

## Northern Water could protect the Mound Springs by replacing *all* BHP's water extractions from the GAB – or *condemn* Springs to ongoing decline due to BHP's Wellfield B operations

*Briefer by David Noonan, Independent Environment Campaigner, 21 Jan 2025.*

***“I agree with you that the real opportunity to achieve significant beneficial environmental and cultural outcomes is to replace, or at least significantly reduce, Olympic Dam's current extractions from the GAB with a new, sustainable water supply.”***

SA Minister for Environment & Water the Hon Susan Close MP, Letter to David Noonan, 18 July 2022.

Protection for unique and fragile [Mound Springs](#) and [integrity of Great Artesian Basin waters](#) can't be left up to BHP's undue influence. BHP's very limited [commitment](#) is to retain its unviable Wellfield A operations and only close it by the end of FY2030 once the State provides a new water supply to BHP.

The impacts of BHP's larger scale Wellfield B water extraction operations are an untenable long-term insidious threat to the viability of Mound Spring flows. BHP wants to continue these operations.

The SA State [Northern Water Project](#) could provide BHP with a water supply for all envisaged mine expansion and new mining options AND *replace both* Wellfields A & B extractions from GAB. The projects "[Summary Business Case](#)" (Feb 2024) does recognise ongoing risks to GAB Springs:

**2.2.2 CULTURAL** *The 2021 Juukan Gorge Inquiry made the following observations: "These springs (Mound Springs) are of great significance to the Arabana people and they are an important part of their cultural heritage. There are fears that continued extraction from the Great Artesian Basin will result in a significant reduction to the 'vitality and the ecological viability of the springs', and that there is a high likelihood that more springs will go extinct."*

*Northern Water will play a significant role in reducing reliance on the use of water supplies that hold significant cultural importance to Traditional Owners. Providing the opportunity for reduced water withdrawals from the Great Artesian Basin may play a role in preserving mound springs. As virtual oases in the desert, the springs were, and still are, of vital importance to Indigenous people.*

However, the State of SA has a serious 'conflict of interest' in dealing with BHP. SA wants to lever and maximize an array of BHP investments in north SA and to give certainty to BHP over water supply.

BHP are to set up [Olympic Dam](#) as a regional processing hub for copper-uranium ores from multiple mine expansions AND to process ore from a major new deep underground BHP mine at [Oak Dam](#).

The SA Labor Premier decided the public is to pay the full capital costs for a major new marine desalination plant on Eyre Peninsula AND to pay for the pipelines to deliver that water up to BHP at Olympic Dam. Half of the new de-sal water supply, up to 130 million litres a day, is to go to mining.

The State claims Northern Water can have no adverse impacts, direct or indirect, on the Mound Springs and *excluded* the Springs from the project's federal EPBC Act Referral [2023/09717](#) (see a [critique](#) endorsed by Conservation SA on this SA Gov position, as 'not fit for purpose'). The State claims 'there is no ongoing degradation of the Springs', and that the Springs have 'stabilized'.

The State EIS process on Northern Water does not intend to assess impacts on Mound Springs or to require Conditions be set to benefit the Springs in an Approval on the project. The [EIS Assessment Requirements](#) on Northern Water give only *token* consideration to the fate of the Mound Springs.

The State does not intend to direct BHP to protect the Springs but rather to '*incentivize*' BHP toward negotiated outcomes and sees closing Wellfield A as an important but *voluntary* measure by BHP. '*Significant beneficial environmental and cultural outcomes*' may be left till last or not realized at all.

**Min Tanya Plibersek has responsibility to protect GAB Springs and can use \$'s & EPBC Act to do so:**

Protection for GAB Springs may finally rely on gaining exercise of federal [influence](#), responsibilities and powers, given SA's stark 'conflict of interest' in support of mining and BHP's undue influence.

Minister Plibersek can use EPBC Act powers to place Approval Conditions on Northern Water through the State EIS process to protect GAB Springs as [a listed EPBC Act Endangered Ecological Community](#).

\$65 million of 'Future Made in Australia' funds has already been put into Northern Water but the Minister not yet taken action to require the GAB Springs are protected, saying on [ABC News](#):

***'Valuable' resources being overdrawn:** Federal Environment and Water Minister Tanya Plibersek said the project was important to provide water for "thirsty" green hydrogen production and copper development. She said the only alternatives for those industries in SA would be a continued reliance the Murray River or the Great Artesian Basin. "Both of these sources are not as reliable as they need to be for industry," Ms Plibersek said. "But they're also incredibly valuable environmentally and the fact that we've been overdrawing on these resources has led to problems both for the environment and for the communities that rely on these water resources for farming, drinking and other purposes." (17 May 2024)*

Federal funds for Northern Water must be made conditional on *closure* of both BHP Wellfields A & B.

The 'window of influence' ahead of the Federal Election is a key time to gain federal engagement to protect the unique and fragile Mound Springs as part of Minister Plibersek's 'Nature Positive' agenda.

At stake are the GAB Springs fundamental ongoing cultural and spiritual values to Indigenous People.

**Premier: 'You can't spend Billions \$'s of public money on water supply and not save the Springs'**

Social license, the SA Gov's political credibility and public interest standing depend on this outcome.

Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas MP has tied his political fortunes [in partnership with BHP](#) (August 2024) to [double the scale of BHP copper mining](#) in north SA to 650,000 tonnes a year by mid-2030's.

The Premier looks to commit \$5 Billion of public funds to Northern Water, with half the water to go to mining (*De-sal plant 'a pipeline to riches' Jobs and \$5 Bn windfall*, The Advertiser 22 Feb 2024).

Over half the public \$5 Billion 'investment' goes to pipe desal water to BHP as world's largest miner.

The fate of the Mound Springs must not be left up to fraught State negotiations with BHP over 'water pricing'. As the State tries to recoup some of the sunk \$5 billion public funds and BHP aims to limit how much they may agree to pay for a new water supply to be delivered up to Olympic Dam.

The State wants to leave decisions on GAB Springs until after the public EIS process on Northern Water and BHP wants to 'hold over' changes to Wellfield B until late in negotiations with the State.

The "[SA Copper Strategy](#)" and Northern Water Project lack a social license, and a \$5 billion State and Federal 'investment' fails contemporary public interest expectations *unless* the Mound Springs are protected for the long term through this opportunity to replace *all* BHP water extractions from GAB.

A conservationist 'Call on the SA Premier to Protect our GAB Springs', ABC SA TV News 22 Feb 2024:

*David Noonan: 'when the first marine de-sal water turns up at Roxby Downs town and at Olympic Dam mine, BHP should have to turn off the taps on GAB water extraction'.*

**Civil Society needs a concerted public interest campaign to protect GAB Springs throughout 2025.**