



Profits before water rights and sites: government pays lip service to Aboriginal voices

The Central Land Council is exploring all legal avenues to challenge the Northern Territory Government's decision to uphold the largest allocation of groundwater ever gifted to a private company in the NT.

"We are alarmed and appalled at the lack of procedural fairness it has afforded the traditional landowners and have no confidence in its decision," CLC chief executive Les Turner said.

"The government can only rebuild trust if it scraps the licence and starts from scratch, doing a full public assessment of the potential impacts, as its own review panel proposed."

"We are getting legal advice about our options. The licence is simply too big, too risky and threatens our sacred sites - and the review panel agrees."

Mr Turner said the decision shows that the government only pays lip service to Aboriginal cultural values.

"The government leaves the company to identify how much water there is, to assess and monitor the impact of the licence on our water sites, such as soakages, trees and dreaming tracks.

"It has abrogated its responsibility to protect our sites and country and handballed it to Fortune Agribusiness.

"As one of our council members reminded no fewer than three NT ministers at our recent council meeting in Tennant Creek: this is not terra nullius - empty land.

"It is rich in important sites that are at risk if the company takes the water it has been so irresponsibly gifted – and again, the review panel agrees."

The Northern Territory Government tailored guidelines for Fortune Agribusiness, allowing the company to destroy almost a third of groundwater-dependent ecosystems, many of them home to important sites.

"These guidelines only apply to the Western Davenport water control district and fly in the face of the protections for groundwater-dependent ecosystems in the district's water allocation plan," Mr Turner said.

"These guidelines were developed to meet the needs of Fortune Agribusiness," Mr Turner said.

"The government's decision to uphold the full licence reflects a development-at-any-cost approach that bush voters simply won't tolerate."

The CLC submitted expert anthropological and hydrogeological advice to the Singleton licence review panel.

It demonstrated, and the review panel agreed, that the water controller failed to take into account both the flimsiness of the data on which the Western Davenport water allocation plan is based and the existential threat the water licence poses to more than forty sacred sites in the region.

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