

Preserving the natural environment

Inquiry findings

The Inquiry identified the onshore shale gas industry has the potential to damage the health, biodiversity and management of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Risks to the natural environment include:

- damage to ecosystems and biodiversity caused by excessive extraction and contamination of surface and groundwater
- the increased spread of invasive species, the loss of native vegetation, and changes to fire regimes
- the potential for onshore shale gas infrastructure to damage ecosystems.

The Inquiry found there were no strong water monitoring requirements to provide an early warning system and reduce the risks to water resources from onshore shale gas activities, including risks to water quality and quantity.

NT Government mitigations

The NT Government accepted all the Inquiry recommendations to mitigate the risks identified by the Inquiry and protect the natural environment.

- The NT Government transferred the responsibility for environmental regulations for the onshore gas industry from the Minister for Mining and Industry to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change, and Water Security. This removes the potential for environmental regulation to be influenced or conflicted by industry development, which could arise if the same decision-maker is responsible for both environmental protection and industry development.
- The NT Government requires all onshore gas proponents to submit an Environment Management Plan (EMP) which identifies and assesses all environmental impacts and risks from onshore gas activities, and demonstrates how they will be managed to acceptable standards.
- The NT Government introduced the *Environment Protection Act 2019* to improve the Territory's environmental protection regulations. There is now a process for the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water Security to issue approvals for activities regulated under the Act and impose specific conditions which reduce the risk of environmental harm.

- The NT Government established a legally enforceable Code of Practice for onshore gas activity, which all EMPs must comply with. To protect the natural environment the Code of Practice requires the following:
 - o project specific weed management plans
 - o the development and implementation of site specific fire management plans
 - o a range of requirements designed to address water resource contamination and extraction
 - o wastewater management plans and spill management plans
 - o a rehabilitation plan, prior to the release of environmental securities
 - o specific wastewater storage and well site protection requirements
- The NT Government introduced the Petroleum Reserved Block Policy, which sets out the areas where onshore gas activities may be prohibited, including areas of high conservation value. As of November 2022, 20.76% of the Territory's landmass has been reserved from onshore gas activities.
- The NT Government has made sure that water usage by the onshore gas industry is licensed and assessed against water protection and allocation policies by removing onshore gas industry exemptions from water licensing requirements. Licences are published online for transparency.
- The NT Government declared the Daly Roper Beetaloo Water Control District to improve management of the water resources in this region. Declaring the water control district enables the development of Water Allocation Plans which apply tailored allocation rules to water licence decisions in regions where there is competition for water, protecting water dependent ecosystems. The Water Allocation Plan for the Georgina-Wiso Basin has closed from consultation and will commence from the date of its Gazettal by the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water Security.
- The Strategic Regional Environmental Baseline Assessment (SREBA) addressed the lack of information needed to manage risks to the natural environment and water resources. Studies on water quality and quantity, aquatic ecosystems, and terrestrial ecosystems produced baseline information which has improved understanding about the natural environment in the Beetaloo region, which will inform future assessment of environmental impacts, including cumulative impacts from multiple projects.

Chapter Summary Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing Final Implementation Report

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Ongoing monitoring into the future

The Department of Environment, Parks, and Water Security (DEPWS) and the Department of Industry, Tourism, and Trade (DITT) will review the Code of Practice in 2023 to ensure it considers advances in processes and technology. The groundwater monitoring requirements in the Code of Practice will be independently assessed to ensure they remain effective and appropriate.

Water Allocation Plans are subject to declaration periods of up to 10 years. DEPWS will conduct statutory reviews of declared plans in 5-year intervals.

Where can I find more information?

Find out more about these reforms in Chapter 5 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

Water Allocation Plans are also available on the water licensing portal on the DEPWS website.

The SREBA baseline reports, technical reports and data catalogue, are available at depws.nt.gov.au/sreba

Fact sheets and audio files in Aboriginal languages are available at 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**.