

# Traditional owners slam Northern Territory land council's pro-fracking 'bias'

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Beetaloo gas basin in the Northern Territory.

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An Indigenous land council has been accused of hand-picking traditional owners in favour of fracking projects in the Northern Territory's Beetaloo Basin.

Northern Territory traditional Indigenous owners opposed to the fracking projects gave evidence on Monday before a parliamentary inquiry investigating the federal government's \$50m grant program to fast-track oil projects in the basin region.

In July, the Coalition announced \$21m had been awarded to Empire Energy for exploration in the basin, triggering legal action from environmental groups that argue it is unlawful because no consideration had been given to climate change effects.

Traditional owners from Borroloola and Minyerri condemned the Northern Land Council's consultation process, telling the inquiry they feared the fracking projects would harm their communities' water and land that Indigenous songlines run through.

Beetaloo traditional owner Johnny Wilson told the Senate inquiry that negotiations between the Northern Land Council, which is leading the consultations, and the traditional owners had been “very poor.”

“The Northern Land Council are hand-picking a few of the traditional owners who they know they can manipulate and give them what they want so that they can have their authorisation to give to the mining company,” he said. “Not once have these people come to speak to the traditional owners. Northern Land Council has done nothing for us.”

Mr Wilson, who appeared as the Nurrdalindi Native Title Aboriginal Corporation chair, spoke on behalf of its 60 members. He said the corporation’s attempts to meet with the land council had fallen on deaf ears.

He also said many Aboriginal people in the NT still struggled to access basic housing in their communities, arguing the \$50m could be invested into opportunities to lift Indigenous communities out of poverty. “I still live in a tin shack. My floor is bare ground. When will I get money for my housing?” he said.

“It is very disturbing our government will not listen to us – injecting so much money into oil and gas when it should be used somewhere else. Our future isn’t looking so bright at the moment.”

Minyerri traditional owner May August said Origin Energy, which is moving ahead with production testing at its Beetaloo Basin gas project, had never accepted her invitation to meet with her community on their land.

“We are all angry,” she said.

Representatives from the Northern Land Council said it was wrong to assume all traditional owners were opposed to fracking.

Origin Energy chair Gordon Cairns has previously said traditional owners who agreed to allow exploration were “horrified” over claims the gas industry was not welcome in the region.

In March, it delayed its Beetaloo project, 500km southeast of Darwin, which is seen as an export opportunity and major contributor to volumes. The basin is part of Coalition plans to create a post-pandemic “gas-led recovery”.