

Decisions on the Northern Water Project could protect GAB Mound Springs from BHP impacts OR condemn the Springs to 'ongoing degradation':

Briefer by David Noonan, Independent Environment Campaigner, 07 March 2023

The Federal Gov has released an EPBC Act Referral [2023/09717](#) on the [Northern Water Project](#) (NW) for a 10-day national public consultation. SA Gov are setting EIS 'Assessment Requirements' for NW.

To protect the viability of [Mound Springs](#) and [integrity of GAB waters](#) requires a decision to replace BHP's unsustainable extraction of GAB water *before* providing for increased BHP demand for water.

Half of NW's major marine de-sal water supply is to go to mining (130 MI/day, of up to 260 MI/d): to BHP's '[Copper-Uranium Province](#)' in north SA, for multiple expansions and a new [Oak Dam mine](#).

The **SA Minister for Climate, Environment and Water the Hon Susan Close MP** has stated a positive position to guide the outcomes of the NW Project (Letter to Mr David Noonan, 18 July 2022):

"... 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. ... Obviously this proposal will only proceed if it is able to pass the rigorous environmental and cultural assessments that will need to be undertaken as part of the overall assessment process.

I understand that the Northern Water Supply project business case being developed by Infrastructure SA is currently expected to be completed early in 2023. Subject to the outcome of the required assessments, it is my view that this project represents the most effective approach to achieving the environmental outcomes that we both desire."

However, the SA Gov still can't commit to a phase out of BHP's adverse impacts on GAB Springs and claims the Springs should not be subject to EPBC Act assessment and Federal decision responsibilities.

The "[Summary Business Case, Northern Water](#)" (Feb 2024) does recognise ongoing risks to Springs:

2.2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL *Currently, mining and other industry in the region are reliant upon extracting water from the River Murray, Great Artesian Basin and other deep saline groundwater resources. SA Water supplies to the region are also heavily reliant on the River Murray. **Reliance on these unsustainable water sources will result in ongoing environmental degradation. ...***

The NW will provide a sustainable source of water and reduce the need for supplies to be taken from either the Great Artesian Basin or the River Murray. ...

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."*

The NW 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.

Call for Civil Society to input to this EPBC Referral to protect the GAB Springs:

To gain protection for the Springs likely relies on exercise of Federal Gov powers and public interest responsibilities, given the SA Gov's 'conflict of interest' over mining and BHP's undue influence.

However, EPBC Act Referral [2023/09717](#) seeks to exclude our Mound Springs, a listed [Endangered Ecological Community](#), from matters requiring Federal assessment, decisions and protection.

As proponent of Northern Water (NW) the SA Gov claims the Project can't have negative / adverse impacts on the GAB Springs: 'as it does not directly draw water from the GAB'. BHP could have written that script! NW is a [\\$5 billion project](#) and must fully realize public interest outcomes.

Further, the SA Gov draws on [EPBC Act Sec.75\(2\)\(b\)](#) to say the Federal Minister can't take potential beneficial impacts of the NW Project on GAB Springs into account in an approval decision on NW.

Civil society should input to this EPBC Act consultation to try to gain Federal decision coverage to protect our GAB Springs – public input is due by cob Thursday 21st March (see EPBC ['Comment'](#)).

The EPBC Portal ['Comment'](#) has a place to write in (or copy in) our reasons as to why the impacted GAB Springs should be included and assessed under the EPBC Act, at *'Provide reasons for why you believe this is/is not a controlled action'*. The Portal only allows one document to be attached.

We need this EPBC Act Referral process to decide to include GAB Springs, at least as 'an indirectly adversely impacted' Federal matter, AND to set an EIS priority to protect GAB Springs and require an EIS Assessment of a full phase out BHP's extraction of GAB water that adversely impacts the Springs.

This NW Project is the only real means to realize an end to BHP's adversely impacting GAB water extraction of 35 MI/day AND thereby to gain long-term protection for our unique & fragile Springs.

There is a conservation priority for BHP's adversely impacting Borefield A operations to close ASAP and not await 'first water' from the NW Project that's not due till approx. 2028. BHP's larger scale Borefield B operations are an untenable long-term insidious threat to the viability of Spring flows.

In contrast, if left up to the SA Gov: the State EIS process on NW could decide to allow BHP to continue adverse GAB water extraction operations, with only a belated reduction in extraction of GAB waters (such as a closure of Borefield A, but to fail to require a full phase out of Borefield B).

The State EIS will consider 'benefits' to Springs in *reducing* GAB water extractions (an initial [Goyder Institute](#) "Northern Water: [GAB Reduced Extraction Study](#)" is underway). But if left up to the SA Gov and BHP's influence the State EIS is likely to fail to even assess the benefits of a full phase out.

SA and BHP 'have form' in disregard for GAB Springs: In Feb 2019 BHP applied to *increase* the 35 MI/day rate of extraction of GAB waters up to 50 MI/d, for a 50-year period out to 2070. The State supported that reckless agenda at the time (that Olympic Dam expansion was abandoned in 2020).

In Summary: Public confidence in the federal EPBC Act and the 'social license' of the State Gov NW Project are dependent on public interest decisions to protect the integrity of GAB waters and the viability of Springs and to phase out and replace BHP's existing unsustainable GAB water extractions.