

To : Dr Paul Vogel

NT Environmental Protection Authority

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Dear Dr Vogel

I live in Alice Springs. I've been here for over 20 years. That doesn't mean I have special knowledge but I do feel extra responsibility to put forward my misgivings and actually, alarm, at the planned Singleton horticultural project. In regard to large scale projects having both immediate and long-term environmental impacts, I believe there have, in the past, been decisions made with good intentions and lack of relevant knowledge, and there have been decisions made with rapacious intentions and careless disregard for the knowledge that is available. Both leave a mess. With this project I don't have confidence that all available knowledge has been collected before a significant potentially very damaging undertaking is given the go-ahead.

Where I am living (and yes, I know not only here!) the changes in temperature and weather trends have people very jittery. How will we be living in 10 years' time? What temperatures will we have to endure? Will we be able to fall back on what the country around us can provide? Will it be staggering, itself? With this uncertainty, rash wide-scope ventures that demand a huge price from country and water surely should be given microscopic scrutiny by an unbiased regulator. It seems that has not been so with the Singleton horticultural project.

Unintended but horrible consequences of well-intentioned human interventions aren't hard to find. The introduction of buffel grass is (I believe) killing off tourism interest in Central Australia, and the grass is swarming across what is now recognised as having been beautiful country that was supporting species of plants and animals that are now affected badly by the conditions promoted by buffel. Clearly, 'smart' decisions have been made before and proved to be not just bad but frighteningly bad. We hear sad stories of special irreplaceable places of very high cultural value to original owners (and newcomers) in Central Australia that have been destroyed by insensitive and stupid water management. (Yes, we non-Indigenous are living here and we demand large quantities of water. And food from horticulture is not unacceptable. But can we please not bulldoze into a huge new stripping-the-country project that has short-term ends and probable repercussions - without end - that won't be able to be fixed?) It is happening. It has happened. It will continue of course, unless every plan is looked at stringently, and tested against current observations, knowledge held by Indigenous people who have broader and deeper understanding than newcomers, and scientific measurement.

Sometimes it seems that tracts of country are mentally pigeonholed as some sort of arid frontier that has only flimsy connection to, and emotional importance for, people familiar with it. That is, no-one will care what happens there. It is actually ancestral homeland, and it is dear and essential to the people who have that connection. They are sensitised to its needs. And it is loved by others who have seen it and experienced it too. These last might not be the best guardians of it, but they are respectful, they have a sense of a duty of care, and they don't want to see it flogged and despoiled when more intelligent thought might have led to a more enlightened determination.

What a risky risky venture it seems, this Singleton venture – colossal amounts of water being extracted – and no apparent appreciation by the company concerned that this will likely have deleterious effects on the local and wider area of country linked into the water sources. They appear to consider 'residual' risks as 'low' or medium'. Yet, (one example) a report about risks of salinity in the Western Davenport Basin, NT, (in which the Singleton project lies) found a high risk of increased salinity that would have 'very significant implications for long-term viability of irrigated horticulture'. It is very troubling: why is such a risk being ignored? Why isn't the company being held to a more stringent assessment of environmental impact?

The company has been granted its water licence. I was in the UK 40 years ago and saw that water had been privatised, and it was being marketed like this : 'Invest in Liquid Gold'. Well, to arid lands it is liquid gold that should never be squandered, or given away carelessly without furious attention to the detail of just what results extraction of that groundwater is going to bring about. The network of related dependence – every creature and plant in the country – can't be ignored.

There does seem to be a rather light-hearted approach to the Singleton venture that is either non-adult or intentionally promoting a questionable 'nothing to see here' confidence, with the aim of getting permission as soon as possible to get clearing and extracting. Naturally the company is focused on its plans and wants to see them materialise. They are happy to go with the risks – why not? – but they don't appear to be taking due responsibility for doing fieldwork and checks to predict and uncover consequences that reasonable people might find unacceptable. I believe that The NT Government has to take the responsibility, and press them to it before a final decision is made.

In NW WA I worked at a mine site in a stunning location, and the groundwater extraction was monitored, - very carefully! - and the results showing the steady decline in water level were tabulated with precision. But whatever consequences that had for flora and fauna on the arid island were never discussed. The purpose of the company was to extract as much ore as possible, do whatever else was necessary to enable that, and then leave. I can see that processes can be mechanically followed but acceptance of consequences can be far from the mind of developers. The responsibility has to be taken on by government through tight regulations.

Please add my name to those who are very concerned about the Singleton horticulture proposal, and who want a much more muscular, rigorous environmental impact assessment applied to the venture (i.e. a Tier 3 assessment).