



New water plan is a disgrace

The twice-rejected Western Davenport water allocation plan unmasks the Northern Territory government's disregard for Aboriginal rights and sites and lacks social licence, Central Land Council chief executive Les Turner said.

He said the plan follows pretend-consultations with traditional owners, disrespects their concerns about site protection, their rights and interests in water and is opposed by the government's own water advisory committee for the region.

The so-called consultation process consisted of two misleading presentations by government water planners who spruiked out-of-date information. Traditional owners may as well have stayed away.

"That's our country. We should be involved. What's going to happen to our sacred trees?" said Alekarenge community leader Graham Beasley.

Mr Beasley said traditional owners "will get sick" if they can't protect their water sites. "That's our culture – we can't give it away. They have already taken everything. What more do they want?"

The NT's latest water allocation plan ignores sacred site protection while the government pretends on the international stage to respect their cultural and ecological knowledge.

"Minister Lauren Moss' address to the United Nations General Assembly last month was at odds with the government's continued and complete contempt for Aboriginal cultural and environmental values when it comes to water planning," Mr Turner said.

"The draft Western Davenport water allocation plan it has released for public comment offers no protection for our sites and the environment."

"Traditional owners might as well have stayed away since the plan only pays lip service to the concerns they raised.

"The government has failed to seek their prior informed consent and share decision-making – principles it promised to uphold under the Closing the Gap reforms and in the international arena."

Water advisory committees, such as the committee for the Western Davenport region north-east of Alice Springs, are the main avenue for the public to try to influence water governance in the NT.

The CLC, along with most of the committee members, rejected two earlier iterations of the plan, but continued to work with the government in good faith.

Committee members include Andrew Johnson, Paul Burke, Roy Chisholm, Annette D'Emden, Jade Kudrenko, Paul McLaughlin, Steve Morton, Barbara Shaw, Michael Liddle and Nicholas Ashburner.

The committee unanimously advised the government that its estimate of how much water can be sustainably extracted is too high.

Traditional owners fear the draft plan puts their sites, plants and animals at great risk.

One of the objectives of the old plan was to protect Aboriginal cultural values.

Under the new draft they merely need to be "considered" as one set of values amongst many others when issuing water licences.

"This is unacceptable because many sacred sites and practices in the region depend on groundwater and the ecosystems it sustains," said Mr Turner.

"Any drop in the water table risks irreversible damage to sacred springs, soakages and trees. Our country and culture will be sacrificed if water extraction is not carefully managed and limited."

"The plan has now been rejected for the second time and has no social license," he said.

"The government has released it because its process of box-ticking has finally hit a brick wall."

The water plan for the Western Davenport region also ignores land rights and sacred site protection laws.

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