

Senate Environment and Communications References Committee

The Hon Eva Lawler MLA
Chief Minister of the Northern Territory

OPENING STATEMENT

Firstly, I want to pay my respects to the Larrakia people on whose land we gather, and to their elders past, present and emerging.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee to discuss our Middle Arm Sustainable Development Precinct project.

I'm Eva Lawler, the new Chief Minister of the Northern Territory and I'd like to thank you all for coming to Darwin. You have come at an amazing time and the Dry seems to have started early. I'd encourage you all to explore the best of Darwin has to offer – and also support our local businesses up here in the Top End.

Middle Arm is not a recent project – the site was designated as strategic industrial land over 20 years ago.

The Middle Arm Sustainable Development Precinct has been carefully and methodically master planned since 2017.

I'd like to respectfully ask all committee members to come with an open mind about this project and try to understand the significant economic benefits for the Territory.

I'd also encourage you to think about the individual benefits to Territory workers that this project will deliver. From the well-paid and secure work in natural gas, minerals processing and advanced manufacturing.

Being in secure work is more than a paycheque. It provides Territorians with the satisfaction of contributing to their community, it allows them to plan their future, support their families and be a mentor for others.

This is an opportunity to be better informed about the Middle Arm project, the careful way it is being developed and most importantly what it means for Territorians.

Senator Hanson-Young, you are quoted as saying “Middle-arm will enable climate bombs like Santos’ Barossa Gas field and fracking in the Beetaloo Basin - a climate bomb that could increase Australia’s total emissions.”

For starters, Santos Darwin LNG is not in the Precinct development – they already have their own processing and loading infrastructure.

Senator Pocock, you put out a statement saying Middle Arm would “create Australia’s very own cancer alley”.

So Senators – put aside any preconceptions about the Precinct and use this time to build perspective. You have accepted this responsibility to be here to become better informed.

I call on the Committee to put pre-conceived political positions and hostility towards the Federal Government agenda on climate change, and specifically views against Middle Arm to the side and consider evidence with objectivity and integrity.

I am always ready to recognise the legitimacy of bona fide concerns and I am respectful of Territorians who have, and are continuing to, raise concerns about this project.

But, unless the Committee looks at the evidence objectively and leaves petty politics out of it, then everyone can only conclude this exercise is purely political, removed from reality, and any findings should be read in that light.

The Middle Arm Sustainable Development Precinct will boost our economy with 20,000 jobs for Territorians. While most of these jobs will be here in and around the Precinct, there will be work opportunities right up and down the Territory. There will be jobs on country.

This is because Middle Arm will support rare earths being mined and processed near Alice Springs.

Support phosphate being mined in the Barkly.

Support solar and wind energy generation in the Barkly.

As you may know, the Territory Labor Government's agenda is to get more Territorians working.

The Middle Arm development is cornerstone to our vision.

Middle Arm will bring work and opportunity for thousands of Territorians and the experts tell us will be a benchmark for similar future developments around Australia.

When I put my hand up to become Chief Minister, I did so because I want more for all Territorians.

Territorians face some of the most challenging conditions in Australia. For example, the majority of the drive along the Stuart Highway doesn't have mobile phone reception.

While we are working hard to improve housing in remote communities – we've built or upgraded around 3800 homes in the bush since 2016 – the complexity in delivering major infrastructure programs in remote areas is significant.

These are circumstances many of you cannot even truly understand.

It is important for the future of the Territory to have every Territorian living in a remote community who can work, to be working in that community; for every Territorian living in a

regional town to be working in that town – this is the long term goal of our Government.

We must start now. We must not be held back any longer.

I want our kids — all our kids — to feel that their choices are unlimited.

I have heard from people in the regions and remote communities — they want real work and I want that too.

That's why I am a big supporter and advocate of getting the Territory growing strongly. When the Territory succeeds, Northern Australia succeeds.

Yet every day we face some of Australia's biggest challenges.

There are 250,000 people living in a vast Territory, larger than NSW, Victoria and Tasmania combined. The challenges we face are so significantly larger when it comes to delivering food, energy, housing, education and health services.

This is why we need to support industries that want to set up here – particularly those that will directly contribute significantly to the Territory Government's revenues.

Territorians take the environment seriously – it underpins our lifestyle.

The Territory today has the most contemporary environmental legislation in Australia. We have undertaken some of the most exhaustive environmental, social and cultural assessments in Australia to progress Middle Arm.

Middle Arm is being developed as a master planned precinct back by 200 technical studies assessing its impact. Its plan integrates industrial scale solar energy projects and will host a carbon capture and storage hub.

I understand and respect people who have genuine concerns about hydrocarbons, fossil fuels and climate change.

Which is why I support Santos in developing carbon capture and storage using the depleted Bayu Undan field.

We will also continue to invest in renewable electricity and support green hydrogen.

We are changing our reliance on electricity generated from traditional gas-fired generators to renewable resources such as solar energy.

Renewables will be backed up by the Darwin-Katherine Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) which will be operational in just months.

I call on the Committee to back Middle Arm and to work with us and make the Precinct a big win for Territory workers and the community.