

Position Paper – Water

The Issues and Our Position

Water is critical to the success of every agricultural enterprise in the NT.

Agribusinesses make a very substantial contribution to the economic and social well-being of communities across the NT - particularly in the regional and rural parts of the Territory. These rural enterprises underpin and sustain a myriad of related businesses – from freight and transport to packaging, fencing, fertiliser and equipment suppliers. Agricultural businesses also engage large numbers of permanent and seasonal staff whose wages circulate through regional centres and the Territory economy.

Given the significant contribution of agricultural enterprises to the economic and social fabric of the Territory, it is critical that government develops and implements policies that ensure access to reliable and sustainable water resources sufficient to support the growth and development of these enterprises.

The Territory has significant water resources but there are serious gaps in the adequacy of current water resource management arrangements and these gaps pose threats to the future of our industry.

The industry strongly supports all efforts aimed at implementing regulated water resource management arrangements that deliver sustainable, equitable and reliable access to water resources for all legitimate water users.

Industry needs to have confidence in the integrity, transparency, equity, consistency and robustness of water resource management policy and its application.

Much work needs to be done by government and its agencies to overcome current inadequacies in water resource management arrangements and practices in the NT and the industry stands ready to support and facilitate improved policies and improved implementation.

Our commitment

NT Farmers will:

- work with national and Territory partners, regulators and policy makers to ensure that water resource management policies and practices are sustainable and that they protect and foster the growth and development of agricultural enterprises across the Territory;
- work to ensure that farmers are aware of water resource management issues and are informed and actively participate in sustainable water use practices; and
- provide an effective conduit and communication channel between growers and Water Resource Management and policy agencies to facilitate informed water policy and the development of water allocation plans.

Our expectations

NT Farmers seeks and expects:

- that water resource management will ensure that use of the resource maximises economic and social benefits for all Territorians;
- adequate recognition of the importance of water security for viable and sustainable agricultural enterprise and development;
- water management that identifies and minimises environmental impact;
- a science based approach to water resource policy and management in order to deliver access to sustainable water resources for our industry (this should include a larger investment by government in scientific and evidence based policy and scientifically based water allocation plans for all aquifers and catchments);
- an immediate, formal review of the Water Act (revisions to include the establishment of independent water allocation committees that are representative of all water users and inclusion of all water resources in water allocation planning, not just groundwater);
- an NT wide strategic plan for water, committing publicly to timeframes for planning and the implementation of improved water management strategies;
- the speedy adoption and implementation by government of the National Water Initiative objectives;
- use of the maximum period of available data;
- economic modelling to identify the benefits/impacts of low security and low reliability water on industry;
- an expression of interest process to replace the existing first-come-first-serve process with licence applications assessed through a competitive tender measuring the viability and the economic benefits of each application (including job creating and value to the NT economy);
- provision of 10-25 year licences, with staged allocations for new developments and reasonable use-it-or-lose it conditions, based on a thorough assessment of each water application;
- consideration of acceptable environmental impacts in water planning processes (particularly in areas where there is already overuse which is likely to have caused impacts);
- a Strategic Indigenous Reserve which facilitates Indigenous economic activity;
- the inclusion of all water users within an equitable allocation framework, applying the same rules to all and not allowing any particular users to reduce the water security of others;
- transparency in respect of all aspects of water resource policy development and policy implementation, including modelling, planning, community engagement, etc;
- government commitment to full and transparent engagement with the industry and stakeholders in a way that offers a high level of opportunity for grower contribution to regulatory arrangements (this must include the establishment of water allocation planning committees and water management committees for each aquifer);
- government to engage with NT Farmers, early, frequently and with integrity and openness, in respect of all water resource management initiatives or policy and implementation changes;
- government agencies to utilise NT Farmers as a communication channel in respect of water resource management matters relevant to the grower community; and
- adequate resourcing of water resource management functions within relevant NT agencies sufficient to enable the above outcomes.

Our agenda items

- Awareness raising for industry participants.
- Greatly improved:
 - transparency in decision making;
 - reliability and consistency in water allocation decisions;
 - equity and accountability; and
 - consultation, engagement and education.
- A science based approach to water resource management and allocation practices.
- Sustainable water allocations for the growth and development of agricultural enterprises.
- Surface water catchment options for agriculture, including a science based approach to surface water harvesting and licencing.
- Development covenants for large water licenses and an equitable framework focused on industry development and sustainability. Water allocation policies should not allow water banking.
- The need for high water security and certainty for agricultural water licences - new licences should not reduce the security of existing licences.
- All water users should be treated equitably within allocation frameworks (including restrictions on stock and domestic water use during periods of limited water supply).
- Water Management Plans for all catchments and aquifers which recognise connectivity between aquifers.
- Fully researched strategies for reducing and negating the impact of PAWA dependence on rural Darwin groundwater (this could include the relocation of the PAWA water extraction).
- Support for a moratorium on fracking and a science based assessment of potential impacts - no fracking to proceed unless there is clear scientific support and appropriate, strong and effective controls and protections for our critical water resources. Consideration of exempt areas where there is extensive, intensive horticultural activity.
- Promotion of water use efficiency throughout the industry.