



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Submission to The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water Consultation on Canberra Airport – Northern Road options

November 2023

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. Since 1981, we have spoken up for a healthy environment and a sustainable future for our region. We harness the collective energy, expertise and experience of our more than 40 member groups to promote sound policy and action on the environment.

We campaign for a safe climate, to protect biodiversity in our urban and natural areas, to protect and enhance our waterways, reduce waste, and promote sustainable transport and planning for our city. Working in the ACT and region to influence governments and build widespread support within the community and business, we put forward evidence-based solutions and innovative ideas for how we can live sustainably.

At a time when we need to reimagine a better future, we understand that the changes we need will only happen with the collective support of our community.

For further information please contact:

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Introduction

Thank you for your letter dated 20 October 2023 inviting input from the Conservation Council ACT Region on options presented by Canberra Airport Pty Ltd (CAG) in their Northern Road – Investigation Report, EPBC 2009/4748 – Northern Road (August 2023) (CAG Report) concerning the road from Fairbairn to Majura Road, Pialligo (project). In responding to the “Northern Road - Investigation Report” this submission will directly reference the page numbers.

We are pleased the Minister is carefully scrutinising the project and seeking complete information, and thank her for her commitment to no new extinctions. We have serious concern for the proposed Northern Road at Canberra Airport and recommend the approval be revoked. The proposal will have an unacceptable impact on a population of Canberra Grassland Earless Dragons (CGED) (*Tympanocryptis lineata*) at the site.

Biodiversity Crisis

The Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon was recognised by the Federal Government in its 2022-2032 Threatened Species Action Plan as one of just 110 priority species for recovery. We commend the Environment Minister for recognising the extinction risk faced by the CGED. For the Federal Government to maintain its commitment to no extinctions, the project approval must be revoked.¹

In July 2022, a landmark State of Environment Report was released outlining that overall Australia’s natural environment is “poor and deteriorating.” The cause of this extreme loss: climate stresses, habitat loss and degradation.²

Australia’s unique animals and plants are under significant pressure. Over 100 Australian species are now listed as either extinct or extinct in the wild.³ Action is needed quickly to arrest environmental decline and prevent new extinctions of plants and animals. Australia has a substandard track record on extinctions, leading the world on the highest number of mammal extinctions and has one of the highest rates of species decline in the developed world.⁴

This context of biodiversity loss illustrates the crucial need to protect the CGED at all costs. The species has been pushed to the brink of extinction by habitat destruction, degradation and fragmentation. It is high time the Federal Government takes heed of the national and international scientific consensus on the biodiversity crisis.

¹ The Threatened Species Action Plan 2022-2032

<https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/biodiversity/threatened/publications/action-plan-2022-2032>

² Australia state of the environment report 2021 <https://soe.dcceew.gov.au/>

³ EPBC Act List <https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=fauna>

⁴ The Red List

https://nc.iucnredlist.org/redlist/resources/files/1630480997-IUCN_RED_LIST_QUADRENNIAL_REPORT_2017-2020.pdf

Scientific Context

The loss and fragmentation of habitat that is critical to the CGED is unacceptable because it will increase the risk of extinction for the population of CGED living on or around the Airport.

I understand new information since the 2009 approval is being considered by the Environment Minister in the decision. This includes the fact that the CGED is not widely distributed with tens of populations, rather, its distribution is highly restricted and there are just three small populations. That does intensify the impact. The area of known habitat has been reduced by at least a half since 2009. The total number of monitored individuals in the Canberra area has fallen by 80 per cent since the time of the approval, from 83 in 2009 to 17 in 2022⁵.

CAG interprets the Conservation Advice for the CGED, which states (p. 6) “there is a ‘High’ likelihood the CGED population at the Airport will be extinct in ten years.” CAG uses this as evidence they should be allowed to proceed with the road. This is completely unacceptable. CAG is suggesting they should be allowed to put the nail in the coffin of this species. Acting now to conserve CGED habitat will halt the extinction pathway the species is on, and prevent the extinction of the CGED.

It is unjustifiable and too early for CAG to conclude the CGED is locally extinct at Canberra Airport (page 2) not finding individuals in recent surveys indicates low abundance *not* extinction.

Project Design

Canberra Airport Group’s claims on the project design are misleading. CAG states they have improved their road design by reducing it from a three-lane to a two-lane road (page 2). This suggests the proposed road is getting smaller; however, the opposite is true. When it was submitted for approval, a longer road was proposed going around the core habitat where the Canberra Dragons live. That longer road was going to disturb 3.39 ha. Now, on a much more direct route straight through the Canberra Dragons’ core habitat, the area to be disturbed is larger (4.84 ha).

Furthermore, outside the road corridor, two new bus parking areas have been added, and earthworks for a drainage basin needed to ensure the main airport runway does not get inundated by runoff from the road. These extras are all proposed in the area where the CGED live, and will further destroy and fragment CGED habitat.

CAG state (page 2) the area impacted by the project footprint is less than 2% of Natural Temperate Grassland in the Canberra Area. However, Only 0.5% of Natural Temperate Grasslands (NTG) remains in good condition; therefore there is no appropriate way to offset the impact of this development. All grassland habitat should be retained.⁶ 2% of Natural Temperate

⁵ ACT Legislation Register (ACT Conservation Advice) n 2, Table 1

⁶ Natural Temperate Grassland

<https://www.environment.act.gov.au/nature-conservation/conservation-and-ecological-communities/threatened-species-factsheets/natural-temperate-grassland>

Grassland is hugely significant when it is a critically endangered ecological community, and put into context with the fact only 5% of original NTG in the Canberra region remains⁷. Cumulative impacts from loss and fragmentation of NTG will continue to see this habitat type lost piece by piece until no viable habitat remains. As a Grassland Specialist, the CGED relies on NTG.

Effectiveness of avoidance and mitigation

At present, the North Canberra population of the lizard has 250 ha of continuous habitat comprising the Canberra Airport (22 ha), the MTA–north (138 ha) and the MTA–east (90 ha) blocks. This represents 24 per cent of the mapped ACT habitat and 21 per cent of the total mapped habitat area for the species. If the road is built, it will irrevocably fragment this continuous habitat into two sections, 22 ha and 228 ha.

No evidence has been presented demonstrating CAG’s underpasses will be effective at mitigating the fragmentation risk. The options appear to be no more than different forms of culvert CAG’s road contractor might use. There is no evidence the lizard will move through tunnels, underpasses, culverts or anything resembling what is being proposed, nor is there any evidence of road underpass use in studies for closely related species.

The underpass design may in fact promote predation on the lizard population. CAG has not addressed the possibility of increased snake predation in or around tunnels, nor the very high likelihood of increased predation from birds perching on the barrier fence.

Given as a species the lizard is in a perilous state, it is reckless for CAG to suggest that: the direct loss and fragmentation of the North Canberra population’s core habitat will not result in negative impacts.

- providing 14.5m long under road passageways will mitigate fragmentation impacts when there is no evidence provided these passageways will be effective.
- There is no evidence provided that long under road passageways will be effective at mitigating fragmentation impacts.
- Enclosing the lizards could increase predation from birds perching on the barriers.
- Captive breeding should not be solely relied upon. It is more important to conserve, restore and re-link habitat, particularly large relatively intact areas of habitat that still support CGEDs.

Importance of this population of a critically endangered species

Canberra Airport Group states the road will have a net positive impact on the long-term viability of the Canberra Dragons. The argument is “the status quo will likely lead to extinction of the [Canberra Dragons] within the foreseeable ten (10) years on the Airport and potentially the [Majura Military Training Area]”. If the road is allowed to proceed, Canberra Airport Group will participate in joint venture research on Dragons with the ACT Government at two sites on the Airport. Further, Canberra Airport Group will make a \$300,000 payment over three years “to

⁷ Natural Temperate Grassland

<https://www.environment.act.gov.au/nature-conservation/conservation-and-ecological-communities/threatened-species-factsheets/natural-temperate-grassland>

support the captive breeding programs". Captive bred individuals will be released into these habitats.

- Offering up compensatory measures doesn't make the negative impacts of this road acceptable, nor will those measures result in a 'net positive' outcome.
- If it proceeds, the road will bisect the place where individuals from a small population of Canberra Dragons have been sighted. This place is therefore incredibly valuable.
- In May 2023, based on advice from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee that Canberra Dragons have a very restricted distribution and just three small populations, the federal Environment Minister listed Canberra Dragons under the EPBC Act as a 'Critically Endangered' threatened species.
- At the Critically Endangered level, the loss even one individual from this small population could be highly significant for the species' survival. The genetic diversity inherent in individuals from that population is incredibly valuable from a biodiversity conservation perspective. The genes of individuals from this important population need to be safeguarded. Their habitat must be retained.

As there are so few CGED's remaining, every individual is important as maintaining genetic diversity is critical. The population at the Canberra Airport is of extreme significance and should be safeguarded at all costs.

Summary and Recommendations

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input. The Environment Minister's intervention to halt works at the site in May 2023 and to no new extinctions is commended.

A Base line of no road at the site must be maintained. The direct loss and fragmentation of one of the last large areas of habitat for the CGED will, with a high degree of certainty, have a serious negative impact on the survival of that population and therefore the species. Loss and fragmentation of habitat is outlined as a key threat to species survival in the 2021 State of Environment Report.

As outlined, Canberra Airport Group options does nothing to improve or protect habitat for the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon and therefore it is completely unacceptable. Considering the significant scientific and project footprint changes in the past 14 years since the original approval, it is clear the approval for the proposed road cannot proceed. We trust the Environment Minister will be sensible in revoking the antiquated and now irrelevant approval.