



Friends of Grasslands

supporting native grassy ecosystems

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Attention: Every Australian, Canberrans in particular!

On 26 Feb, the Conservation Council ACT Region published an update, it is [here](#).

The problem

On or about 20 Feb 2025, more than 15 years after a conditional approval was granted under the then Environment Minister Peter Garrett, Capital Airport Group (**CAG**) fired up the bulldozers and began bulldozing core habitat for the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon population that lives on and adjacent to Canberra Airport (see two pictures below; each Dragon is 5 to 9 grams).

This species was listed as threatened under national environmental law in June 2023; it is 'Critically Endangered'.

Shortly after Tanya Plibersek became the Environment Minister in May 2022, Friends of Grasslands (**FOG**) began calling for the road's approval to be suspended.¹ The facts about the approval and FOG's advocacy are below. Suffice to say here:

- CAG have an EPBC Act approval; however, the Minister has decided to review that approval. We understand that CAG has agreed to not clear along the existing Malcom Vale Road until the review is complete.
- We do not know whether CAG has or is still identifying and evaluating options to avoid, mitigate and compensate for impacts to the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon population, or whether that information has been provided to the Environment Department for consideration.
- FOG understands the Minister has not finalised the review. Given this, we are shocked CAG has contracted works and begun its bulldozing and earthmoving. To us, it seems presumptuous.

Action

27 people came to the snap protest organised by FOG and the Conservation Council ACT Region, outside the Environment Department, on Monday 24 February. Thank you!

Right now, please email the Minister calling on her to [revoke the approval for the Northern Road \(EPBC 2009/4748\)](#), *urgently*:

- The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for the Environment and Water
tanya.plibersek.mp@aph.gov.au

¹ Note: FOG has been *opposing* this road since it was first mentioned in a CAG planning document in 1998!

The facts

In 2009, CAG was granted an approval, under the then Environment Minister Peter Garrett, to construct and operate a road from Fairbairn, around the northeast corner of Canberra Airport, to the Majura Road north of Bunnings in Pialligo.

However, given CAG had provided little detail at that time, the approval was granted subject to a strict condition. Before CAG could proceed, they would have to first demonstrate that constructing and operating the road would not increase the risk of extinction for the 'East Majura' population of a lizard, an earless dragon that lives right there, in grass tussocks, hunting in spider burrows, on and adjacent to that part of the Airport.

Weighing in at nine grams, this tiny lizard was thought to be widely distributed with tens of populations from Bathurst to Cooma and south to Melbourne. The condition was supposed to protect the species which at that stage was listed as threatened, in the 'Endangered' category, under national environmental law.

Fast forward ten years. In 2019, scientists demonstrated the lizard is in fact not widely distributed; rather, there are four genetically distinct species. The species that lives in east Canberra and south to Queanbeyan in NSW, the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon, has just three populations that together occupy a total of around 40 hectares.

In early 2020, CAG prepared and submitted a strategy to the Minister's Department that among other things recognised this important change. However, far from demonstrating constructing and operating the road would not increase the East Majura population's extinction risk, CAG argued that—because no individuals from the population had been seen on the Airport since 2017—it would not be possible for the road to increase the risk, i.e., that in all likelihood the East Majura population was already extinct.

CAG's strategy was accepted in May 2020, while Sussan Ley was the Environment Minister. As an aside worthy of mention, this decision was not published until June 2022, i.e., until a fortnight after the last Federal election.

There are serious problems with the strategy that was approved. For instance:

- The East Majura population is *not* extinct. We know this because two individuals were seen on land abutting the Airport in 2020.
- While finding the population's habitat continued to exist on the Airport, the May 2020 decision determined that no habitat is recognised, legally, between two parallel lines that now form the road reserve. As a result of that determination, no habitat could be lost and the road could not cause or exacerbate fragmentation of the population's habitat.

We are not making this up, this happened!

FOG asked the Minister to suspend the approval for the road in September 2022. In November 2022, FOG was hopeful when the Minister published the Australian Government's [Threatened Species Action Plan](#). This Plan identifies the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon as one of 110 species to be prioritised in the fight against species extinctions (p. 44). In June 2023, FOG was further encouraged. The Minister listed Canberra Grassland Earless Dragons as threatened under national environmental law in the 'Critically Endangered' category.

In October 2023, an official from the Minister's Department wrote to FOG's President Jamie Pittock (and other selected entities) inviting comment, within two weeks, on new, confidential options provided by CAG that would supposedly avoid and mitigate the negative impact on the Dragons. CAG refused permission for FOG to publish those new options. FOG did comment inside two weeks. It was a mammoth effort. FOG systematically demonstrated there was nothing new in the confidential document. We warned constructing and operating the road as proposed would likely seal the fate of the East Majura population.

When FOG followed up in July 2024, we were told CAG was still to respond to the concerns expressed by FOG and others. We were told no final decision would be made until a Recovery Plan was made for the four species of earless dragons.

Since then, we have heard nothing; yet, in the last few days, more than 15 years after the initial decision, CAG has fired up the bulldozers.



Photo 1: Canberra Dragon in Raspy Cricket burrow (photo by Jess Thomson)



Photo 2: Earthworks in progress for the Northern Road (photo taken 21 Feb 2025)