Case Card #5
PASTORAL LAND CLEARING

The Issue
Just weeks after new research was released showing that the Northern Territory's tropical savanna and arid lands ecosystems are collapsing, the Northern Territory Government created a streamlined process for clearing native vegetation from pastoral land.

Background Information
Close to half of all land in the Northern Territory (45% or 596 542 km^2) is held under just 224 pastoral leases.[1] The Pastoral Lands Act 1992 only has one line relating to land clearing, requiring pastoralists to obtain the permission of the Pastoral Land Board (PLB) before clearing native vegetation. Traditional owners' native title rights coexist with the pastoral leases, but pastoralists do not need the permission of traditional owners to clear land, except where sacred sites will be affected.

The PLB rarely if ever requires an environmental assessment under the Environment Protection Act 2019: the PLB's guidelines make environmental assessment easy to avoid by stating that they will refer applications to clear more than 5000 hectares (approximately 5000 rugby fields) for environmental assessment.[2] There is nothing to stop applicants from making successive applications to clear just under 5000 hectares.

Unsurprisingly given the lax regulations, the NT has become a hotspot for land clearing in recent years.[3] Instead of acting to protect the Territory's ecosystems, the Northern Territory Government has weakened its already weak land clearing rules by introducing a six-week timeframe for approvals to clear up to 1000 hectares at a time.[4]

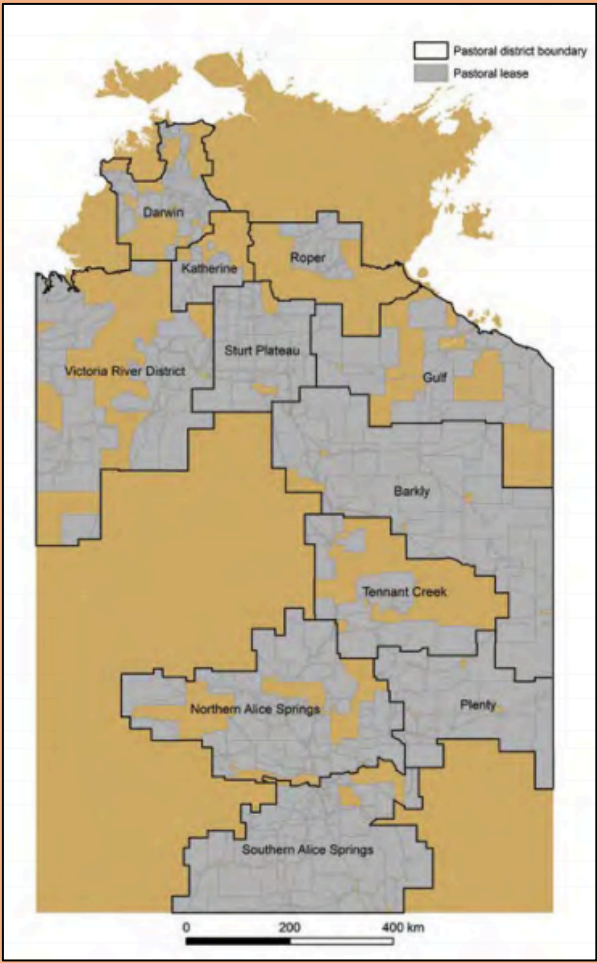

Figure 1 - map of pastoral land in the NT.
Source: Pastoral Land Board Annual Report 2017-18, p13.

Why This Issue is a Concern
Research released in February this year identifies three of the Northern Territory's key ecosystems as 'collapsing' and points to land clearing as a threat to two of those ecosystems: the tropical savanna and the arid zone.[5] Clearing native vegetation destroys habitat for native animals, fragments the wider ecosystem and can contribute to the spread of invasive weeds and feral animals.

Additionally, bulldozing and then burning savanna (a common method of clearing vegetation) causes the release of a considerable amount of greenhouse gases, contributing to climate change. For instance, in an application to clear over 20,000 hectares, it was estimated that the greenhouse gas emissions generated could account for up to 18.5% of the Territory's emissions for that year.[6] In 2018 (the most recent data available), the category of "Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry", which includes land clearing, was approximately 35% of the Northern Territory's approximately 16 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions for that year.[7] The entire Indigenous carbon industry in the Territory can only offset approximately 1 million tonnes per year.[8]

This Case Card was prepared by *Lottie Boardman and Kirsty Howey* *April 2021*

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Information / Action Request (what we would like done / possible solutions)

- Create new legislation that protects the Territory's unique biodiversity by:
  - requiring bioregional planning and management of the Territory's ecosystems that will set limits for land clearing on an ecosystem scale.
  - recognising the interests of traditional owners in maintaining biodiversity on pastoral lands and empowering them to be involved in planning to protect that biodiversity.
- Until the new legislation is in place, require all pastoral land clearing applications to be referred to the Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority for assessment under the Environment Protection Act 2019.

References

1. Pastoral Land Board Annual Report 2018-2019, p ii. Available at: https://depws.nt.gov.au/boards-and-committees/pastoral-land-board
2. Northern Territory Pastoral Land Clearing Guidelines (v9), p 8. Available at: https://nt.gov.au/property/land-clearing/pastoral-land/clearing-native-vegetation-on-pastoral-land
3. Slezak, Michael. 11 December 2017. "Northern Territory land-clearing approvals increase nearly tenfold". *The Guardian (online)* https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/11/northern-territory-land-clearing-approvals-increase-nearly-tenfold
4. Shipway, Gary. 26 March 2021. "NT land clearing changes slash approval times by months". *NT News (online).* https://www.ntnews.com.au/news/northern-territory/nt-land-clearing-changes-slash-approval-times-by-months/news-story/
   The new "Simplified Pastoral Land Clearing Applications" policy is available at: https://nt.gov.au/property/land-clearing/pastoral-land/clearing-native-vegetation-on-pastoral-land
5. Bergstrom, D.M., et al. 2021. "Combating ecosystem collapse from the tropics to the Antarctic". *Glob. Change Biol.*, 27: 1692-1703. https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.15539
6. Breen, Jacqueline. 5 September 2019. "NT's biggest ever land-clearing bid at Maryfield Station delayed in court". *ABC News.* https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-05/court-win-climate-change-challenge-nt-land-clearing/11479726
7. See the 2018 State Greenhouse Gas Inventory for the NT, available on the Australian Greenhouse Emissions Information System website: https://ageis.climatechange.gov.au/
8. Bardon, Jane. 1 March 2020. "How fracking could threaten Australia's Paris target". *ABC News.* https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/fracking-could-threaten-australias-paris-target/12006532

Write To

The Minister for Environment, Parks and Water Security

Tell the Minister we want robust protections from land clearing for our precious Territory ecosystems

Hon Eva Lawler MLA
PO Box 400,
Palmerston NT 0830
minister.lawler@nt.gov.au
08 8999 5397

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April 2021

Sample Letter #5
PASTORAL LAND CLEARING

Your name
Address

Minister Eva Lawler MLA
Minister for the Environment,
Water Security, and Climate Change
GPO Box 3146
Darwin NT 0801

Date

Dear Minister Lawler,

Briefly introduce yourself e.g. I am a resident of Alice Springs.

I am seriously concerned about the threat that pastoral land clearing poses to our precious Territory ecosystems and to the climate.

Clearing native vegetation pushes ecosystems towards collapse by removing habitat for native species, fragmenting what remains, and contributing to the spread of invasive weeds and feral animals. Yet, just weeks after new research was released showing that the Territory's tropical savanna and arid zone ecosystems are already collapsing, the Northern Territory Government made it simpler for pastoralists to clear up to 1000 hectares of native vegetation at a time.

Land clearing also contributes to climate change. For instance, in 2018, the category of "Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry", which includes land clearing, was approximately 35% of the Northern Territory's greenhouse gas emissions for that year.

The Northern Territory's stunning environment is important to me and I want future generations to be able to enjoy it as I have. For this to be possible, we need robust laws to protect native biodiversity on pastoral lands and to protect the climate.

I respectfully request that you:

- create new legislation that protects the Territory's unique biodiversity by:
    - requiring bioregional planning and management of the Territory's ecosystems that will set limits for land clearing on an ecosystem scale; and
    - recognising the interests of traditional owners in maintaining biodiversity on pastoral lands and empowering them to be involved in planning to protect that biodiversity;
- until the new legislation is in place, require all pastoral land clearing applications to be referred to the Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority for assessment under the Environment Protection Act 2019; and
- make offsetting the greenhouse gas emissions that result from land clearing a requirement of any approval given to clear pastoral land.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this letter. I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Your name

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