

Sen the Hon Murray Watt,  
Minister for the Environment and Water

cc. The Hon Alicia Payne MP  
Member for Canberra

**Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon: Please suspend the approval of the northern airport road**

Dear Minister,

Congratulations on your appointment to the role of Minister for the Environment and Water. We look forward to working with you over the coming years to protect Canberra's and Australia's beautiful environment.

We write on an urgent matter, the protection of the critically endangered Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon, *Tympanocryptis lineata* (**Dragon**).

**About Us**

Friends of Grasslands (**FOG**) is a community group dedicated to the conservation of natural temperate grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia. Treeless grasslands were the first ecosystem occupied by colonisers and they are now listed as critically endangered. FOG advocates, educates and advises on matters to do with the conservation of native grassy ecosystems, and carries out surveys and other on-ground work. FOG is based in Canberra and its members include professional scientists, landowners, land managers and interested members of the public.

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the leading environmental advocacy organisation and hub for community groups in Canberra. Our mission is to protect nature and create a safe climate future in the ACT and region.

**Our Urgent Request**

The Dragon was only recognised as a separate species in 2022 and is listed as one of the most critically endangered species in Australia. There are a mere three populations living on just 40 hectares in the east of the ACT and adjoining land in NSW. In 2022, your government identified the Dragon as one of 110 priority threatened species for recovery.

We ask that you step in urgently and suspend the approval granted to the Canberra Airport Pty Ltd (also known as Canberra Airport Group or '**CAG**') for their 'Northern Road' between Fairbairn and Majura Road in Pialligo in the ACT. The road would bisect and threaten the habitat of one of three remaining Dragon populations.

We understand no decision has been made on a review commenced by your predecessor in 2022 of the approval granted to CAG in 2009 for the northern road. Despite this, the threat to the Dragon and outcry by the community, CAG began constructing their road earlier this year. CAG initiated construction fully cognisant they may not be allowed to finish and operate the road.

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (**EPBC Act**) provides in s 144(2) that you can consider whether, as we assert, the original approval in 2009 would not have been granted if information identified in 2022 were known then, i.e., that there are not tens of Dragon populations widely distributed but a mere three populations living on just 40 hectares.

Further, on 8 May 2025, the ACT Labor Government stepped up and, in a tight fiscal situation, has allocated \$4.5 million over 4 years for the implementation of its new *Action Plan for the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon 2025-2035*.<sup>1</sup> The first two outcomes are that “Extant populations are restored and expanded” and “Quality habitat is secured, restored, and connected”.<sup>2</sup>

**We ask you now to take three key actions:**

1. Revoke the EPBC Act approval for this unnecessary road.
2. Work with the Minister for Defence to enable the recognition of an ‘Other effective area-based conservation measure’ over the Majura Military Training Area (and abutting Defence lands), to permanently conserve remaining habitat for the Dragon; and
3. Match the investment of the ACT Government into Dragon recovery by funding habitat restoration and protection.

We attach a background brief with additional background information if required.

Minister, please act now to suspend CAG’s approval for the Northern Road at Canberra Airport. Prof Jamie Pittock, President of FOG, has been unable to sign this letter due to other commitments. We request an opportunity to meet with you to discuss this matter as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

SIGNED

Matt Whitting  
Committee Member, Friends of Grasslands  
13 May 2025

SIGNED

Dr Simon Copland  
Chief Executive, Conservation Council ACT Region  
13 May 2025

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.act.gov.au/our-canberra/latest-news/2025/may/funding-boost-to-save-grassland-earless-dragon>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/2848016/grassland-earless-dragon-action-plan-2025-2035.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/2848016/grassland-earless-dragon-action-plan-2025-2035.pdf)

## **Background Brief**

### The Northern Road at Canberra Airport

In 2009, a delegate of then Environment Minister Peter Garrett granted a conditional approval to CAG for 'the Northern Road' on a route that went *around* the 'Significant Habitat' for a population of grassland earless dragons, an area shaded grey in [Figure 1](#) below. That decision was based on the advice of the Grassland Earless Dragon Recovery Team.

The condition said, before a final approval would be granted, a strategy was needed to demonstrate the road could be built and operated without increasing the risk of extinction for the Airport population.

During the Black Summer in 2019–20, a fire burned near the southeast corner of the Airport. CAG went to the media saying the road needed to be "sorted out" for the safety of people working east of the Airport. Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison got involved.

Five months later, in May 2020, a delegate of then Environment Minister Sussan Ley gave the final go-ahead for a more direct route that bisects the area where the Airport population lives (in [Figure 1](#), we have added the road reserve, in blue). The advice of the Grassland Earless Dragon Recovery Team was not sought before that decision was made.

The strategy that was approved does not account for the increased risk of Dragon mortality due to collisions, additional losses to predators using the road, or the loss of genetic viability of fragmented populations.

On 1 Sep 2022, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee recognised grassland earless dragons are not all the same; that is, they responded to taxonomic advice that there are not one but four species of earless dragons. The (*Canberra*) Dragon occupies a small area within the Majura and Jerrabomberra valleys. There are just three small populations found on 40 hectares in in the eastern ACT and around Queanbeyan in NSW.

Based on this new information, on 23 Sep 2022, FOG asked Minister Plibersek to suspend the approval for the Northern Road. The Minister initiated a review, and that review is still underway.

In Feb 2025, CAG began constructing the road. After community pressure, they quickly announced a halt on construction in areas sensitive to the Dragon population. CAG's Head of Aviation, Michael Thomson, stated "We are holding off. We are working to develop a nature-positive plan." No nature positive plan has been published.

In Apr 2025, we noticed CAG had commenced constructing the proposed intersection between the Northern Road and Majura Road. While not cutting through the sensitive habitat yet, these latest works are against the spirit of their earlier statement.

### The need to suspend this approval

We cite four facts in support of suspending the approval and protecting this habitat.

Fact 1: Dragons are good at hiding. CAG argue Dragons everywhere are in decline, and that is true; however, they are not extinct and two Dragons were seen on the Airport in 2020 (monitoring results since 2021 have not been shared). We know their populations rise and fall. During the review, Associate Professor Paul Cooper from the ANU's Research School of Biology observed in Nov 2023 and that Dragons had been found recently around Melbourne after 30 years of searching and assumptions the

species was extinct. Paul wrote ‘the lizards can “disappear” but still be present in a locale for many years.’

**Fact 2:** The best part of the Airport population’s habitat is yet to be disturbed. While CAG’s recent bulldozing has been extensive, going well beyond the road reserve and into so-called ‘heavily disturbed farmland’, the area regarded by experts as the best Dragon habitat is yet to be bulldozed.

In April 2020, an ecologist working for CAG reported that the habitat already destroyed had a “moderate cover of native grasses [and] contained some suitable burrows and had a structure similar to low quality [Dragon] habitat, but was considered very unlikely to be occupied by [Dragons] due to its history and recent fluctuations in condition.”<sup>3</sup> We note the habitat already destroyed was considered worth searching. It may have been a candidate for nature repair, for improving habitat for a recovering population.

The habitat that CAG are avoiding during the review surrounds an existing dirt road rarely travelled. It is natural temperate grassland described in April 2020 as being “high to very high quality habitat.”<sup>4</sup> Earthworks there will destroy that habitat. The structure of the soil that supports the burrows in which the Dragons shelter and hunt will be gone.

**Fact 3:** Operating the road will be an ongoing threat to surviving Dragons. CAG’s ecologist wrote “If an effort is made to retain all or parts of the new Northern Road as crossing areas for [Dragons], higher volumes of faster traffic would increase the risk of [Dragons] being killed by vehicles.”<sup>5</sup> Arguing the road would not fragment the Airport population, CAG’s strategy states CAG will “design to facilitate [Dragon] movements across the roadway.”<sup>6</sup>

**Fact 4:** You cannot rely on CAG’s claims. The *Airports Act 1996* (Cth) requires that, for each of 22 federally-leased airports around Australia, there must be an approved master plan in effect and that plan must be updated every eight years. CAG has had several plans since it first leased Canberra Airport. In their [2020 Master Plan](#), approved by the Transport Minister in February 2020, CAG state that “the alignment of the road is agreed with all parties.”<sup>7</sup> That statement needs bulldozing. FOG has been actively objecting to the Northern Road since it was first proposed in CAG’s *1999 Master Plan*.

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<sup>3</sup> CAG’s *Northern Road Strategy*, <https://www.datocms-assets.com/88007/1675732837-northern-road-epbc-20094748-construction-and-operations-strategy-may-20.pdf>, pdf p. 161 of 182

<sup>4</sup> CAG’s *Northern Road Strategy*, n 3, pdf p. 179 of 182

<sup>5</sup> CAG’s *Northern Road Strategy*, n 3, pdf p. 174 of 182

<sup>6</sup> CAG’s *Northern Road Strategy*, n 3, pdf p. 15 of 182

<sup>7</sup> CAG’s *2020 Master Plan*, <https://www.datocms-assets.com/88007/1676347072-cag-approved-2020-master-plan-chapter-8.pdf>, p. 135

Figure 1: Map of the proposed 'Northern Road' at Canberra Airport

