



Northern Land Council

MEDIA RELEASE

URGENT PLEA FOR RUDDOCK TO RELEASE ABORIGINAL LANDCARE FUNDS

30 April 2003

Northern Land Council CEO Norman Fry today called on the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Philip Ruddock, to urgently release Aboriginal royalty-based funds to support Aboriginal landcare projects.

“This is not money for the operation of land councils but money desperately needed to support on-ground works by Aboriginal community groups in the bush,” Mr Fry said.

The Minister has had applications from Aboriginal landcare groups in the NLC area seeking approximately \$900,000 from the Aboriginals Benefit Account for nearly six months. Recent correspondence suggests the Minister has now put an informal but seemingly indefinite moratorium on release of these and other funds from the Aboriginals Benefit Account.

“Aboriginal landcare groups are struggling to protect Aboriginal lands in the Northern Territory from the catastrophic effects of fire, weeds and feral animals,” Mr Fry said. “With the end of the wet season groups are trying to move land management programs into high gear”.

“Our groups are suffering a double whammy in funding difficulties this year. Timelines for Natural Heritage Trust funding have blown out by nearly six months and NHT funds reaching the Territory will reach an all-time low in the coming year – being less than half the previous annual allocation from the Commonwealth.”

“Although Aboriginal landcare groups have been very successful in obtaining funding from NHT and in delivering highly praised project outcomes, the amount of money available has shrunk and some groups are missing out.

“Achieving community capacity to deal with the threshold issues of fire, weeds and feral animals is critical to providing a basis for developing viable economies for future generations,” Mr Fry said. “In the seven years since the NLC established a special Caring for Country unit we have seen a great increase in the work being done by community based groups to prevent and remediate land damage”.

“The \$900,000 sought for 2002-2003 follows success by community groups in using about \$700,000 in ABA funds in 2001-2002 to support land management. The funds were spent responsibly and to great effect, with the NLC using an administrative process based on the Natural Heritage Trust model to monitor and evaluate outcomes.

“This is a case of Aboriginal people wanting to use their own funds, which flow from mining on Aboriginal land, to protect their country from environmental damage and being prevented from doing so by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

Mr Fry said. “I only hope the Minister will look at the situation for these land management funds as an urgent and special case outside of any longer term plan he has to reform the administration of Aboriginal royalty fund distributions and get funds flowing to Aboriginal landcare groups”