

# Protecting landscapes

## Inquiry findings

The Inquiry found the development of an onshore shale gas industry poses a potential risk to the integrity and character of the Northern Territory's landscape. The Territory's landscape is an essential element of the culture of Aboriginal Traditional Owners, and is central to attracting tourists to regional areas. Identified risks from the Inquiry included:

- the above and below ground degradation of sacred sites and cultural landscapes
- adverse impacts to the unique wilderness value of the Territory, which may damage the 'outback experience' marketed by the tourism industry
- increased infrastructure in regional and remote areas, increased noise and light pollution, and increase heavy vehicle traffic were identified as potential adverse outcomes.

## NT Government mitigations

The NT Government accepted all recommendations from the Inquiry in order to mitigate these risks and protect the unique heritage of the Territory.

- The NT Government introduced the Petroleum Reserved Block Policy, which sets out the areas where onshore gas activities may be prohibited. Before the policy was introduced, only 2.05% of the Territory was reserved from onshore gas activities. As of November 2022, 20.76% of the Territory's landmass has been reserved. Areas which can be declared as reserved blocks include:
  - o Parks and reserves
  - o Areas of cultural significance
  - o Towns and residential areas
  - o Areas of high tourism value
  - o Areas of high conservation value
  - o Areas with no petroleum potential
  - o Indigenous Protected Areas
- The NT Government introduced requirements for onshore gas industry proponents to pay environmental securities as a part of the approval process. This ensures proponents have access to sufficient funds for remediation and rehabilitation and that Northern Territory taxpayers will not be required to pay for remediation or rehabilitation.
- The NT Government introduced a Code of Practice which sets legally enforceable standards for the onshore gas industry. The Code reduces the risk of land subsidence (gradual sinking of surface land due to the removal or displacement of sub-surface materials) by requiring Erosion and Sediment Control Plans consistent with international best practice. The Code of Practice also requires site planning and selection to consider wet season flows and fauna passages, and risk assessments for heavy vehicle transport on unsealed roads during the wet season.
- To minimise the surface footprint of development, the Code of Practice requires a minimum 2 kilometres of spacing between well pads, except for specific site constraints (such as geohazards or areas of cultural heritage). The Code of Practice also ensures that infrastructure located in proximity to major roads or locations with existing amenity value is designed to minimise long-term impacts.
- The NT Government requires onshore gas proponents to submit Well Operation Management Plans (WOMPs) which cover the entire life cycle of a well. WOMPs must consider the location of known geohazards, such as fault lines, and the proximity of other hydraulic fracturing wells to reduce the risk of well leaks and damage to the landscape.
- The Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority's (NT EPA's) assessment framework and risk management requirements for proponents have been significantly reformed, reflecting regulatory concerns regarding the onshore shale gas industry. Please refer to the chapter summary on strengthening the regulatory environment for more information about this reform
- The NT Government introduced a mandatory requirement for onshore gas project proponents to hold a valid Authority Certificate, issued by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA). AAPA works with Traditional Owners to map sacred sites in project areas. The Authority Certificate restricts work in sensitive areas to protect sacred sites, including surface and the sub-surface features.
- The NT Government introduced a public notification and consultation process for the proposed release of land for onshore gas exploration. The Minister for Mining and Industry must publish a statement explaining why the blocks were determined appropriate for exploration, and must consider any submissions

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received when determining which blocks will be released for exploration.

- The terrestrial ecosystems Strategic Regional Environmental and Baseline Assessment (SREBA) study developed new information to reduce risks to landscapes. The study mapped and classified ecosystems, identified areas of high conservation value, and conducted targeted surveys for some threatened species. This baseline information will improve the assessment of landscape impacts and decision-making about onshore gas industry development.
- The NT Government secured \$367 million of joint funding with the Commonwealth Government to improve the Carpentaria Highway, Buchanan Highway, Western Creek Road and Gorrie/Dry River Road, and to deliver flood immunity and shoulder-widening upgrades to the Stuart Highway. These upgrades will provide a two lane sealed road over approximately 305 kilometres of public road network through the Beetaloo Sub-basin to ensure the road network can safely accommodate additional heavy vehicle demand from the onshore gas industry before any significant increase in traffic occurs.
- The NT Government will fund road maintenance costs by applying a charging model to heavy vehicles in the Territory, including for the onshore gas industry. The charge will be based on vehicle weight and distance travelled to ensure the system is equitable but accurately reflects the impact of each industry on the road network. This system is in line with the national system for heavy vehicle charging.
- The NT Government commissioned independent studies to forecast traffic demand based on development scenarios in the Beetaloo Sub-basin. These studies have provided sufficient baseline data on projected traffic demand.

### Ongoing monitoring into the future

The Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (DITT) will continue to monitor the integrity of wells and surface infrastructure as a key priority in its regulation of the onshore shale gas industry, ensuring measures are in place to mitigate risks to landscapes posed by onshore shale gas activities. DITT will also continue to implement the Reserved Block Policy.

AAPA has established a compliance team whose functions include auditing activities associated with the onshore gas industry. AAPA continues to strengthen its approach to protect sites from damage resulting from development activities and will sustain the rigour in which Environment

Management Plans (EMPs), including those relating to onshore gas activities, are assessed.

The Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics (DIPL), as the agency with responsibility for road infrastructure and maintenance, will work with onshore gas project proponents to ensure measures for mitigating and monitoring risks to road infrastructure are in place prior to approval of EMPs. Approvals may include conditions for DIPL to review engineering and design proposals for road upgrades, and to monitor and accept construction works.

DIPL will monitor the effectiveness of road upgrades and plan for maintenance activities using the traffic count program. Reports of road conditions and faults in the Beetaloo Sub-basin will be continually monitored, reported and actioned through the NT Government 'Report a road fault' website.

### Where can I find more information?

Find out more about these reforms in Chapter 4 of the Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing Final Implementation Report.

NT Government decisions about EMPs are available to the public on the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security (DEPWS) website at [depws.nt.gov.au](http://depws.nt.gov.au)

The SREBA baseline reports, technical reports and data catalogue, are available at [depws.nt.gov.au/sreba](http://depws.nt.gov.au/sreba)

Fact sheets and audio files in Aboriginal languages are available at [hydraulicfracturing.nt.gov.au](http://hydraulicfracturing.nt.gov.au)

To report regulatory breaches by the onshore gas industry, anyone can make a toll free, anonymous call to the Onshore Gas Non-Compliance Hotline. The hotline is available 24 hours a day on **1800 413 889**.