GEOLOGICAL AND BIOREGIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM – BEETALOO GBA REGION USER PANEL MEETING 5, 28 April 2021 – COMMUNIQUE

The Geological and Bioregional Assessment (GBA) Program (the program) held its fifth and final Beetaloo GBA region user panel meeting on 28 April 2021. This meeting was held virtually due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. This communique outlines the key topics discussed during the meeting.

The program thanked user panel members in particular: regional Mayors, representatives from the Northern and Central Land Councils, representatives of land users such as the Farmers and Cattleman's Associations, the gas industry, Northern Territory (NT) Government representatives and important members of the local community who have engaged with the program over the last 3 years through the user panel process.

The program team presented a brief update on its activities in the Beetaloo GBA region. The region covers an area of around 28,000km^2 in the NT and supports important landscapes and habitats that have cultural, economic and social value. The Beetaloo GBA region falls within the larger Beetaloo GBA extended region, an area greater than 80,000km^2 that was defined in consultation with the NT Government and represents the original study area for the Strategic Regional Environmental and Baseline Assessment (SREBA). The SREBA boundary was subsequently modified by NT Government to capture prospective areas to the east of the Beetaloo Sub-basin.

The presentation included the preliminary results of the program and a description of the program's causal network approach, which uses cause-and-effect relationships to map pathways from development activities to important environmental and water-related matters. The causal network approach is a flexible and robust method of dealing with a multi-disciplinary assessment of impacts at a regional scale due to unconventional gas resource development activities.

Key findings for the Beetaloo GBA region included:

- there are no pathways of high potential concern
- all pathways that have the potential to result in impacts can be managed or mitigated using existing regulations, best practises or guidelines
- surface activities lead to the majority of potential concern pathways
- there are few pathways of potential concern for water resources
- mitigation of potential impacts relies on the compliance and enforcement of existing legislative controls.

The program also demonstrated a draft version of the causal network interactive web tool (the tool). The tool has been developed for regulators and proponents. It identifies the pathways that are the highest priority for environmental planning and impact assessment. When completed, the tool will be publicly available through the program's website.

Origin and Santos gave the panel an update on their respective work programs in the Beetaloo Sub-basin.

NT Government reiterated that the SREBA must be completed prior to the granting of production licences. The SREBA will include studies to address knowledge gaps and establish appropriate baselines against the potential impacts of proposed gas activities. The outputs of SREBA will be used in planning and regulation of unconventional gas developments, support other natural resource management activities and more broadly in regional planning.

The Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources outlined the Australian Government's commitment to supporting and unlocking the resource potential of the Beetaloo Sub-basin. Key initiatives include:

- $50 million to support exploration through the Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program
- $173.6 million to improve road infrastructure through the establishment of a Roads of Strategic Importance corridor
- $13.7 million to support CSIRO's Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA) social and environmental research.

Researchers from Charles Darwin University, CSIRO, Geoscience Australia and Combase provided updates on the five additional projects commissioned through the GBA Program to support the program and SREBA. These are:

- Beetaloo GBA region ecological baseline survey program
- Cambrian Limestone Aquifer – Recharge and discharge study
- LiDAR – Protected matters condition study
- Seismic baseline study
- Data management platform.

Key questions from the Q&A session with the panellists were:

- How would improvements to the causal networks and the web interface be made?
    - The web tool is designed to be flexible and low maintenance and will be publicly available through the program's website. NT Government expressed a desire to update the tool with information and data from SREBA. The program, CSIRO and software developers are working to establish mechanisms for the long-term support of the tool post June 2021 when the program ends.
- How can we access information from the program after June 2021?
    - After June 2021, all the results and program products (including user manuals and datasets) will be made available on the program's website, which will remain active, post June 2021. Datasets will also be discoverable at data.gov.au.
- What extent of non-compliance has GBA considered, is there any consideration of whether complete compliance is likely?
    - Inadvertent non-compliance (such as accidental release or spills) is incorporated into the causal network assessment.
    - Intentional non-compliance has not been considered.
    - The assessment assumes that current regulation is complied with and enforced.

User panel members are encouraged to visit the GBA website at bioregionalassessments.gov.au/gba and contact us with any further questions or feedback.