NT Water Licence for Massive Irrigation on Singleton Station

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I am a voter in the ACT electorate of Bean and for many reasons I am resolutely opposed to granting a water licence to the proposed mega water-guzzling Singleton Station project.

The first point to make is that Fortune Agribusiness (FA) seems to think it is god's gift to Australian agriculture and specifically the NT, and that a 40 000 megalitre groundwater extraction licence is a trivial matter even taking in to account that this project is completely dependent on a massive free public water subsidy of estimated value up to \$300 million, and carrying intolerable negative ecological, cultural, and social costs which have not been properly considered.

Jeff Connor, a Professor of water economics from the University of South Australia, who was commissioned by the Central Land Council (CLC) to study the FA Singleton proposal, has cast a pall over the company's claimed job projections of 110 permanent and 1350 seasonal jobs, suggesting that a more realistic projection would be between 26 to 36 full-time equivalent jobs for Territorians, with just five to eight of those jobs going to Indigenous workers in the local Barkly region. He also suggests that it is the creation of full-time jobs for local Indigenous workers and the associated employee benefits which FA is attempting to use as a payment trade-off for this vast volume of groundwater, when the financial benefits to the Indigenous land owners are illusory and miniscule in relation to the estimated value of the water subsidy of \$250 million provided by the NT government. This subsidy estimate is presented in ANU's Professor Quentin Grafton's peer review of the Connor report. The review also stated that the NT in giving away "in the order of \$250 million ... (and) is not justified from either a public interest or a cost-benefit perspective." In this era of climate change and extreme heat, giving away such vast quantities of irreplaceable and ancient artesian water in arid, inland Australia, whatever the charge to FA, is irresponsible in the extreme.

The Traditional owners rightfully fear that, if the development gets the go-ahead, it will significantly lower the region's water table, in turn damaging sacred trees, soakages and water holes that draw on the same groundwater FA plans to harvest. CLC policy manager Francine McCarthy wants the project to receive a tier-three assessment by government authorities, which is the most stringent. In Ms McCarthy words: "Kaytete traditional owners have maintained their country for millennia and we owe them the highest level of assessment."

Professor Connor's report also found that up to 40 sacred sites in the region relied on the region's groundwater, and tellingly a couple of days ago a shocking addendum to that report, authored by Susan Donaldson, found the safety of those sites fell outside the scope of current sacred site protections in the NT, and could only be captured by the most stringent level of analysis. Report

author Susan Donaldson found: "The potential impacts will likely or almost certainly result in highly significant cultural values ... (being) lost, degraded, and damaged, as well as notably altered, modified, obscured, or diminished. In her view: "... the planned action ... is likely to alter the existing use of a number of cultural and ceremonial sites, causing their values to notably diminish over time."

Predictably and worryingly, in response FA said the concerns of the traditional owners group were not justified.

Now the Arid Lands Environment Centre has also thrown its weight behind calls for the licence to receive a tier-three assessment. Its chief executive and former NT government water planner Adrian Tomlinson said the community deserved to have a voice in such a significant project: "It's essentially a longer process with a number of steps along the way where community input can influence the decision. It's the biggest groundwater extraction licence we've seen in the Territory and in my view the existing processes we have aren't designed to assess something like this." And as Kirsty Howey, from Environment NT, told *the Guardian*: "There is no guarantee of how or when those water resources and the communities and ecosystems that rely on them would recover, ... And we're not sure that they would, in fact, ever recover."

In summary, Australia including, the NT, must choose between two paths as it faces the future. One leads to suffering and ruin for our country and people. The other leads to a safe and vital future. We must choose the path which does not lead to damaging and exploitative outcomes.

In the words of Maureen O'Keefe, who grew up around Singleton, where her parents worked and met: "We're not worrying about money, we're worrying about life ... We have climate change and we don't have rainfall every year. I've been crying for this country. All the springs will be dried out. Then we got no name for them anymore. All the cultural sites will suffer and we will have no stories to tell for our kids,"

To express Maureen's words another way, Australia must put a complete moratorium on projects which make profits by irreversibly consuming and damaging resources and our cultural and natural heritage and environments, and we must urgently begin making a just transition to a sustainable future and the associated explosion of new jobs, technologies, and industries such a transition will bring. Only then can Australians begin to look to a future which does justice to our First Nations people and the rest of us.

For all these reasons the Singleton Irrigation Plan must be rejected.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Enge