

We can't protect country and frack



Janet Gregory

THE Beetaloo Basin is my grandmother's country, on my father's side. It's a special place – a mix of plains, dense woodland and shrubs, many of which are native to this area.

Until recently, I lived with my family at Elliott, on the edge of the Basin. The young women and men there are looking for training opportunities and worthwhile jobs.

They love where they've grown up and many want to stay living on country. They enjoy hunting and fishing, just like we always have, and hope their children can do the same.

The government's plan to allow a string of gas companies to explore and frack the Beetaloo Basin puts all this at risk.

We worry about the damage that fracking will do to our land, culture, stories and future.

Across the region we can already see the effects of new gas wells, more roads and the clearing of land on our birds, our animals and our reptiles.

When my family go out and hunt they notice the scarcity of animals which would normally be there in seasonal times.

We hold fears that fracking chemicals will poison our water. Drilling into the Great Artesian Basin, which runs under my country and goes all the way down to Western Australia and South Australia, also invites trouble.

Water is life and we want our water sources left alone. Once damaged, it can never be put right.

It's not just Aboriginal people who are concerned about what fracking will do to their animals, water and country.

Our neighbours running cattle stations are also worried.

Theirs is a valuable industry and like us, they rely on fresh, clean and unpolluted water to survive and thrive.

It would be one thing if big gas companies were using their own money to explore and drill for gas.

What's troubling is the federal government plans to hand over \$50m of public money to help them do it.

Just last week the federal Resources Minister gave nearly \$20m to Imperial Oil and Gas, putting in for a quarter of their exploration costs.

If gas is so profitable, why do big companies need this help? This money would be much better spent on the housing, education and health services that all of us need.

The government and fracking companies love to talk up the benefits from this kind of investment, but no one has seen them.

Over the last 20 years I have heard miners make a lot of promises about jobs and training to my community in Elliott, but I haven't seen them.

We know fracking outfits use fly-in flyout workers and we don't believe anything will change.

It's clear that few, if any, of these jobs will be filled by locals and local Aboriginal people.

These big gas companies have taken advantage of our good will for too long.

We are sick of the lies.

They have skimmed on information and actively worked to pit families against each other.

They say money talks, but there's no future in gas. The mess left by fracking will stay with us forever.

The big opportunity is in the sun, the greatest power in our universe. Already communities in Marlinja, Tennant Creek and Borroloola have plans to power their homes and public buildings with solar energy that's cheap and available all year round.

We are strong and at the end of the day as Aboriginal people we bear great responsibility for keeping our lands healthy.

Governments and gas companies must listen to us properly, not pretend they have our consent when they don't.

That's why we are voicing our concerns, through Nurrdalinji Aboriginal Corporation, and are asking that the Northern Land Council properly represent us in all their negotiations.

We will not let fracking destroy our country, because protecting country is an essential practice of our culture, lore and life.

Janet Gregory is a Djingulu traditional owner and cultural adviser, Nurrdalinji Native Title Aboriginal Corporation, which has members across the Beetaloo Basin and Barkly regions