



MEDIA RELEASE

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Government buried modelling showing Territory nature icons are at risk, call for federal intervention

Environment groups are calling for federal Environment Minister Murray Watt to act, as explosive documents reveal the Northern Territory Government allegedly buried scientific modelling predicting increased water extraction poses dire risks to iconic barramundi, endangered sawfish and tourist destinations, including Bitter Springs.

Environment Centre NT used Freedom of Information laws to seek government documents in relation to proposed water extraction in the Mataranka area.

The documents reveal the government modelled several scenarios to understand the effects of current and proposed increases to water extraction on the Roper River and springs around Mataranka.

Shockingly, the modelling showed that even current extraction rates could cause devastating impacts to Bitter Springs and iconic Barramundi and endangered freshwater sawfish.

Bitter Springs could have an 80% to 90% reduction in flows based on current extraction rates compared to natural conditions.

It found the survival of endangered freshwater sawfish and barramundi in the Roper River system is dependent on minimum water flows of four to five cubic metres per second during the dry season.

Even based on current extraction rates, required flows for sawfish spawning may only occur in three years out of every 50, which is far too little to support the future of the unique species, which was uplisted to [endangered status in August 2025](#).

The introduction of the new Mataranka Water Allocation Plan will make things even worse.

Lawyers from the Environmental Defenders Office, representing Environment Centre NT, have written to Environment Minister Murray Watt requesting he exercise his powers to “call in” the Larrimah Farms [cotton project](#) and for assessment under Australia’s federal nature laws due to its impacts on endangered sawfish. This licence would see another 10 billion litres of groundwater taken per year from the aquifer.

The modelling was based on water levels recorded at the gauging station at Old Elsey Homestead near Mataranka.

Environment Centre NT Executive Director Kirsty Howey said: “The modelling shows that in the future dry years Bitter Springs could stop flowing, which would be a disaster for the Territory’s tourism industry.

“Pictures of Mataranka and Bitter Springs are broadcast around the world, but in reality these tourism hot spots are being hung out to dry by the Finocchiaro government.

“Internal Northern Territory government modelling appears to have been buried so the government could proceed with its dangerous plan to double the amount of water taken from the Cambrian Limestone Aquifer.

“The aquifer keeps the Roper flowing during the dry season, but people who know the river the best – First Nations communities, locals who fish, and even stockmen are telling us that key springs are already drying up.”

EDO Managing Lawyer Elanor Fenge said: "Decision makers must carefully consider the best available scientific evidence before making decisions that can significantly impact threatened species.

“From the evidence that has come to light through these FOI documents, and in particular the potential impacts on threatened species, it is difficult to understand how this water licence was granted.

“These sorts of decisions undermine public confidence in the administration of environment laws in the Northern Territory.

“Given the NT Government's own modelling shows current water extraction rates could have devastating impacts on the endangered freshwater sawfish, our client believes it is only reasonable that the Federal Environment Minister 'call in' this project for assessment under the EPBC Act.”

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