

the unnecessary 'northern road'

Final addition to the backstory

On 30 July 2025, a delegate of the Federal Environment Minister declined a request by FOG to revoke the approval by which Canberra Airport Group (CAG) can now construct and operate the unnecessary 'northern road' between Fairbairn and Majura Road in Pialligo.

With CAG in the media suggesting they can deliver a nature positive outcome, the Government has allowed the road subject to new conditions requiring: 5.64 ha of grassland rehabilitation 'on airport'; some other, untested mitigation measures; and by paying the ACT Government one million dollars in supposed compensation.

On these mitigation measures, FOG can find no plan and there is no proof CAG can mitigate the impacts of this road:

- CAG have controlled the airport grounds for quarter of a century, and the decline of Canberra Dragons there has occurred on their watch.
- Via the conditions of another approval, CAG has already been required to rehabilitate 17.1 ha of grassland 'on airport' to a set standard within a set timeframe. It did not work and that timeframe expired on 4 June 2025. CAG have again sought more time. Now there is to be more rehabilitation. This time, CAG has not been required to publish a plan explaining how they will achieve their required rehabilitation outcome.
- CAG's inability to create Natural Temperate Grassland comes as no surprise to FOG. CAG can sprinkle water on seeds, but they can't easily create a home for Canberra Dragons.
- CAG's road must include barrier fencing coupled with fauna passageways and a fauna road crossing *that are to be sealed from use*. The fauna pathways must remain sealed until the Minister is satisfied they should be unsealed. CAG must cooperate with the ACT Government, giving access to researchers.
- However, we do not know how the Minister must be satisfied the passageways can be unsealed, nor when (if ever) the unsealing can be expected. If there is a plan, it has not been published.

Had a precautionary approach been adopted, fauna passageway testing would have commenced years ago.

On compensation, CAG must pay a million dollars to the ACT Government. This is both welcome and offensive. You can't buy what the Dragons have.

The varied approval indicates Canberra Dragons live right up to the very straight lines that are the boundary of the unnecessary road. It is offensive to suggest the Dragons live up to *but not beyond* these straight lines, that their habitat is not fragmented by this road and that there is no increase in extinction risk to the genetically distinct East Majura population.

FOG has lost this fight. We will continue to keep watch on CAG.

The 'northern road' and Canberra's Dragon – how did we get here?

While CAG states in its [current Master Plan](#) that “the [revised] alignment of the road is agreed with all parties” (p. 135), nothing could be further from the truth. FOG have been objecting to this road continuously for 27 years.

In 2009, a delegate of then Environment Minister Peter Garrett granted a *conditional* approval to Canberra Airport Group (**CAG**) for its 'northern road' between Fairbairn and Majura Road, Pialligo.

At the time, the road was approved to go *around* what CAG described as the 'significant habitat' for a population of grassland earless dragons living on and adjacent to the Airport (the population's 'Significant Habitat' is shaded grey in [Figure 1](#) below). This is where the lizards live.

The condition said, before a final approval would be granted, a strategy was needed to demonstrate the road could be built and operated without increasing the risk of extinction for the Airport population. A decade later, CAG had not secured the land it needed for the road; Defence had been reluctant to relinquish any part of its Majura Military Training Area northeast of Canberra Airport.

During the Black Summer in 2019–20, a fire burned near the southeast corner of the Airport. CAG went to the media straight away stating the road approval needed to be “sorted out” for the safety of people working in Fairbairn. Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison got involved.

Five months later, in May 2020, a delegate of then Environment Minister Sussan Ley gave the final go-ahead. A more direct route was approved. Rather than go around the Dragon's habitat, based on what land Defence would relinquish, the new road would bisect the Airport population's 'significant habitat' ([Figure 1](#)).

The strategy that was approved does not account for the increased risk of Dragon mortality due to collisions, additional losses to predators using the road, or the loss of genetic viability of fragmented populations.

On 1 Sep 2022, the Federal Threatened Species Scientific Committee recognised grassland earless dragons are not all the same; that is, they responded to 2019 taxonomic advice that there are not one but four species of earless dragons. *Canberra Grassland Earless Dragons*, *Tympanocryptis lineata* (**Dragon**), occupy a small area centred on the Majura and Jerrabomberra valleys. There are just three small populations found on 40 hectares in the eastern ACT south to around Queanbeyan in NSW.

Based on this new information, on 23 Sep 2022, FOG asked for the former Environment Minister, Tanya Plibersek, to suspend CAG's approval for the northern road.

Whether or not it was in response to FOG's request, based on [this package of documents](#) obtained by FOG under freedom of information, we now know that, by 1 May 2023, the former minister had “sent the airport back to the drawing board” and that “the airport [had] promised to do no work while the government [reviewed] their proposal” (pdf p. 5 of 23)

With effect from 1 June 2023, Dragons were [listed](#) as threatened under the EPBC Act at the level critically endangered. At this level, any collision between a bulldozer or B-double truck and a Dragon could be fatal for not just the Dragon concerned but the entire species.

In Feb 2025, CAG began constructing the road. After community pressure, CAG quickly announced a halt on construction in areas sensitive to the Dragon's Airport population. CAG's Head of Aviation, Michael Thomson, stated “We are holding off. We are working to develop a nature-positive plan.”

Based on [this package of documents](#) obtained by FOG under freedom of information, we now know that, as at 24 Feb 2025 (which reiterating is *after* construction had started), the “Department [had] not provided the Minister with advice ... and no decision has been made to suspend, vary or revoke the existing approval” (pdf p. 21 of 23)

Despite the fact no nature positive plan has been published, in Apr 2025, CAG began upgrading the proposed intersection between the northern road and Majura Road in Pialligo. These latest works are against the spirit of CAG's earlier statements.

In May 2025, CAG advised FOG in a meeting it holds an approval to move natural temperate grassland that abuts the existing dirt road around the northeast corner of Canberra Airport. We take this as a clear indication the Department has no intention of recommending that CAG's approval for the road be suspended.

We are preparing for the worst by recommending what we see as the best way CAG might begin to compensate for the impacts of their project on the Dragon's Airport population. In our view, CAG should be required to identify, acquire if required, securely protect and appropriately manage existing habitat for Dragons somewhere else for the duration of the impact at the impact site, i.e., CAG should be required to deliver a *substantial* averted loss offset *in perpetuity*. This would be consistent with the 2012 EPBC Act Offsets Policy.

Why all this fuss?

Dragons are the 'goldilocks' indicator species for healthy grasslands. They need enough space between tussocks to hunt insects but also enough grass to hide from predators. This 'just right' grass cover is the ideal habitat for a number of endangered animal and wildflower species in natural grasslands.

With so little natural temperate grassland remaining, CAG's arguments in favour of the road are not strong. A capacity for the people living and working at Fairbairn is just one such argument. Others include the security of dignitaries and the status of Canberra Airport as a slot-free and curfew-free airport making it ideally suited as a regional freight hub.

None of these arguments is compelling. In relation to the fire and security threats, existing dirt roads could have been used to access or escape Fairbairn; in the event of any serious fire or security threat, people could have moved through the airport! Now that CAG has proceeded and constructed part of the northern road, the part that links to an existing dirt road (Malcolmvale Road), there is no need to do anything more!

The Canberra Airport is not a freight hub.

The facts

Fact 1: Dragons are good at hiding. CAG argue Dragons everywhere are in decline, and that is true; however, the population is not extinct. Two Dragons were seen on the Airport in 2020, and monitoring results since 2021 have not been shared with FOG.

We know their populations rise and fall. In a letter to the Federal Environment Department, Associate Professor Paul Cooper from the ANU's Research School of Biology observed in Nov 2023 that Dragons had been found recently around Melbourne after 30 years of searching and assumptions the species was extinct. Paul wrote 'the lizards can "disappear" but still be present in a locale for many years.'

Fact 2: The best part of the Airport population's habitat is yet to be disturbed. While CAG's recent bulldozing has been extensive, including by going well outside the road reserve and into so-called 'heavily disturbed farmland', the area regarded by experts as the best habitat for Dragons is yet to be bulldozed.

In April 2020, an ecologist working for CAG reported that the land destroyed already had a "moderate cover of native grasses [and] contained some suitable burrows and had a structure similar to low quality [Dragon] habitat, but was considered very unlikely to be occupied by [Dragons] due to its history and recent fluctuations in condition" (CAG's [Northern Road Strategy](#), pdf p. 161 of 182). We note the area destroyed already was considered worth searching. It may have been a candidate for nature repair, for restoring habitat for a recovering population.

The 'significant habitat' Dragons occupy, that CAG are avoiding for now but wanting to bulldoze asap, straddles an existing dirt road rarely travelled. It is natural temperate grassland described in April 2020 as being "high to very high quality habitat" ([Northern Road Strategy](#), pdf p. 179 of 182). The proposed earthworks there will destroy that habitat. The structure of the soil that supports the burrows in which the Dragons shelter and hunt, that has been there for millennia, will be gone.

Fact 3: Operating a tarred road will be an ongoing threat to surviving Dragons. CAG's ecologist wrote "If an effort is made to retain all or parts of the new Northern Road as crossing areas for [Dragons], higher volumes of faster traffic would increase the risk of [Dragons] being killed by vehicles" ([Northern Road Strategy](#), pdf p. 174 of

182). Arguing the road would not fragment the Airport population, CAG s strategy states CAG will design to facilitate [Dragon] movements across the roadway” ([Northern Road Strategy](#), pdf p. 15 of 182).

Fact 4: We cannot believe CAG. The *Airports Act 1996* (Cth) requires that, for each of 22 federally-leased airports around Australia, there must be an approved master plan in effect and that plan must be updated every eight years. CAG has had several plans since it first leased Canberra Airport. In their *2020 Master Plan*, approved by the Transport Minister in February 2020, CAG state that “the alignment of the road is agreed with all parties” ([2020 Master Plan](#), p. 135). That statement needs bulldozing. FOG has been actively objecting to the Northern Road since it was first proposed in CAG’s *1999 Master Plan*.

Figure 1: The northern road bisects what CAG itself has labelled 'Significant Habitat' for Dragons

