The secrecy surrounding negotiations on a settlement to the Blue Mud Bay High Court judgement is undermining public confidence in the process.

Shadow Fisheries Minister, Kezia Purick, said documents obtained by the Country Liberals indicate a settlement totalling tens-of-millions of dollars is being canvassed to Indigenous stakeholders who will benefit from the High Court judgement.

Ms Purick said while a negotiated settlement with Indigenous groups is the best possible outcome, the Government has failed to advise the community of developments in its talks with Indigenous communities and to keep it informed about its progress.

“During the last Territory election campaign, Paul Henderson promised Territorians there would be no fishing permits as a result of the Blue Mud Bay decision,” Ms Purick said.

“But as a central plank of his Government’s settlement proposal the Chief Minister’s offering up a boat identification scheme – which amounts to fishing permits by stealth.

“The proposal being put to stakeholders includes $30.75m to fund an Aboriginal Fishing Corporation which will allow for the purchase of fishing licenses and businesses; a $6.4million one off payment in cash and a $120,000 ongoing annual payment for access to key recreational fishing areas.

“I understand stakeholder meetings involving Government representatives and the Northern Land Council have been taking place for some months.

“The Government needs to explain to all Territorians the nature of the negotiations being undertaken, the likely cost to taxpayers of an agreement and the impact on the rights of amateur and commercial fishermen.

“It should explain how the beefed up powers of Marine Rangers and their capacity to stop, enter, examine and detain any vessel, vehicle, gear or fish will impact on the freedoms of recreational anglers.

“It should also explain whether boat retailers will be responsible for administering the boat identification scheme in the same way business is forced to administer pool fencing legislation.

“While it is undeniable the High Court’s Blue Mud Bay judgement ushered in a new era for Northern Territory recreational fishing, the challenge for Government is to manage the change that will come with this decision.

“The Chief Minister and the relevant ministers have been secretive
and withholding when it comes to consulting with the wider community about these significant changes.”

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