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Via email: admin@panchobeef.com

Dear Mr & Dr Mohr-Bell

Re: Application to clear native vegetation on Pastoral Land - NT Portion 7061, Mathison Station, Katherine Pastoral District.

This letter comprises comments from the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security (DEPWS) relevant to your application. These comments inform the assessment of the application against the requirements of the Pastoral Land Clearing Guidelines and the *Pastoral Land Act 1992*.

These comments do not represent a final determination of the application, but will be considered by the Native Vegetation Assessment Panel and the Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority. Following consideration, a recommendation will be made to the Pastoral Land Board (PLB) on determining your application.

Vegetation Assessment Unit

Greenhouse gas emissions

Under 'Greenhouse Gas Emissions Management for New and Expanding Large Emitters' (the Large Emitters Policy) land use projects generating more than 500,000 tCO₂e from a single clearing action, or cumulatively from multiple land clearing actions on a property over time require the submission of a Greenhouse Gas Abatement Plan (GGAP). This would then form a condition of an Environmental Authorisation that is required to be issued before any clearing of the property can occur.

Calculation of the estimated greenhouse gas emissions determined that the proposed clearing of 4525ha would emit approximately 623,714.3 tCO₂e and triggers the Large Emitters Policy. Accordingly, the applicant has included a GGAP with the application.

In accordance with section 91H(1)(b) of the *Pastoral land Act 1993*, the Board will consider whether the proposal complies with the requirements of the Large Emitters Policy. The NT EPA has to consider greenhouse gas emissions and as such, the Board will refer the application, including the GGAP, to the NT

EPA for assessment. The applicant may choose to self-refer to the NT EPA prior to the application being considered by the Board.

Flora and Fauna Division

Cumulative clearing impact assessment

The proposal will result in clearing approximately 6.92% of the vegetation on Mathison Station, which has a total area of 65,250ha. National Vegetation Information System mapping indicates that the proposal will impact on one mapped vegetation community (Eucalyptus mid woodland/Erythrophleum low open woodland/Chrysopogon low tussock grassland) which is relatively common on Mathison Station.

Currently, 530ha (0.8%) of native vegetation has been cleared on Mathison Station. The proposed clearing would result in a total cumulative clearing of 5013ha, representing 7.7% of all vegetation on Mathison Station and 9% of the mapped vegetation community on the station.

Mathison Station occurs within the Birdum subregion of the Sturt Plateau bioregion. A total of 0.3% of the Subregion is currently mapped as cleared. The proposal would increase the area of cleared native vegetation within the subregion by 0.1%. The affected vegetation community is currently 98.4% intact. The proposal will increase the area cleared by 1.1%.

Mathison Station occurs within the Sturt Plateau Bioregion. A total of 1.1% of the Bioregion is currently mapped as cleared. The proposed clearing of intact native vegetation will increase the total area of the bioregion cleared by <0.1%. Currently, the affected vegetation community is 98.4% intact. The proposal would increase the cumulative clearing by 1.1% (within the bioregion, this vegetation type only occurs in one bioregion).

A summary of the cumulative effects of the proposed clearing at the property, subregional and bioregional scale is provided in Table 2.

Threatened species

There have been no comprehensive biodiversity surveys in the proposed area. Based on a search of DEPWS databases within 50km of the site, expert knowledge of species' habitat requirements, and information about habitats occurring within the site, eleven species classified as threatened under the *Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act (TPWC Act)* and/or *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)* may occur within or immediately adjacent to the site:

Table 1 – Threatened species with the potential to occur within or adjacent to the Application Area

Common Name	Scientific Name	TPWC Act	EPBC Act
Australian Painted Snipe	<i>Rostratula australis</i>	Endangered	Endangered
Gouldian Finch	<i>Erythrura gouldiae</i>	Vulnerable	Endangered
Victoria River Squat Snail	<i>Trachiopsis victoriana</i>	Vulnerable	(not listed)
Grey Falcon	<i>Falco hypoleucos</i>	Vulnerable	Vulnerable
Pale Field-rat	<i>Rattus tunneyi</i>	Vulnerable	(not listed)
Crested Shrike-tit (northern)	<i>Falcunculus frontatus whitei</i>	Near Threatened	Vulnerable
Mertens' Water Monitor	<i>Varanus mertensi</i>	Vulnerable	(not listed)

Common Name	Scientific Name	TPWC Act	EPBC Act
Red Goshawk	<i>Erythrotriorchis radiatus</i>	Vulnerable	Vulnerable
Ghost Bat	<i>Macrotis lagotis</i>	Near Threatened	Vulnerable
Yellow-spotted Monitor	<i>Varanus panoptes</i>	Vulnerable	(not listed)
Common Brushtail Possum (north-western)	<i>Trichosurus vulpecula arnhemensis</i>	Near Threatened	Vulnerable

Australian Painted-snipe: The Australian painted-snipe is a nomadic and sparsely distributed bird with few known nesting locations in the Northern Territory, but knowledge of this species is limited due to its cryptic and secretive behaviour. The Australian Painted-snipe is often recorded in temporary or infrequently inundated wetlands, having a preference for shallow inland and coastal wetlands. It is often observed in sparse, open habitat with some cover in the form of grass or sedge tussocks, in or near shallow muddy pools. The Flora and Fauna Division considers that the potential impact to the Australian Painted-snipe is low as the planned clearing does not intersect suitable wetland habitat.

Gouldian Finch: habitat preference of this species changes seasonally, preferring rocky upland woodland dominated by *Eucalyptus tintinnans* (or similar species such as *E. leucophloia*) for nesting hollows and within proximity of persistent waterholes or springs in the breeding season, and moving to lowland grassy systems during the non-breeding season. A site inspection by the Flora and Fauna Division confirmed that the vegetation is unsuitable for breeding habitat and comprises largely *E. tetradonta/Corymbia* woodland. There are several historical records of the species from the Victoria Highway which is adjacent to Mathison Station. Although suitable foraging habitat occurs on the site, the area of habitat that is proposed to be cleared is small in comparison to the area of potentially suitable foraging habitat across the property, subregion and bioregion (Table 2).

Victoria River Squat Snail: This species is known from limestone outcrops, sinkholes and adjacent woodland habitats in the region. Sinkholes and limestone outcrops have been excluded from clearing and appropriate native vegetation buffers have been put in place as per the Land Clearing Guidelines, and the potential impact on this species is considered low.

Grey Falcon: This species is highly nomadic and sparsely distributed with few known nesting locations, and the majority of Territory records are from arid and semi-arid areas. It prefers timbered lowland plains, especially those that are acacia-dominated, and interspersed with tree-lined watercourses, but may forage in open grassland areas. Despite the presence of suitable foraging habitat the likelihood of significant populations in or adjacent to the area proposed for clearing is considered to be low due to the relatively small proportion of habitat impacted and the confirmed absence of large trees that would be suitable for nesting.

Pale Field-rat: This species may occur within NT Portion 7061. The species was historically common across its range but has undergone significant declines possibly associated with changes to fire regime. They typically inhabit dense vegetation along creeks, and it is unlikely that suitable habitat occurs within the clearing footprint. The Flora and Fauna Division considers that there is a very low likelihood that the proposed clearing at Mathison Station would have a significant impact on any regional population of the species.

Crested Shrike-tit: This species occurs sparsely in eucalypt woodlands in the Top End. The majority of records are known from the northern Sturt Plateau and Katherine region. Whilst suitable habitat likely occurs

on the site, the area of habitat that is proposed to be cleared is small in comparison to the area of potentially suitable habitat across the range of the (sub-) population of this species on the Sturt Plateau and south of Katherine. From a regional perspective, habitat for the species across the Sturt Plateau is relatively intact with high connectivity. The proposed clearing is unlikely to contribute to the significant loss or fragmentation of suitable habitat for the species. Consequently, Flora and Fauna Division considers that there is a low likelihood that the proposed clearing at Mathison Station would have a significant negative impact on the regional (sub-) population of the species.

Red Goshawk: This species typically inhabits tall eucalypt open forests and riparian systems associated with watercourses, which support large nesting trees. Given the absence of major watercourses that support large nesting trees from the proposed clearing footprint and the retention of native vegetation within a corridor/wetland and landscape buffer network, the potential impacts on Red Goshawk from the proposed clearing are likely to be low.

Common Brushtail Possum (northwest): This species occurs mainly in tall eucalypt open forests with large hollow-bearing trees. Staff from the Flora and Fauna Division visited the site and noted the absence of vegetation with suitable denning habitat for this species. While there is potential for this species to be present, it is unlikely to occur in high densities due to the absence of preferred habitat. Potential habitat may occur in riparian vegetation to the south of the Application Area. This area has been appropriately buffered from the proposed clearing.

Yellow-spotted Monitor, Mertens' Water Monitor: These species may occur within NT Portion 7061. These species were historically common across their range but have recently undergone significant declines due to the spread of cane toads. Both species are known to forage in agricultural and modified environments, and riparian ecosystems, respectively. The proposed land use is likely to still provide suitable foraging habitat for the Yellow-spotted Monitor. Habitat for Mertens' Water Monitor occurs along waterways which have been excluded and appropriately buffered from the clearing footprint. The Flora and Fauna Division further notes that historic declines to both species are attributed to Cane Toads. The proposed clearing and intended use are unlikely to exacerbate the threat to individuals.

Ghost Bat: roosting sites (particularly caves) are critical for the maintenance of this species. Roosting habitat has been recorded in the local region but is unlikely to occur within the application area. This is due to an absence of rocky areas that have the potential to support cave systems. There is a high potential that the species uses the application area for foraging habitat. The application poses a low risk to foraging habitat due to the intact nature of vegetation in the local area and broader subregion and bioregion (Table 1).

Wetlands and drainage depressions

Drainage areas, waterways and wetlands are important areas for biodiversity as they may support higher species diversity than the surrounding landscape and may act as an important refuge for species during the dry season. Wetlands and riparian vegetation associated with these systems are considered sensitive and/or significant vegetation under the NT Planning Scheme. The Applicant has correctly identified and excluded the waterways, wetlands, sinkhole and riparian vegetation from the clearing polygons. The placement of the polygons also ensures all of the features have the minimum buffer recommended in the NT Land Clearing Guidelines.

The NT Land Clearing Guidelines recommend that applications include appropriate buffers of native vegetation along property boundaries. The application provided justification for not meeting the minimum buffer requirement for the boundary north and east of Polygon E. However, the Division recommends the inclusion of boundary buffers where clearing occurs adjacent to native vegetation on adjoining properties,

in order to maximise options for retention of native vegetation corridors in the context of potential future clearing applications.

Wildlife corridors and buffers

Wildlife or landscape corridors provide a link of native vegetation suitable as wildlife habitat joining two or more larger areas of intact native vegetation. Polygons A and E have a linear footprint of approximately 9.1km and are separated by a vegetated corridor of less than 90m. As a default, the guidelines recommend that clearing configurations incorporate a corridor network of one corridor per linear kilometre of clearing. The Guidelines recommend that for clearing applications ≥ 500 ha that each corridor has a minimum width of 200m. Alternatively, the applicant may prefer to reconfigure Polygons A and E and incorporate a single large wildlife corridor in a north/south direction.

Recommendation

The Flora and Fauna Division notes that the applicant has appropriately sited the clearing polygons to avoid impacting important habitat for threatened species and significant and/or sensitive natural features.

The current configuration of Polygon A and E does not meet the minimum recommended wildlife corridor configuration and will impact on landscape connectivity for wildlife through the application area. It is recommended that the applicant reconfigure polygons A and E to incorporate the minimum recommended corridor network configuration specified in the Guidelines. Alternatively, the applicant may propose an alternative configuration with a single broad north/south corridor provided it achieves landscape connectivity for wildlife.

Land Assessment Branch

A field inspection was undertaken by DEPWS staff on 14 March and 15 March 2023.

The proposed clearing area is predominantly a mixed *Corymbia*, *Eucalyptus tetradonta* and *Erythrophleum chlorostachyum* open woodland. The only exception was Land type 7 (as identified by the applicant), an imperfectly drained *Melaleuca viridiflora*, *Melaleuca nervosa* low open forest. Significant *E. tetradonta* dieback is evident across most of the clearing area.

Riparian buffers were inspected along 'Aldersyde' creek in the south, duckhole swamp in the north, and the drainage channel mapped as Land Unit 5 by the applicant between clearing polygons B, C and D. All riparian buffers were found to be sufficient.

The information collected by the Department generally supports the land type mapping and land capability assessment provided by the applicant, though it should be noted there is significant variation within some land units provided (particularly Land Unit 4). However, this does not change the overall land capability assessment, the proposed area is suitable for non-irrigated improved pasture for grazing and hay production.

Weed Management Branch

The Weed Management Branch did not conduct an on-site inspection for the property.

An assessment of the NT Weeds Database for NT Portion 7061, surrounding parcels and roads has revealed current and/or previous records for the following weed species, listed in **Table 2**:

Table 2: Weed records located within and surrounding property.

Common names	Botanical Names	Declared
Gamba grass	<i>Andropogon gayanus</i>	Class A
Devils claw	<i>Martynia annua</i>	Class A
Mimosa	<i>Mimosa pigra</i>	Class A
Bellyache bush	<i>Jatropha gossypifolia</i>	Class B
Grader grass	<i>Themeda quadrivalvis</i>	Class B
Sida - spiny head	<i>Sida acuta</i>	Class B
Hyptis	<i>Hyptis suaveolens</i>	Class B

All land in the Northern Territory is subject to the *Weeds Management Act 2001* (WM Act). The WM Act describes the legal requirements and responsibilities that apply to all persons, owners and occupiers of land regarding declared and potential weeds. General duties described in Division 1 of the WM Act include the requirement for owners or occupiers of land to take all reasonable measures to prevent land being infested with a declared weed and to prevent a declared weed from spreading. There are additional duties including a prohibition on buying, selling, cultivating, moving or propagating any declared weed.

There are four types of classifications for a declared or potential weed under the WM Act: Class A (to be eradicated); Class B (growth and spread to be controlled); Class C (not to be introduced into the Territory or part of the Territory); and Class D (prevent the growth and spread by actions of persons).

Gamba grass, mimosa, grader grass and bellyache bush are subject to a statutory weed management plans. Management obligations outlined in this plan must be adhered to by all land holders.

Recommendations

The applicant should carry out vehicle and equipment hygiene controls in line with the key principles for weed spread prevention as outlined in the Weed Management Branch document *Preventing Weed Spread is Everybody's Business* - https://denr.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/257987/preventing-weed-spread.pdf.

The applicant should detail methods, treatments and timing for effective weed management on the site during the development, so that weeds are satisfactorily managed at completion of works for the site and access roads and or tracks.

Any works that cause disturbance to native vegetation and soils will create conditions favourable for the growth of weed species and control should be undertaken as necessary in these areas. It is a general recommendation that weed control prior to seed set is carried out in all areas affected by the proposed project area.

The Weed Management Branch would like to reiterate the need for weed control and weed hygiene practices during proposed land clearing processes to ensure that;

- Vehicle and machinery will need to be clean of weeds and soils containing weeds prior to commencement and washed down after.
- As the commencement of bulldozing is to occur after the beginning of the wet season; chemical treatment of weed species on the areas to be cleared during the wet season, prior to seeding, is recommended. This is particularly relevant for the grassy weed species gamba grass and mission grass.
- Ongoing herbicide treatment of weed species will be required on site until preferred species are established and maintained.

DEPWS Weed Management Branch may conduct inspections of the proposed site to ensure weeds have not been spread or introduced to the site.

Further information as to management requirements and the Weed Management Plan for gamba grass is available at <http://www.nt.gov.au/environment/weeds> or alternatively contact the Weed Management Branch for further advice on (08) 8999 4567.

Water Resources Division

The application proposes to clear 4517 ha of land for the development of non-irrigated improved pasture on NT Portion 7061 (**Land**). The land is located within the Daly Roper Beetaloo Water Control District and is not subject to a water allocation plan. The application does not propose to take water for the required land clearing.

Land to be cleared is unaffected by storm surge flooding. Contamination risks from clearing to nearby waterways is negligible.

Take of surface and groundwater for commercial purposes requires an extraction licence under the *Water Act 1992*. Public information about water resource management is available on the Department website [Water | DEPWS](#). Please contact water resources water.licensing@nt.gov.au for licensing requirements.

Bushfires NT

Under the *Bushfires Management Act 2016* the property owner/lessee is responsible for preventing or inhibiting fire spreading from their land to other land. Fire management has been adequately considered in the proposal. In accordance with Version 7 of the Northern Territory Pastoral Land Clearing Guidelines, consent is required to clear firebreaks wider than 10m.

Additional fire management strategies may be required for the safe harvesting and storage of hay. The proposed areas are in the Savanna Fire Management Zone, as such a permit to burn windrows or stockpiles of felled vegetation is required during the northern Fire Danger Period (generally from June to December). Any proposed aerial burning requires a Permit to Burn all year around.

A permit can be obtained from Bushfires NT Katherine Office (08 8973 8871). Property owners/lessee are encouraged to develop a Property Fire Management Plan for future reference. Bushfires NT staff are available to assist with the plan development and to provide advice by contacting a Fire Management Officer at the Katherine Office.

A Technical Assessment has been completed with regard to the above comments and is attached for your information. Should you have any further queries regarding these comments, please contact me by email tom.garnham@nt.gov.au or telephone 8999 4454.

Yours sincerely



Tom Garnham

Land Development Facilitator
Development Coordination Branch

6 April 2023

Att: Technical Assessment