



WESTERN RIVERS ALLIANCE
Protecting the Channel Country

Submission response to the Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement for the Lake Eyre Basin

To: Strategic Policy
Department of Environment and Science (Queensland)



Photo: Helen Commens

25 August 2023

Who we are

The Western Rivers Alliance is an alliance between individual graziers, Traditional Owners, conservation organisations and scientists advocating for the protection of rivers and floodplains of the Channel Country.

The Western Rivers Alliance has 180 supporters who live in the Lake Eyre Basin in Queensland and 27,688 supporters nation-wide.



Photo: Glenn Walker

Lake Eyre Basin's rivers and Channel Country floodplains – worthy of protection

The Lake Eyre Basin is globally recognised as an area rich in natural and cultural heritage. The major rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin, the Georgina and Diamantina Rivers and Cooper Creek, are some of the world's last uncompromised desert rivers. The Lake Eyre Basin's rivers have the most variable flow patterns of any rivers on the planet, creating a unique ecology (Kingsford, 2017).

“The Lake Eyre Basin rivers are one of the world's greatest desert river systems- arguably the greatest.”

- Professor Richard Kingsford, UNSW

The natural boom and bust cycle of this landscape supports an incredible diversity of unique plants, birds and other wildlife. When the floods arrive the water spills across expansive floodplains and into hundreds of braided channels before finally reaching Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre to the south.

This spectacular natural phenomenon has supported the livelihoods and culture of the region's First Nations since time immemorial and today supports renowned productive and naturally irrigated grazing pastures and a growing tourism industry.



Photo: OBE Organic

Cattle grazing is central to the local economies and way of life in the Channel Country today. Local graziers rely on unpolluted and unimpeded floodwaters to naturally irrigate the Channel Country floodplains that are renowned for their productive pastures following a flood. Cattle grazing is the largest direct employer in the Channel Country followed by services and tourism – many of which are reliant on the natural assets of the region. (ABS, 2016).

“(It is) the long-held desire of pastoralists, townspeople, and conservationists, to see the very best protection of the floodplains of the Channel Country rivers which flow into Lake Eyre.”

- David Brook OAM, Chairman OBE

Traditional Owners from across the Lake Eyre Basin have for many years been coming together to fight for stronger protections for the rivers and floodplains, including from gas mining:

“We want our rivers to remain free-flowing and our floodplains protected from fracking.”

- Our Water, Our Future statement by Traditional Owners

Sadly, the Channel Country is under threat from oil and gas mining encroaching on the floodplains- Gas well pads, pipelines, roads, and water pollution disrupt and degrade the natural flood flows that sustain this precious and globally significant environment. The Western Rivers Alliance believes that unconventional gas mining in Channel Country rivers and floodplains presents an unacceptable risk to the outstanding economic, cultural, and ecological values of these areas.

“It’s God’s own country. It keeps coming back to the fact that no amount of money will be able to undo what potentially could happen from fracking.”

Ann Rayment, Connemarra Station

The Palaszczuk Government committed at the 2015, 2017, and 2020 elections that they would strengthen protections for the rivers and floodplains of the Lake Eyre Basin in Queensland. It is time for Queensland Labor to fulfil the legacy of protecting Queensland’s pristine rivers through strengthened legislative protection against unacceptable threats to the Channel Country’s rivers and floodplains.

Spatial options

The Western Rivers Alliance recommends the Queensland Government expand the strategic environmental area/designated precinct (SEA/DP) to include all major waterways, their tributaries and floodplains to the greatest possible extent- **spatial option 3**.



Cooper Creek floodplains, July 2022. Photo: Kerry Trapnell

In our view, spatial option 3 is the most accurate representation of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers and floodplains in Queensland. It is our position that rivers are an interconnected system and should be provided with the same level of protection throughout. It is of great concern that significant waterways and floodplains that were formally recognised under Wild Rivers are currently outside of the SEA/DP and are not protected from large-scale irrigation, open-cut mining, or oil and gas.

“The boom and bust cycle is something locals have not just adapted to, we thrive in it. It has become part of our character, our grit, and our identity as Channel Country people”

-Bob Morrish, Cooper's Creek Protection Group

Regulatory options

The Western Rivers Alliance is supporting **regulatory option 4**. It is our long-held position that the existing regulation be updated to include oil and gas mining as an ‘unacceptable use’ within river and floodplain areas, alongside the existing unacceptable uses of open-cut mining and large-scale dams and broadacre cropping, should be added to the list of unacceptable uses.

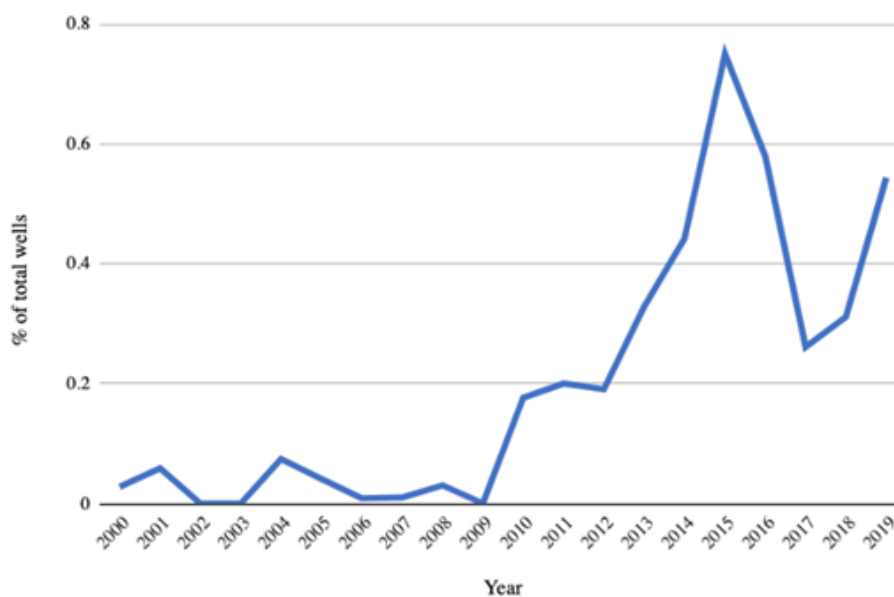
While the oil and gas industry has been present in the Lake Eyre Basin region for decades, the nature of the industry is changing with new technology allowing deeper and more dispersed resources to be accessed. These “unconventional” oil and gas deposits such as shale, deep coal, and tight gas, require frequent hydraulic fracturing (known as “fracking”) and in some cases horizontal drilling.



The cumulative footprint of gas production in the Cooper Creek floodplains, South Australia. Photo: Doug Gimesy

Extraction for “conventional” oil and gas is also changing, data from the Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy shows that the amount of petroleum wells fracked has significantly increased over the last 15 years from what was typical in years prior (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of Petroleum wells in Queensland’s Channel Country fracked each year.



Source: © State of Queensland (Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy) 2019.

Local landholders and Traditional Owners have also expressed concerns over the impacts of existing petroleum and gas activities particularly regarding diverting overland flood flows. There is increasing concern over the growing cumulative impact on the river system, as more wells and associated infrastructure are added to the industry’s footprint each year. Recent research published in a peer-reviewed international journal last year supported these local concerns, finding evidence that roads built to support oil and gas mining were impacting natural flooding regimes and fragmenting the Channel Country floodplains (Kingsford and Walburn, 2022).

“Allowing industrial developments like oil and gas mining on the floodplains is just madness.”

- Ken Griffiths, Hayfield Station

Option 4 is the only option that:

- Addresses cumulative impacts from oil and gas infrastructure and environmental disturbance- all other options address individual projects only and *do not* manage the number of wells and other infrastructure permitted within an area or across the catchment.
- Addresses threats to the rivers and floodplains from road and levee bank infrastructure.
- Categorically rules out hydraulic fracturing (fracking) from future projects.
- Will regulate the risk of hazardous spills from waste by-products or fracking chemicals for both conventional and unconventional extraction.
- Will not increase regulatory burden, adding additional regulatory requirements will only increase regulatory burden both on the oil and gas companies and on the regulator (the relevant Government department) and will require constant updating as the nature of the activity changes with time. Clearly declaring oil and gas mining as an ‘unacceptable use’ along with pre-existing unacceptable activities is straightforward and provides certainty on what is and is not permitted within river and floodplain areas.



Gas and oil production in the Lake Eyre Basin. Photos: Doug Gimesy

Environmental attributes

The Western Rivers Alliance welcomes the proposal to list the additional environmental attributes and recommends the Queensland Government implements **environmental attributes option 2**. The

Western Rivers Alliance further supports recognising the Aboriginal cultural heritage attributes associated with the rivers and Channel Country floodplains.

Supporting Traditional Owners of the Lake Eyre Basin

Traditional Owners from across the Channel Country have worked hard for many years to secure lasting protections for the rivers and floodplains. The Western Rivers Alliance calls on the Queensland Government to recognise, respond to, and support the aspirations of Traditional Owners in the Lake Eyre Basin including those articulated in the Tibooburra Resolution (2011), the Our Water, Our Future (2019) and Healthy Water, Healthy Future (2019), the 2020 Lake Eyre Basin Traditional Owner Alliance submission, and submissions from Traditional Owners and organisations into this consultation process.



Photo: Lyndon Mechielsen

"I grew up on the Diamantina- it is very important to me, my family, my group. Any exploration, whether it be for oil, gas, gold, or whatever- I just don't want it to happen on our rivers."

- Don Rowlands, Wongkangurru

Implementation of recommended options

The Western Rivers Alliance urges the Queensland Government to implement the recommended options (spatial option 3, regulatory option 4, and attributes option 2) as a matter of priority within this term of government. It is recommended that this is achieved through amendments to the Regional Planning Interests (Regulation) 2014.

"This is the world's greatest desert river system. The Palaszczuk Government can either be the government that lets it be completely destroyed, or they can be the government that protects it forever."

- Josh Gorringe, Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation

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References

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