

Jabiluka's Problem Pond Dodgy Approval

6 April 2000

Pond problem gives the lie to safe claims by company.

Gundjehmi Aboriginal Corporation today revealed that the water management pond at the Jabiluka mine site has not received proper Commonwealth approvals. The news comes a day after it was revealed that water is currently accumulating at a rate that cannot be contained in the pond at the Energy Resources of Australia (ERA) mine.

Executive officer of Gundjehmi Aboriginal Corporation, Jacqui Katona, said that the current Commonwealth approvals for the mine are for the so-called Jabiluka Mill Alternative (JMA). This involves the construction of milling facilities at Jabiluka and makes no mention of any such pond.

The JMA is distinct from the company's preferred option, the Ranger Mill Alternative (RMA), which involves building a 22-kilometre haulage road to truck Jabiluka ore to the existing Ranger mill. In December 1999 the Northern Land Council informed ERA the Mirrar would not negotiate at all on the RMA for five years, expressing their right of veto over such 'remote milling'. "It is now evident that ERA has constructed the mine with its preferred option, the RMA, clearly in mind. Both the design of the so-called interim pond and comments by the Northern Territory Supervising Authority clearly indicate this," Ms Katona said.

She cited a 1999 report from the Northern Territory Supervising Authority that states the pond "will be incorporated into the water management system for the production phase". However, a review of the approvals process reveals the pond was only ever intended for the construction period. "This pond has been built exactly to the Ranger Mill Alternative design, the company's preferred option. It has been built on the presumption that the Mirrar's opposition will subside or simply be overridden. The Mirrar are disgusted at the arrogance of ERA and the Commonwealth who have worked in cahoots in an attempt to make the RMA a fait accompli.

"The Environment Minister, Senator Robert Hill, must come clean on the Commonwealth approvals and whether or not he approved the construction of this pond. Further, we challenge ERA and its parent North Limited to come clean over the JMA and categorically deny that they are not building to the Ranger Mill Alternative," Ms Katona said.

Yesterday it was revealed that the pond is too small to contain the current rate of water entering it. ERA has proposed to release the contaminated water into an adjacent tributary of Swift Creek after a reverse osmosis process. Any release

would contravene commitments made by the company in January this year to not release any water from the Jabiluka site.

“The water proposed for release contains heavy metals such as lead, mercury, copper and zinc and extremely high levels of uranium. We have a level of uranium in this pond 100 times the World Health Organisation drinking water standard and 2,000 times the level of uranium in the surrounding wetland. Yet the company is talking about releasing this into the immediate environment.

“This problem would not be with us if the federal government and ERA had listened to the World Heritage Committee when in 1998 it called for the voluntary suspension of construction at Jabiluka.

“The Government must intervene and put an end to this continuing fiasco,” Ms Katona concluded.

For more information contact Justin O’Brien on 0407 0600 99 or 08 8979 2200.