



Mr Brent Murdoch  
General Manager  
Vista Gold Australia Pty Ltd  
GPO Box 3449  
DARWIN NT 0801

Dear Mr Murdoch

### **Request for Further Information and Extension of Decision on Approval Timeframe – Mt Todd Gold Mine**

I refer to the proposed action listed above which is currently being assessed under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). On 9 July 2014 as delegate of the Minister for the Environment, I requested Vista Gold provide specified further information required to determine the acceptability of impacts of the action to the listed threatened Gouldian Finch. On 15 July 2015, you wrote to the Department requesting removal of the requirement to conduct Gouldian Finch breeding habitat surveys, citing that the Yinberrie Hills have been subject to extensive survey effort (including breeding habitat surveys in conducted in 2014) and further breeding surveys would be of minimal benefit.

In light of your request, I amend my information request under section 132 of the EPBC Act and as delegate of the Minister I request that you provide the following further information:

#### 1) Gouldian Finch breeding in Yinberrie Hills

Assess, define and quantify the number of potential breeding hollows, and the proportion of breeding habitat previously defined as "Gouldian Finch core breeding habitat", that will be impacted by clearing, blasting, light and peak dust concentrations of 50 µg/m<sup>3</sup> or greater (or, if a lower Gouldian Finch threshold for dust is determined during laboratory studies requested at point 2 below, then the area subject to that concentration of dust or greater). Assess and define the relative importance of the "Gouldian Finch core breeding habitat" to the maintenance of the regional Gouldian Finch population (e.g. at the scale of the Yinberrie Hills Site of Conservation Significance).

#### 2) Gouldian Finch dust trigger level

Consistent with Recommendation 12 of the NT EPA's Assessment Report 76, a proposed dust threshold limit for the Gouldian Finch, developed via the conduct of appropriate laboratory studies must be provided. As noted in the assessment report, "*the species may be particularly susceptible [to dust] given apparently high levels of respiratory compromise due to a high prevalence of infestation with air-sac mites*" and "*finches are likely to have a greater sensitivity to dust levels than humans.*" The methods and results of the laboratory studies, along with the basis for the proposed dust threshold limit must be provided.

### 3) Gouldian Finch population monitoring and mitigation program

Consistent with Recommendation 13 of the NT EPA's Assessment Report 76, the details of a baseline and ongoing Gouldian Finch population monitoring and mitigation program that has been peer-reviewed by an appropriately qualified independent expert, selected to the satisfaction of the Department is required. The program must:

- a) detail the extent and duration of baseline survey effort to be undertaken, which must not be less than two years;
- b) have sufficient rigour to detect short-term changes in the Gouldian Finch breeding population;
- c) distinguish between natural variation in the population and mine-related impacts;
- d) identify appropriate trigger levels for management action, and;
- e) identify appropriate management responses along with evidence as to how these management responses will be effective in protecting the Gouldian Finch from adverse impacts.

The advice of the appropriately qualified independent expert should be provided along with the complete mitigation and monitoring program.

### 4) Dust monitoring and mitigation program

Consistent with Recommendation 14, the details of a dust monitoring and mitigation program developed to the satisfaction of the NT EPA and NT Department of Mines and Energy must be provided. The program must:

- a) detail the methods for undertaking baseline and ongoing dust monitoring over the full extent of Gouldian Finch habitat potentially impacted by dust and outside of the area potentially impacted by dust for use as control sites;
- b) be capable of detecting ground level baseline and Project-related PM10 dust;
- c) be capable of monitoring the range, extent and amount of baseline and Project-related dust;
- d) be capable of identifying whether the Gouldian Finch proposed dust trigger level, requested above has been exceeded in a timely manner, and;
- e) identify appropriate management responses along with evidence as to how these management responses will be effective in reducing dust levels below trigger levels.

Please note that I have not requested further information regarding offsets. This is because as per the Australian Government's *Environmental Offsets Policy, October 2012*, offsets cannot make an unacceptable impact to a matter of national environmental significance acceptable. While, as per the NT EPA's assessment report, the Department is of the view that the proposed action will have a significant residual impact on the Gouldian Finch, without the further information identified above it is not clear whether the proposed action will have an unacceptable impact on the Gouldian Finch. Therefore this information request focuses on the information required to first make this determination.

Please note that in line with my previous decision of 9 July 2014, the approval clock remains stopped under section 132 of the EPBC Act until this information is received. This means that the timing for a decision on approval restarts once we have received satisfactory information.

If you have any questions about this decision or wish to arrange a time to discuss Vista Gold's proposed approach to addressing the above information request, please contact the project manager, Matthew Kunsti, by email to [matthew.kunsti@environment.gov.au](mailto:matthew.kunsti@environment.gov.au), or telephone 02 6274 1536 and quote the EPBC reference number shown at the beginning of this letter.

Yours sincerely



Dr Simon Banks  
Assistant Secretary  
Assessments (NSW/ACT) and Fuel Branch

13 August 2015