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17 December 2008

The Honourable Alison Anderson
Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage
GPO Box 3146,
Darwin NT 0801

Dear Minister,

Re: Gamba Grass and the Weeds Management Act

The Environmental Defender's Office (NT) (EDO) wishes to congratulate you on your appointment as Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage.

On 5 June 2008 I met with the then Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage. The primary purpose of that meeting was to introduce the Minister to work of the EDO. I enclose a pamphlet for your information, which gives a brief sketch of our services. I forward to meeting with you in the future to discuss the work we are presently undertaking.

At the meeting of 5 June we also took the opportunity to raise the serious environmental problem of gamba grass (*Andropogon gayanus*). You would be aware of the general extent to which gamba grass has become a significant threat to Territory ecosystems and biodiversity. Due to the age and extent of the problem, no doubt NRETA will have an extensive amount of detailed scientific and practical information concerning its impacts, particularly through fire. However, I enclose for your reference photos showing both the high intensity of gamba fires and the resulting loss of trees.

There is no doubt that gamba grass poses a very significant threat to the Territory environment. There is also no doubt that urgent action is necessary. Accordingly, EDO considers the declaration of gamba grass as a 'declared weed' under the *Weeds Management Act* is urgently required.

We understand an NT Invasive Species Enquiry released a report earlier this year calling for the Government to declare gamba as a 'declared weed' under the Act. You would no doubt also be aware that both the Western Australian and Queensland governments have taken steps to declare and control gamba grass. We understand that their decision to do so was based, in part, on an understanding of the impacts gamba grass is currently having within the Territory.

EDO appreciates that the declaration of gamba grass as a 'declared weed' would have an impact on the pastoral industry, however there are ways this could be managed, including through the scheme of the *Weeds Management Act*. We also appreciate that if declared a weed, resource and regulatory consequences would result for government, particularly because declaration itself would have little impact without steps taken to enforce the provisions of the Act. Regardless, a significant sector of the broader community is generally aware of the impact of gamba grass, and would support immediate and effective measures. We are also aware of the significant scientific support for immediate action, having sited the 'open letter from scientists calling for a ban on Gamba grass across Northern Australia' addressed to Chief Minister Paul Henderson and his then cabinet.

An associated benefit to taking decisive action to address the problem posed by gamba grass is that a serious reduction strategy would have the flow on effect of reducing a portion of the Territory's greenhouse gas emissions. We note the Department of Chief Minister's recent Climate Change Discussion Paper indicated that approximately one third of the Territory's emissions are through dry season burns. Research has indicated that the fuel load and therefore emissions generated from gamba grass are significantly higher than from native grasses.

The EDO would be grateful for your advice concerning what legal steps the Territory government intends to take to address gamba grass. In particular, whether or not it has decided to declare gamba grass a declared weed under the *Weeds Management Act*, and, if so, what are the relevant time frames?

If you require any further information or wish to discuss this further please do not hesitate to contact me on 8982 1182 or at rachel.carey@edo.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Rachel Carey
Principal Lawyer