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Ms Robyn Smith
Secretary
Sessional Committee on Environment & Sustainable Development
Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory
GPO Box 3721
Darwin NT 0801

24 July 2009

Dear Ms Smith

Northern Territory's capacity to progress agricultural production in an environmentally sustainable manner

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Sessional Committee's inquiry into the Northern Territory's capacity to progress agricultural production in an environmentally sustainable manner. The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) welcomes the Committee's examination of issues relating to sustainable agricultural production.

The EPA operates under the *Environment Protection Authority Act* to give advice and make recommendations to government, business and the community about ecologically sustainable development (ESD).

The establishment of the EPA with this function reflects the commitment made by the Government that the Northern Territory's future should be guided by the concept of ESD. The EPA was established to advise about the structures required to ensure the principle of sustainability is enshrined in how the Northern Territory goes about its business.

In taking on this function the EPA has prepared a document that introduces principles of ecologically sustainable development which reflect the specific context of the Northern Territory characterised by:

- its relatively intact natural environment that is recognised nationally and internationally for its significance;
- its population identifying the unique natural environment as a significant element to the Northern Territory identity;
- its small population spread across a large geographic area and where Indigenous people living in regional areas make up approximately one third of the population;
- its economy which is dependent upon a limited diversity of development types (resource extraction, tourism, pastoral activity and the public sector).

This work aims to develop a suite of Northern Territory specific principles that integrate national and international sustainability principles with the Northern Territory's unique social, environmental and economic circumstances. In themselves many of the principles are found across a range Northern Territory government policies, however as a suite, the principles

define a broad and common understanding of what sustainability means for the Northern Territory and serve to guide a whole-of-government approach to sustainable development. The principles have been developed as a tool to benchmark policies, programs and decisions made in the Northern Territory by government, business and the community.

The six Northern Territory specific principles of ecologically sustainable development are as follows:

- ecologically sustainable development is necessary to support a strong, diversified and healthy Northern Territory society;
- the nature dependent Northern Territory identity is to be protected and promoted;
- equity and social cohesion are intrinsic to how the Northern Territory operates;
- the public sector must lead in the advocacy and enactment of ecologically sustainable development in the Northern Territory;
- the Northern Territory community and business are key partners in ecologically sustainable development; and
- acknowledging and addressing regional circumstances is required to achieve ecologically sustainable development in the Northern Territory.

A copy of the EPA's Paper Discussion Paper can also be found on the EPA's website at www.epa.nt.gov.au.

Principles of ESD are not exclusive to environmental issues but require social and economic development and environmental protection issues be addressed together. Their interdependence needs to be acknowledged and factored into policy and program areas. The concept of ESD is based on a long term and integrated approach to development that takes into account the inherent inter-relationships among our environment, the people living in it and the economy within which we interact on a daily basis. In view of the important role agriculture plays as an economic activity that both supports livelihoods and manages extensive areas of land, the EPA considers that the Northern Territory's capacity and willingness to respond to issues relating to agricultural systems and their sustainable use of natural resources are crucial for planning and delivering a prosperous and sustainable future for the Northern Territory.

Agriculture makes an important contribution to the Northern Territory economy and in supporting the livelihoods of Territorians. The sector is estimated to contribute to around two percent of the State Product and employ two to three percent of the Territory's work force, but makes a more significant contribution to the livelihoods of Territorians living in regional and remote areas. Agricultural activity is responsible for managing extensive areas of the Northern Territory's landscape, with pastoralists managing around 50% of the Northern Territory for grazing stock.

While the EPA has a limited capacity to respond to the many technical and scientific matters under consideration it recommends that the Committee ensure that the principles behind what is meant by the concept of "sustainability" be used to guide its work. This includes:

- Ensuring that the precautionary principle is used to guide the Committee's recommendations. The Committee should undertake careful evaluation of all options to ensure the outcomes from its Inquiry avoid, wherever practicable, serious or irreversible damage to the environment.
- Being guided by the principle of improved valuation and pricing of the environment. Specifically, environmental factors should be included in the valuation of assets and services, therefore when examining the economic benefits and costs of agricultural development, the "costs" associated with the use of natural resources and assets and the ultimate disposal of any wastes are taken into account.
- Ensuring that the use of the term "environmentally sustainable" does not prohibit the Committee from drawing on information that relates to the Northern Territory's social and cultural environments. The outcomes of the Inquiry should reflect the

consideration of this element of the sustainability picture. This is in keeping with the concept of Community Wellbeing (as being promoted in the draft Territory 2030 document).

- Being guided by the element of integration that is inherent to the concept of sustainability. It is important to consider where the outcomes of this Inquiry will sit with other initiatives and existing legislation that can influence natural resource use and management, regional development etc within the Northern Territory. The Inquiry should consider how it can promote and achieve integration across the suite of existing government policies, programs, strategies and legislation (as well as new initiatives being developed) that apply to agricultural development and natural resource management.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Tupper', with a stylized, flowing script.

Andrew Tupper
Chair
Environment Protection Authority