

NOTICE OF DECISION AND STATEMENT OF REASONS

Section 55 of the *Environment Protection Act 2019* (EP Act)

Regulations 57(2)(b) and 63 of the *Environment Protection Regulations 2020* (EP Regulations)

Name of proposed action	Singleton Horticulture Project
Proponent	Fortune Agribusiness Funds Management Pty Ltd
NT EPA reference	EPA2022/019
Description of proposed action	<p>Development of a large irrigated fruit and vegetable farm on Singleton Station, approximately 130 km south of Tennant Creek and about 35 km northeast of Ali Curung in the Barkly region. The proposed activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearing of 4,037 hectares of native vegetation on pastoral land • development of 3,300 ha of irrigated crops • groundwater extraction of up to 40,000 megalitres per year, from 144 bores, subject to development over four stages including gradual increase in extraction rates¹ • a services hub including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ accommodation for approximately 150 permanent staff and up to 1,350 seasonal staff ○ packing facilities, cold storage and machinery workshops ○ telecommunications infrastructure ○ potential future power station ○ waste and water services • access tracks, fences and fire breaks • upgrade of the power supply from Tennant Creek. <p>The farm would operate indefinitely, subject to water licensing and other approvals.</p> <p>The proponent has been granted a water extraction licence under the <i>Water Act 1992</i> and is progressing approvals for non-pastoral use and land clearing under the <i>Pastoral Land Act 1992</i>, in accordance with approvals mapping by the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security².</p>
Nature of proposed action	Horticulture (irrigated)
Decision	<p>Standard environmental impact assessment is required in accordance with section 55 of the EP Act and regulation 57(2)(b) of the EP Regulations</p> <p>The method of environmental impact assessment to be by Environmental impact statement (EIS) in accordance with regulation 57(2)(b)(ii)</p>

¹ As conditioned in groundwater extraction licence WDCP10358

² [Singleton Horticulture Project | Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security](#)

NOTICE OF DECISION AND STATEMENT OF REASONS –
FORTUNE AGRIBUSINESS FUNDS MANAGEMENT PTY LTD – SINGLETON HORTICULTURE PROJECT

Person authorised to make decision Dr Paul Vogel AM – Chairperson, as delegate of the Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority (NT EPA)

Signature



Date of decision 7 March 2023

Matters considered under EP Regulation 56 The NT EPA has considered the following:

- the accepted referral (including the referral form, referral report and appendices)
- submissions received in relation to the referral information during the public consultation period 23 November 2022 to 13 February 2023
 - government authority submissions received: 9
 - public submissions: 89

Consultation The proponent indicated in the referral:

- it has engaged with stakeholders including pastoral lease holders, Ali Curung community, businesses, government, regulatory agencies, local councils, industry groups, interest groups, and the general public
- that consultation with Aboriginal native title holders and the Central Land Council was undertaken at an early stage, with Traditional Owners and the local Aboriginal Land Council unavailable to be consulted to inform the referral due to concurrent legal action regarding the process of issuing the water licence for the project.

The proponent reported the following matters raised in its consultation:

- that Aboriginal people have a strong relationship with land and water, and associated cultural values, in the potentially impacted area
- concern among some stakeholders, in particular Aboriginal stakeholders, regarding a lack of thorough understanding of the proposed action and its potential impacts on the environment
- concern about the large volume of water to be used and the uncertainty about potential impacts, particularly climate change and long-term impacts affecting future generations
- concern about a lack of community capacity, workforce competition, and a lack of trust that the proposed action would be implemented
- support for the proposed action and its potential economic and employment benefits.

To address some of the above concerns, the proponent stated that the proposed action was amended as follows:

- altered location and design of the proposed crop fields and borefield to minimise impacts on groundwater dependent ecosystems (GDEs)
 - increased duration of early lower rates of water extraction to enable adaptive management
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- addition of bush tucker and seasonal vegetable plots for local produce.

Submissions to the NT EPA raised similar matters to those reported by the proponent. These included potential impacts on hydrological processes, threatened terrestrial flora and fauna, sensitive or significant vegetation, water quality and other water users.

Other issues raised in submissions included:

- limited knowledge on the local hydrological and hydrogeological environment, and inherent uncertainties in modelled predictions including groundwater drawdown, salinity, flooding, and medium to long term cumulative impacts
- uncertainty regarding the extent of GDEs, the degree of GDE dependence on groundwater, and the cultural values associated with GDEs
- insufficient information to assess potential impacts on stygofauna
- uncertainty of impacts to Aboriginal sacred sites and Aboriginal culture and heritage sites across the modelled impact area and beyond
- uncertainty regarding monitoring and mitigation measures, particularly adaptive management
- a need for increased engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders and the wider community
- the economic benefits the proposal would bring to the region.

All submissions made during the consultation period are published on the NT EPA website in accordance with regulation 269 of Environment Protection Regulations 2020.

Statement of Reasons

Overview

The NT EPA considers that the proposed action has the potential to have a significant impact on environmental values associated with six environmental factors³.

Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hydrological processes – The proposed action would result in groundwater drawdown that has the potential to significantly impact:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ local and regional hydrogeology○ GDEs○ groundwater users in the area○ culture and heritage values.• Inland water environmental quality – There is potential for significant impacts to water quality from irrigation salinity, erosion, and the release of agricultural chemicals.
Land	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Terrestrial environmental quality – There is potential for significant impacts on land and soil quality from earth disturbance, irrigation salinity and erosion.

³ [NT EPA Environmental factors and objectives](#)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrestrial ecosystems – There is potential for significant impacts to sensitive or significant vegetation communities and GDEs from groundwater drawdown, erosion and sedimentation and salinity.
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community and economy – There is potential for significant benefits to the regional community from employment and service provision, and potentially significant impacts primarily due to groundwater drawdown. • Culture and heritage – There is insufficient information to assess the significance of potential impacts to sacred sites and other cultural values in the region.

The NT EPA considered other environmental factors during its consideration of the referral; however, the impact on those factors was not considered to be significant.

Justification

A standard assessment by EIS is required, having regard to:

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| Regulation 59 (a) | the significance of the potential impacts of the proposed action as described above |
| Regulation 59 (b) | <p>the level of confidence in predicting potential significant impacts of the proposed action taking into account the extent and currency of existing knowledge, particularly in relation to the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • groundwater system, including numerical groundwater models and predicted drawdown and salinity • application of the principles of ecologically sustainable development to the staged implementation of the proposed action including groundwater extraction • impact on water and soil quality due to erosion and sedimentation, and irrigation salinity • drawdown impacts on biodiversity and other water users (current and future) • cultural values in the region (including sacred sites) and potential impacts to these, including from groundwater drawdown • potential impacts on Aboriginal native title holders, traditional owners, and local residents. |
| Regulation 59 (c) | <p>the level of confidence in the effectiveness of proposed measures to avoid, mitigate or manage potential significant impacts, with respect to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the hydrogeological environment including soil/water quality • sensitive or significant vegetation and stygofauna • Aboriginal sacred sites and cultural values • welfare of Aboriginal native title holders, traditional owners, and local residents. |
| Regulation 59 (d) | the limited extent of engagement that has occurred with Aboriginal stakeholders including native title holders and their representative body |

Regulation 59 (e) uncertainty about the capacity of the communities and individuals likely to be affected by the proposed action to access and understand information about the proposed action and its potential significant impacts

Conclusion

The NT EPA considers that the proposed action has the potential for significant impacts on six environmental factors, and that environmental impact assessment is required. The method of assessment will be EIS.

In making its decision under EP Regulation 57, the NT EPA has considered:

- the objects of the Act in section 3 of the EP Act
 - the purpose of the environmental impact assessment process in section 42 of the EP Act
 - the matters under regulation 56 of the EP Regulations
 - the matters relevant to a consideration of the method of environmental impact assessment in regulation 59 of the EP Regulations.
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