



## **“Not going to let it go”: native title holders appeal Singleton water licence ruling**

The native title holders of Singleton Station, south of Tennant Creek, will fight another day against the country’s most controversial water licence.

The Central Land Council will on Wednesday lodge an appeal on their behalf against a court ruling allowing the station to extract up to 40 gigalitres each year to irrigate a large fruit farm in the desert.

Last month the Northern Territory Supreme Court rejected a legal challenge by the native title holders’ Mpwerempwer Aboriginal Corporation against the NT government’s decision to grant a licence for the largest amount of groundwater the NT has ever given away.

They argued that the decision was invalid because it did not comply with the NT Water Act and did not properly take Aboriginal cultural values into account.

Now they are taking their fight to the Court of Appeal of the NT.

“We want to keep on fighting for this water,” native title holder Heather Anderson, from Tennant Creek, said. “We have got to keep going until the end, until they leave us alone. Until we win.”

Central Land Council executive member Sandra Morrison is pleased with the appeal.

“We’re going to keep on fighting for our rights and we’re not going to let it go,” the Tennant Creek resident said.

Native title holder Valerie Curtis, from the Wakurlpu outstation, said the government’s water licensing decisions “don’t fit with us culturally” and benefit only the developers.

“Why do they need so much water? We are trying to conserve our water. They are trying to drag it all out from under us and leave us with nothing while they get rich.

“Look what happened in other places, like the Murray Darling. We don’t want that happening to us.”

Ms Morrison hopes the appeal will inspire her children and grandchildren.

“As Aboriginal people we know about our environment and how much water we need in our land. We know it by our heart because our ancestors used to live there and know where to get water. So we’ve got to keep going.

“We’re not going to give up, because the next generation – we don’t want them to give up.”

The decision to appeal comes two years after Mpwerempwer [pronounced emPURra-empurra] asked the court to set aside the decision to grant Fortune Agribusiness the 30-year licence – free of charge.

The native title holders and their supporters fear the licence will result in a lower water table, damaging groundwater-dependent trees, springs, soaks and swamps, and threaten sacred sites.

Ms Morrison hopes the appeal will “make us satisfied and the traditional owners for our country”.

“We want to keep the country healthy for the next generation and to teach our next generation how to look after country. That is important for us: not to destroy our country but to look after our country,” she said.

Government documents such as the water allocation plan for the region around Singleton Station are meant to protect country and culture.

In other states these plans are the gold standard for water planning.

“The Supreme Court ruling means the NT government does not have to follow its own water allocation plans when making water licensing decisions,” said CLC chief executive Les Turner.

“Today, in the NT, water allocation plans mean little and can be ignored.”

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**MEDIA CONTACT:** Elke Wiesmann | 0417 877 579 | [media@clc.org.au](mailto:media@clc.org.au)