Fracking will worsen the Territory’s water crisis

Water is life in the Northern Territory, where about 90 per cent of regional water demand is supplied by groundwater, supporting critical drinking water supplies and our tourism, farming, fishing and pastoral industries.

But last Wet season, the NT experienced the hottest year on record and the driest in 27 years; rainfall was just two-thirds of the average. This is in line with climate change predictions for the region.

Leaked and vented methane from fracking operations is a potent greenhouse gas. Emissions from a single new shale gasfield in the Territory are estimated to contribute as much as 6 per cent of Australia’s total domestic emissions annually, fueling climate change and making life hotter and harder for vulnerable regions of the NT.

Shannon Dixon is a senior Mudburra Traditional Owner from the outstation of Marlinja, in the centre of the Beetaloo Basin. He’s concerned that fracking will reduce the availability of groundwater for local communities as the climate crisis worsens.

“Our communities are concerned about the impact that water extraction for gas fracking could have on our sacred sites and culture. Taking too much water could dry up our soaks, springs and rivers that rely on underground water for their flow.

With climate change the heat will continue for longer, drying surface water. Low rainfall means our underground water won’t fill up as fast. We don’t think these risks have been properly considered by the NT Government in allowing fracking.”

Fracking is a water intensive industry, using between 40 – 60 million litres of water for every frack.

Local communities are already facing a water crisis, with severe and prolonged drought affecting more than 2/3rds of the NT. Handing out scarce water supplies to gas fracking could imperil regions like the Barkly and Roper. Plus the competition over water could pose a major threat to existing industries like cattle, farming and tourism.

The NT Government’s ‘no-go-zones’ for fracking offer only limited protection to areas of cultural and ecological significance like Lake Woods. The gas in the Beetaloo Basin is trapped in shale rock, deep below ground. Tapping it would require thousands of wells to be drilled through the underground water table, and an extensive network of pipelines, roads and gas processing infrastructure. The proposal has been met with alarm by local communities, Traditional Owners, pastoralists, scientists and health professionals.

Lake Woods
A wetland of international significance, Lake Woods is an important breeding ground for flocks of migrating birds, including internationally significant numbers of Plumed Whistling-Duck and threatened species such as the Gouldian Finch, Grey Falcon and Painted Honeyeater. The near permanent waterholes in nearby Newcastle Creek are an important refuge for many species during the dry season, and during the monsoon as many as 100,000 waterbirds find refuge there.

Lake Woods sits at the southernmost tip of the Beetaloo Basin, a gas reserve stretching over 28,000 square kilometres from Mataranka thermal springs in the north to Elliott in the south and the Gulf of Carpentaria in the east. Recently the region has become the target of a gas rush by companies like Origin Energy and Santos, eager to explore for oil and gas.

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Lake Woods

Under threat from oil and gas fracking

Lake Woods, near the township of Elliott in the Barkly Tablelands, is the largest freshwater lake in the Northern Territory. For millennia, the lake, known as Jurrkulu by its traditional custodians, has been a reliable and celebrated source of water for the Mudburra and Jingulu people.

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The gas sits below the Tindall limestone aquifer; ancient water, and the source of drinking water for tens of thousands of the Northern Territory’s regional and remote communities, cattle stations and Indigenous homelands.

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This document produced by the Protect Country Alliance
For more information visit protectcountrynt.org.au/pledge_origin

1 Major floods filling the lake to capacity have occurred at least three times in the past 15 years, in 1993, 2001 and 2006.
The practice has been banned in Victoria and Tasmania. New South Wales has a restrictive “go slow” approach after strong community opposition, and last year Western Australia lifted its moratorium on fracking, saying 98 per cent of the state would remain “frack free”. In Queensland, where the gas industry rapid industry expansion over a decade means there are now over 6000 gas wells, with thousands more approved and a myriad of unresolved water and landholder problems.

An NT Government Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing finding that, “for a significant majority of Territorians, fracking was not considered safe, trusted or wanted.” Yet recently the Northern Territory Government gave the greenlight to open more than 51% of the region to fracking for shale oil and gas. The inquiry determined fracking risks could be reduced to “acceptable” levels - provided its 135 recommendations were implemented in their entirety. Over 100 of these recommendations have not yet been implemented.

Now, these critical recommendations and laws that could help protect local communities, drinking water supplies and the environment from risk are being pushed aside. There’s a rush to open the Territory up as the world’s next fracking frontier.

Fracking puts Northern Territory communities, culture and climate at risk

Fracking is a high-risk and experimental mining technique that involves injecting large volumes of water, mixed with sand and chemicals, into sedimentary shale rock at high pressure, creating fine cracks so that gas flows into the well.

Lake Woods is significant habitat for migratory shorebirds. Thousands of Oriental Pratincole and Little Curlew have been seen there, waiting for the wet season before they disperse over the grasslands of the Barkly Tablelands. The nationally endangered, threatened Australian Painted Snipe, takes refuge there during dry months.

BirdLife Top End Branch states, “The area is extremely significant for not only waterbirds but other species. Inland populations of Magpie Geese, Green Pygmy Goose, Brolga and Pied Cormorant occur there. It is a stronghold for the threatened Painted Snipe and Yellow Chat. It’s the Northern limit for Spinifex Bird and Australian Ringneck Parrot.”

Lake Woods and neighbouring Longreach Waterhole, 20kms north of Elliott, is home to an incredible biodiversity of water bird life which has made the region a popular destination for bird watchers from all over Australia and internationally.

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“Waterbird life there is phenomenal. It is an important refuge for waterbirds during dry periods of the south. Even Australian Shelduck has been recorded there. Great Crested Grebes, crakes and raptors that predate on other birds including Grey and Peregrine Falcons. Also significant for migratory shorebirds, I’ve seen thousands of Oriental Pratincole and Little Curlew there waiting for the wet season before they disperse over the grasslands of the Barkly Tablelands.

The area is totally land locked with all water flowing inland towards lake woods and it looks like an inland sea! An amazing place.”

Lake Woods Catchment and Gas Fracking Wells

Lake Woods meets at least five of the criteria for listing as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, including (NTG, 2019):

• Rare or unique example of a wetland type;
• Supports threatened species or communities;
• Provides refuge or supports a critical life-cycle stage for important species;
• Important wildlife aggregation site with >20,000 waterbirds; and
• Criterion 6 regularly supports >1% of the individuals in a population.

A site of cultural, ecological and historical significance

Historical data from Lake Woods and the surrounding catchment area and community of Newcastle Waters contains a myriad of important historical and cultural data about the history of the region considered valuable for scientific, archaeological, and climatic studies.

Investigations are presently underway outside the extent of the proposed no go zones around Lake Woods by the Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH) and archaeological investigations.

The potential archaeological significance of the Lake Woods system, and associated lakes in the Barkly region need to be more considered and significant buffer zone needs to be applied to the current no go zones to ensure they have little disturbance, and are accessible for further cultural and heritage studies.

Lake Woods is currently recognised by the NT Government as a Site of Conservation Significance, and the region boasts ecological and cultural values of international significance that make it a strong candidate for RAMSAR heritage protection.