

## Senate Inquiry into Middle Arm

### Additional Notes

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Presented to Senate Inquiry in Darwin hearings on behalf of Lock the Gate Alliance

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I welcome the ability to top up information presented at the Middle Arm Senate Inquiry.

The federal governments lack of interest in the on-ground reality of the Northern Territory climate and water realities related to gas deals, EPBC reform, and in utilising the water trigger, are increasingly being seen through the lens of the NT being rendered a climate sacrifice zone. This is coming a great social cost.

Is it really the case that you do not care that this MASDP has been, and continues to be, created by lobbyists of international petrochemical infame? That you don't care about our water being contaminated? That you do not register that we will become climate refugees before mid-century on the current climate trajectory? That the oldest living intact culture on earth will be forced to uproot and evacuate? That already we are seeing an exodus of professional and educated people from our communities due to climate change? Climate change is contributing to the breakdown of social relationships in our communities.

Long term residents are cashing in their real estate and moving south, recognising that it will be worth nothing within a decade or two if rapid climate action is not taken. The exodus means there is high staff turnover and massive employment gaps. This leads to inadequate service provision across the board, felt worst in rural and remote regions. The movement of people leads to a lack of medical staff, lawyers, experienced police officers, domestic violence support workers, regional council support services - the list is endless. Ultimately it leads to a breakdown of the fabric of our community, something that is now being played out in our communities with devastating and violent consequences.

**Centre for Public Integrity, In Whose Interest. Paper.**

***“Notwithstanding these grave social and environmental risks, there has not yet been a public cost benefit analysis nor any meaningful public consultation in respect of the MASDP. Given that the Commonwealth Government has committed substantial taxpayer funds towards the MASDP, these absences are striking.” Pg 10 Report***

The paper was tabled at the Senate Inquiry. It speaks to a long history of lobbying for middle arm at both a Territory and Federal levels. The paper speaks to the NT having the weakest lobbying laws of any Australian jurisdiction, with 'secrecy, corruption and unfairness' being the outcome. Only last week in another incredible twist of fate Tamboran Resources were able to secure a contract to provide fracked gas energy the Northern Territory Government without the usual tender process, with exploration management plans still sitting unapproved, and with no production licence anywhere in sight.

If the Federal Government continues down the path of middle arm they are magnifying and funding this secrecy, corruption and unfairness with serious health and environmental consequences for the population of the Northern Territory.

The paper highlights the fact that the NT has

- No lobbying code of conduct enshrined in legislation.
- No register of lobbyists
- No diary publications for Ministers, shadow ministers and chief of Staffs
- A small 6-month window for post-separation employment prohibition
- A unicameral Parliament where a minority Government has never yet occurred, creating no credible threat to the passing of legislation by the incumbent government.

The timeline of events on pages 16-18 of the report needs to be considered deeply before more taxpayer funds are spent on the development of MASDP. Darwin is a small space. Deals are done quickly with little disclosure or consideration. It is a case of who you know to gain access to decision makers and money. Liveris and Henderson and the Worley are in the box seats and the federal government is now dancing to a tune not of its own making.

**Potential for water contamination:** 2024 has seen environmental management plans for 25 new fracked gas wells put out for public consultation. Both these projects aim to profit from gas production, despite no production licence being issued. The cumulative impact of this type of exploration must be considered in this senate inquiry, particularly in relation to potential water contamination. Concerned citizens repeatedly attempt to get assurances that water and food chains are not being contaminated. However, attempts to get data from the Onshore Gas department result in the need for FOIs, with charges of up to \$1200 to be paid by citizens, to obtain this Government reports created with taxpayer monies. There is nothing transparent in the process.

### **Surface Water**

- i. **Heavy rainfall:** The 23/24 wet season has been a good one. It is however nothing on the 1974 flood event described by 'Beetaloo' traditional owners and supported by Department of Water Resources data. No detailed flood mapping exists for the region. The SREBA Baseline Studies acknowledge this as a data deficient area and has advised that companies do their own flood mapping once the fracking fields are delineated. These companies were not here in 1974. In March 2024 residents of Katherine flew over of fracking wells to see how they were holding up to the recent good wet. The images are below. They show perished and dilapidated drill sump liners, surface water being pumped from or flowing from fracking sites, and water running as a continuous flow over the landscape. This water leads to floodplains and aquifers that sustain the Northern Territory it's flora, fauna, tourism, pastoral enterprises, and people. The entire proposed fracking region sits across two massive floodways that feed our underground water, our springs, and our rivers. Springs flow forms the entire dry season flow of all our rivers. Chemical spills are commonplace on sites and are recorded quarterly. Breeches that are investigated are now only reported annually. No baseline soil testing is required on the sites, nor in soil or surface water testing required on the well pads. Bund walls

are seen to give way frequently. Drilling muds sit on site for years without being tested. In addition, deliberate dumping of contaminated water is known to occur. In 2023 Tamboran were fined for dumping of over 300,000 litres of contaminated water on their Maverick well site. In the remote NT it is truly a case of out of sight out of mind. No amount of regulation can control it given the vastness of the geography. Many of the protective Pepper Inquiry recommendations have not been implemented thus putting our water, our environment, and us, at risk.



*Courtesy Protect Big Rivers 1 Carpentaria Well Imperial*



*Courtesy Protect Big Rivers 2 Shenandoah Well Tamboran*



*Courtesy Protect Big Rivers 3 Maverick Well perishing sump liner Tamboran.*



*Courtesy Protect Big Rivers 4 Bund wall giving way on Maverick well pad, known site of contamination.*



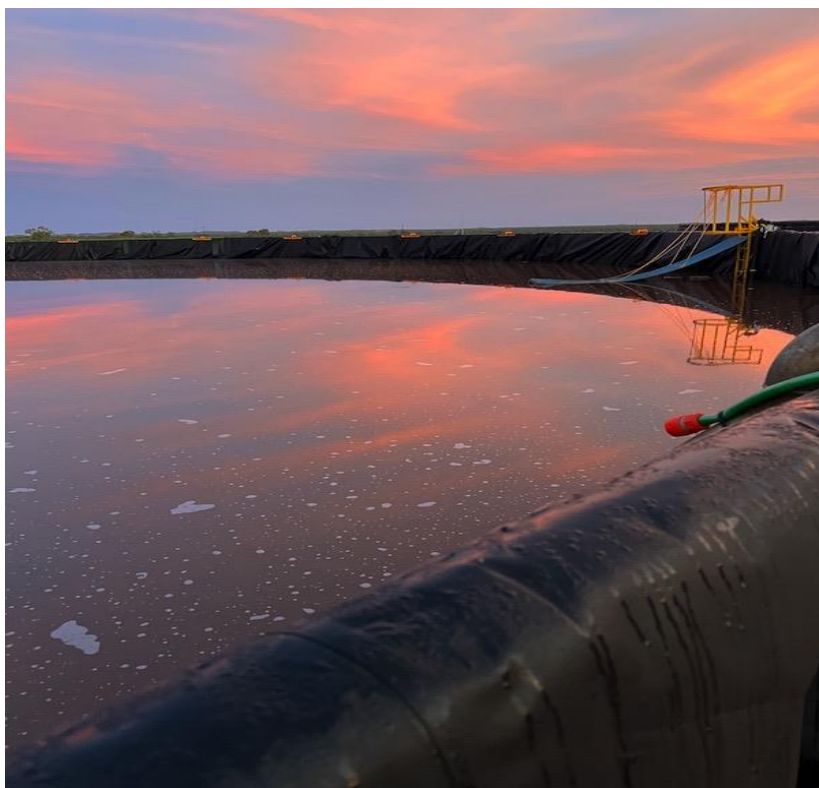
*Courtesy Protect Big Rivers 5 Pumping over the bund wall from Maverick, known site of contamination, Tamboran.*

- ii. Transport of water. We have recently become aware of the movement of contaminated wastewater from fracking sites to privatised water holding facilities outside petroleum lease zones. This stored water is no longer subject to the petroleum code of conduct and instead now sits governed by the Waste Management Control Act. This effectively renders the protections of the Pepper Inquiry and the code of practise null and void regarding fracking wastewater. No public consultation process is required for site selection and EPA licensing, so these facilities can effectively pop up anywhere without anyone knowing. The Hydrera water treatment facility at Tennant Creek as one such location, recently discovered by accident. This facility is 15 km North of Tennant Creek, and only three kilometres away from the Tennant Creek itself, the aquatic playground for Tenant Creek residents. 3 strands of barbed wire are all that separate the facility from the public. Home ladders are attached to the wall of the tanks making them accessible to children. Garden hoses are set up on the tanks as if to syphon water from them onto the ground. The tanks are not covered, and Tennant Creek experienced a 5-day deluge from recent Cyclone Megan. Pumps are set up pumping water from sumps on site, over the bund wall, out towards Tennant Creek. Attempts to find out the chemical nature of the water again lands us back to the lengthy and expensive process of FOI. Concerned citizens have obtained water samples that show contamination, and the matter has been referred to the NT EPA for investigation. To obtain the results of this investigation citizens will need to return to the expensive FOI process. As the site is 1000km from the EPA the investigation would not have occurred at all if citizens had not investigated independently first.

Strangely the site is completely obscured from view on Google Earth, in a deliberate act. Again, the lack of transparency and obvious power of this industry, compared to the rights of citizens to clean drinking water is starkly apparent.



*6 Hydrera Water treatment plant pumping contaminated sump water over bund wall, site entirely accessible.*



*7 Hydrera, garden hose set up with ability to siphon from contaminated tank.*



*8 Hydrera potential siphoning set up of highly contaminated fracking flowback water with ladder in place*



*9 Pumping contaminated water over the bund wall.*

**Aquifer contamination:** The SREBA baseline studies into vertical aquifer communication recognise that more work is required to ensure the safety of both the potable aquifer and the springs that may be associated with deeper aquifers. The studies show methane bubbling in springs in the Beetaloo and MacArthur region. This implies potential communication from the gas bearing layer to surface springs. The baseline study only examined fault lines accessible by road. We can therefore assume many more such communications exist, again out of sight out of mind.

In its recent EMP Imperial Oil and gas state they expect only 5% of the contaminated water put down the hole to return to surface. Where does the other 95% of that water go? Will it find pathways to surface springs? These are the unacceptable unknowns.

The SREBA baseline studies related to water were inadequate, with at least 16 critical knowledge gaps remaining when independently assessed by a hydrogeologist. **Report attached.**

**We note that neither Imperial Oil and Gas, Tamboran or the Northern Territory Government have referred the proposed programs for 2024-2028 to the Federal Minister for the Environment, under the EPBC Act, to have their projects assessed using the water trigger.** In the absence of referral, it is critical that the Minister calls these projects in herself. The chemicals used in hydraulic drilling and fracturing are highly toxic. Some are persistent. Some bioaccumulate. The heavy metals and radiation brought to the surface with this practice are also contaminants of great concern. It is critical we have independent scrutiny of these projects.

**Suncable comparison clarification:**

Given the comparison of the solar footprint of Sun cable was discussed on multiple occasions, being compared to the 'relatively small footprint of fracking wells', I have done more research since the inquiry.

In an ideal production scenario, each well pad will have 10 wells. Each well will extend horizontally up to 4 kms, although even a 10 km underground horizontal is being considered. This will create a minimum 8-kilometre longitudinal footprint to each well pad. With five wells each side of the pad fanning, and a minimum distance of 500 metres between each, the short end of the rectangle will be a minimum of 2.5 kilometres long. Thus, for each well pad we see a minimum of 20 square kilometres of fractured shale underneath. If we assume 600 well pads, we have an underground footprint of 12,000 square kilometres. The projected scale of this industry must be considered at all points in the process of its assessment.

The map below of exploration applications and permits, speaking to the scale the gas industry has in their back pocket, should it materialise. This map represents a complete sacrifice of the Northern Territory. The question is whether the federal government will oversee it either by omission of climate and water custodianship, or via direct financial support.



# Map of NT Petroleum Licences

