



Environment Institute
of Australia and
New Zealand Inc.

9 April 2020

Chief Minister
The Hon Michael Gunner MLA
GPO Box 3146
Darwin NT 0801

Dear Chief Minister,

Re: Retention of capacity in the environmental services sector

1. Overview

The Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ) represents professionals working in environmental science, land management and related professional services such as cultural heritage, legal, community engagement, social scientists, academics and researchers and non-government organisations.

The environmental services sector (including associated professional services) is a key enabler across all the NT's growth sectors identified in the NT Government's 2017 "Our Economic Future: Northern Territory Economic Development Framework".

We understand and support the immense investment the Northern Territory and Australian Governments have made in business support schemes. We are seeking similar support for the less visible, but equally critical, environmental services sector. This covers hundreds of jobs in government, the private sector (particularly mining), non-government organisations and Aboriginal land management.

Our members face challenges to business survival, with co-managed Aboriginal projects on hold or cancelled. Fieldwork and programs have been halted in regional and remote communities. Key industry sectors are being challenged by the economic uncertainty, leading to projects being cancelled or deferred and staff laid off.

The EIANZ supports a letter sent last week by farming, conservation and land management groups to the Prime Minister and State and Territory leaders outlining potential economic stimulus measures in the conservation and land management sector.

We believe our sector can make an early and ongoing contribution to progressing important private sector projects to their final investment decisions, then help deliver and manage them through their operations to deliver a range of benefits to Territorians, including regional areas.

This letter provides some thoughts on what we can contribute, then outlines the challenges facing our sector.

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We ask that the NT Government consider a specific stimulus package for our sector and we request a meeting to discuss the issues outlined below.

A bridge to recovery in the environmental services sector

A recent planning meeting by the Northern Territory EIANZ committee came up with two key ideas that would support both our sector and the Northern Territory economy in the immediate and longer-term.

The first is research, policy and planning either for government or key industries in the Northern Territory to enhance sector productivity. This research could include co-contributions from sectors that retain some capacity to pay. This might, for example, cover strategic planning for non-pastoral land use. We plan to seek a meeting with groups such as Territory Natural Resource Management, the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association and NT Farmers on how we can all collaborate on a 'bridge to economic recovery' and would welcome government involvement.

The second key 'bridge to recovery' idea would be Government-funded research that will de-risk and fast-track projects once the economy improves, by reducing uncertainty and regulatory timelines, such as environmental assessments and feasibility and constraints analysis. This work could, for example, identify at the landscape scale land parcels that have minimal constraints and consequently are available for 'shovel-ready' projects. This pre-development approach would make available the *assessment on referral information* approvals pathway under the NT's new *Environmental Protection Act* thereby substantially reducing the environmental approval timelines, while still giving the community comfort they require that the project has been fully assessed.

We can support the government's long-term visionary projects with bioregional planning, land use planning and strategic assessments of regions or areas where there is potential for industry clusters, whether this is Middle Arm, Glyde Point or strategic assessments of potential mining, horticulture, agriculture or onshore gas development including the proposed Strategic Regional Environment and Baseline Study (SREBA).

Some other ideas:

- Working with the land councils on creative ways to continue the important economic activities that deliver on devolved decision-making and economic development, such as land management, traditional livelihoods, working on country and small-scale horticulture and aquaculture projects.
- Investment in de-risking potential projects that could attract Australian Government or private sector funding, such as feasibility studies and regulatory approvals.
- Redirecting Australian and Northern Territory Government funding to projects that can be delivered and that would deliver visible benefits to Territorians, such as water and land use planning, gamba grass control.
- Investing in environmental audits that may not have been done due to funding or staff shortages.
- Research to ascertain the economic value of environmental services and land management sectors to the Northern Territory, which might provide an evidence base in funding applications to the Australian Government for investment in Territory programs.
- 'Rainy day' projects, such as research or program development that enhances investor-readiness or the quality of services provided by Government.

- The coming months could provide an opportunity for the environmental professionals in the private sector to be more engaged in planning and implementation of new legislation, regulations, guidelines, policies and processes to support current regulatory reforms.
- Subsidising government and private sector employees to use any reduced hours or downtime to enhance their professional development. The EIANZ nationally is running more webinars and the NT committee is looking at increasing access to webinars on topical issues.

Our sector

The environmental services sector supports major projects, water extraction, fire management and land management in the Northern Territory. We work in project planning, supporting projects through their environmental approvals processes and ensuring that environmental obligations have been met through auditing and reporting to government and the community. Our work ensures the Northern Territory's special environmental values are maintained for current and future generations and ensures that existing and future projects have an important environmental mandate.

The environmental services sector (including associated professional services) is a key enabler across all the NT's growth sectors identified in the NT Government's 2017 "Our Economic Future: Northern Territory Economic Development Framework". For example, our work is helping pastoral industries transition to off-pastoral land use. In addition, the strategy described environmental services as one of the important developing sectors in the Territory (p.34). It incorporates environmental studies, Indigenous Ranger Groups and renewable energy. In fact, we believe our role is critical in growing Northern Australia's knowledge economies, educational sectors, Aboriginal land and seas management and adapting to more sustainable prosperity for the future.

How is the sector affected?

The consequences of the current crisis include:

- Companies, individuals and research programs face an uncertain future as they downsize, ask staff to reduce hours or take on lower-paying work to survive.
- The potential loss of experienced professionals and their families back to their home states.
- Interruption to programs and, potentially, research funding in regional and remote areas such as carbon farming, land management, conservation, ranger programs, environmental offsets programs, coastal and marine and biosecurity programs.
- Delays to environmental studies for government and private sector projects seeking regulatory approval because a range of fieldwork for major projects, such as biodiversity studies, has been halted due to an inability to travel or access regional and remote regions.
- A serious loss of local knowledge would slow down the approvals processes and increase future reliance on interstate consultants leading to further competition for those of us that choose to stay in the NT.
- Pressure to fast-track projects, could lead to an erosion of public confidence, or social licence to operate, in government and companies. We believe the public is increasingly

concerned at the implications of development for the health of our environment and use of the planet's finite resources.

- We have supported the Government's current environmental reform program by reviewing legislation and guidelines, because we are at the coalface of these reforms. However, we fear some of the gains and improvements to process may be undermined by pressures to 'cut red tape', or take short-cuts in regulatory processes.

In summary, while small business in the Territory will have access to a range of stimulus programs and support, we believe this could be enhanced if the funding is put to productive use by retaining the Territory's knowledge base and doing the preparatory work needed for a bridge to economic recovery.

We look forward to discussing these ideas with you in the future.

Yours sincerely,



JEFF RICHARDSON,

President,

Northern Territory Division

Copy

CEO Department of Business, Trade and Innovation Shaun Drabsch

CEO of Department of Environment and Natural Resources Jo Townsend

