

26 July 2023

To

NT Environmental
Protect Authority

By Email to:

eia.NTEPA@nt.gov.au

Copy to:

Minister Lauren Moss: Minister.Moss@nt.gov.au

To Whom it May Concern,

Pancho Beef. - Submission to NT Environment Protection Authority on Mathison Station Land Clearing

1. The Environment Centre NT (**ECNT**) is the peak community sector environment organisation in the Northern Territory of Australia, raising awareness among community, government, business, and industry about environmental issues. We assist people to reduce their environmental impact and support community members to participate in decision-making processes and action.
2. ECNT welcomes the opportunity to comment on the referral for the Mathison Station Land Clearing proposed action (**'Proposed Action'**). ECNT supports rigorous assessment of the proposal to clear 4,517 hectares of land by Pancho Beef (Bos Terra Pastoral Co Pty Ltd, Consulta Pro Pty Ltd and NTR Ag Pty Ltd) (**'The Proponent'**). ECNT supports an EIS being undertaken for the project and looks forward to a productive engagement with this project through the assessment process.
3. Below we outline a number of additions to the draft Terms of Reference to ensure that when the Environmental Impact Statement is undertaken that the environmental and human impacts can be adequately assessed.
4. **Factor: Air – Atmospheric Processes:** The project does not adequately minimise greenhouse gas emissions to contribute to the NT Government's goal of achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050:
 - a. The threshold of 500 000 tonnes established in the Large Emitters policy 'provides a reasonable position for when the emissions from a proposed action have the potential to have a significant impact in the environment'.¹
 - b. The NT Government's 'Draft Environmental Factor Guidance: Atmospheric Processes greenhouse gas emissions' states that land use change proposals which exceed the threshold of 500 000 tonnes require referral to the NT EPA for assessment under the Environment Protection Act.
 - c. Furthermore, the submitted Greenhouse Gas Abatement Plan (GGAP) does not meet the requirements of

¹ Draft Environmental Factor Guidance: Atmospheric Processes greenhouse gas emissions'

the Large Emitters Policy. The Mathison Station GGAP is inadequate as it does not offer any genuine greenhouse gas abatement solutions, not least because there are currently no approved methodologies for offsetting emissions from land clearing in the NT. This alone is reason enough for the proposed land clearing to be rejected on both climate and biodiversity grounds. The GGAP is inadequate for the following reasons:

- a. Calculation of the estimated greenhouse gas emissions determined that the proposed clearing of 4,525ha would emit approximately 623,714.3 tCO₂e and triggers the NT Large Emitters Policy. However, with previous clearing on Mathison Station included in the greenhouse gas emissions calculations, the cumulative area is 5,013 ha of clearing in total – emissions will therefore be even more than the 625,000 tonnes calculated by the Department.
- b. Land clearing is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions in the NT and contributes materially to climate change. Land clearing at very extensive scales, such as the 4,517 hectares of land proposed to be cleared on Mathison Station, puts the NT Government's commitment to net zero by 2050 in serious jeopardy. Land clearing approvals between 2011 and 2022 have together authorised the generation of approximately 24 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in an 11-year period in the NT^[1]. In 2021 alone, the generation of approximately 2.6 million tonnes of emissions were authorised from land clearing. This is a very significant quantity, representing approximately 12% of the Northern Territory's annual emissions (using greenhouse gas inventory figures from 2019). It is not surprising to ECNT that Mathison Station's expected emissions are well above the large emitters threshold, which is itself already 400,000 tonnes higher than most other jurisdictional thresholds. The alarmingly high emissions of over 625,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂-e) is unable to be mitigated or abated, as such the project should not go ahead.
- c. The Mathison Station Greenhouse Gas Abatement plan states that the proposed land clearing "... will improve ground cover and perennial pasture productivity, significantly improve soil health and deliver various environmental co-benefits and result in net sequestration of over 8,100 tCO₂ -e per year and by 2044 will have cumulatively sequestered over 125,000 tCO₂ -e" (page 5). These claims are unsubstantiated and require scientific verification against the NT EPA environmental factors and objectives. The severe, and extensive negative impacts of broadscale tree clearing on Australian biodiversity is unquestionable^[2]. Vegetation clearance transforms the environment more than any other threatening process and has especially drastic impacts upon terrestrial environments. The direct immediate impact is that plants and animals are killed. The impacts on the physical environment are extensive and severe, including loss of topsoil, erosion run-off, introduced weeds and increased fire regimes all contributing to 'edge effects' that further degrade fragmented vegetation^[3].
- d. A GGAP must provide an overarching long-term emissions target for the project that represents a meaningful contribution to the Territory's net zero emissions target. The Mathison Station GGAP fails to do this. The submitted Greenhouse Gas Abatement Plan asserts that new pastures will result in net sequestration of 8,100 tCO₂ -e per year, and that by 2044 will have cumulatively sequestered over 125,000 tCO₂ -e. This fails to meaningfully contribute to the Territory's target of net zero emissions by 2050. Over 625,000 tonnes tCO₂ -e of pollution will be released due to the proposed land clearing. Only 125,000 tCO₂ -e will be sequestered by 2044 – only a fraction of the total emissions will be

sequestered over two decades. The remaining 500,000 tonnes will remain unaccounted for and jeopardizes the NT government 2050 net zero emissions target and will contribute significantly to climate change impacts.

- e. The assertion that there could be an increase in soil carbon under pastures compared to savanna woodlands completely disregards the immense greenhouse gas emissions that are guaranteed from the bulldozing and burning of intact native vegetation, that could otherwise be avoided by simply not clearing and burning the land. It also disregards the extensive biodiversity impacts, including the immediate mortality and displacement of many thousands of native plants and animals.
- f. The proponent appears to justify emissions based on an early fire history, from 2000 to 2009. During that period the area of land now known as Mathison Station was part of a larger pastoral lease and was essentially unmanaged. Poor land management resulting in increased wildfire and increased greenhouse gas emissions is not justification for releasing more greenhouse gases from clearing. The current owners of the station have since 2011 been successful in reducing late dry season wildlife, which is highly commendable. As such, a ten-year baseline from 2012 – 2022 would be the most appropriate ten-year period to use in terms of baseline emissions.

5. **Factor: Land – Terrestrial Environmental Quality:** There is insufficient evidence to show that the quality and integrity of land and soils will be protected sufficiently so that environmental values are supported and maintained:

- i. There is insufficient evidence to support the Applicants claim that land areas where slope is greater than 2% in land units 2,5,6 and 10 have been excluded.
- ii. There is insufficient evidence to support the Applicant’s claim that no soil erosion is present in the proposed area.
- iii. There is insufficient evidence to suggest that the soil is unlikely to be impacted by chaining 4517 hectares of woodland and then burning the felled trees and shrubs in-situ.

6. **Factor: Land – Terrestrial Ecosystems:** There is insufficient evidence provided to show that terrestrial habitats will be adequately protected to maintain environmental values including biodiversity, ecological integrity and ecological functioning:

- i. Important environmental values on Mathison Station include a number of threatened species that may be impacted by the proposed broadscale land clearing. These include the Northern Quoll, Curlew Sandpiper, Gouldian Finch, Ghost Bat, Red Goshawk, Painted Snipe, Grey Falcon, Northern Shrike-tit and Masked Owl.
- ii. The cumulative impacts of broadscale land clearing on threatened species habitats must be thoroughly assessed. Research recently undertaken by the National Environmental Science Program’s Northern Australian Environmental Resources Hub (NESP) created spatial data that can be usefully used to inform species conservation policy, assessments of species’ conservation status and decision-making about threat mitigation and management.² ECNT is concerned that there is

² A. Pintor, M. Kennard, J. Alvarez-Romero and S. Hernandez, “Prioritising threatened species and threatening processes across northern Australia”, User Guide for data, Northern Australia Environmental Resources Hub, National Environmental Science Program, <https://www.nesppnorthern.edu.au/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/Prioritising-threatened-species-and-threatening-processes-across->

very little attempt in the Application to understand the cumulative impacts of different threatening processes in this poorly protected region.

7. **Factor: People and Community – Culture and Heritage:** There is insufficient evidence provided by the proponent to decide that Culture and Heritage will be protected:

- i. It is inadequate for the Heritage, Libraries and Sports division to state that there are no aboriginal archeological sites when there have been no archeological surveys ever conducted in that area. It is also inadequate for a Heritage Officer to describe 4517 hectares of land as not ‘overly large’ and then use that as the sole justification not to recommend archeological surveys.
- ii. A registry extract is manifestly inadequate to protect sites that may exist in the area. An authority certificate granted under the Northern Territory Sacred Sites Act 1989 (NT) should be a mandatory requirement.
- iii. It is inadequate for the Applicant to provide the response that Cultural and Heritage values are not applicable to the proposed clearing area based on the evidence provided by the Heritage Division and obtained from AAPA.

8. **The NT EPA should refer the proposed action to the Federal Minister for Environment and Water under the EPBC Act**

- a. For the reasons outlined above, we submit that there is compelling evidence to refer the proposed action for assessment under the EPBC Act. The referral documents make several references to the presence of threatened species.
- b. Under sections 18 and 20 of the EPBC Act it is an offence for a person to take an action that will or is likely to have a significant impact on a listed threatened or migratory species if that person does not have approval for the action.
- c. We are of the view that the Application has the potential to significantly impact threatened and migratory species, and that the action must be referred to the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment to determine whether it is a controlled action requiring approval. As an agency of a self-governing Territory, the Board can exercise its discretion to refer a proposal to the Minister for a decision whether or not the action is a controlled action, if the agency has administrative responsibilities relating to the action.

9. We submit that the proposed action surpasses the threshold that it may have a significant impact on the Environment. Therefore the proposed action must undergo an Environmental Impact Statement and be referred under the EPBC Act for a decision on whether it is a controlled action requiring assessment.

Yours faithfully,

Kirsty Howey

Executive Director

