

## Submission to the Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Government's Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network and would welcome the opportunity to provide further detail if needed.

### Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

The IRG is an expertise-based advisory group comprised of Indigenous people with experience in Indigenous economic development in Northern Australia. Current IRG members were appointed in 2019 to provide policy advice to the Minister for Northern Australia and the Minister for Indigenous Australians on practical actions to enhance the economic prosperity of Indigenous Australians. IRG members are presented at **Attachment A**.

### Northern Australia

Northern Australia comprises 59 per cent of Australia's landmass, defined as all of the Northern Territory, as well as the Northern parts of Queensland and Western Australia that intersect with the Tropic of Capricorn, including the Indian Ocean Territories (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Figure 1- Northern Australia

The region is abundant with untapped potential and talented people. Northern Australia has a competitive advantage in resources, energy, agriculture, aquaculture and tourism and its proximity to Asia and the Pacific creates trade potential to drive Australia's economic growth over the next decade and beyond. This continues on established trade between Indigenous Australians and South East Asian peoples over millennia. Northern Australia is mineral rich with deposits of lithium and rare earth metals that will be vital to the electrification of the country as we move toward a net zero future.<sup>1</sup> It is on the frontline of the nation's defence, border protection and biosecurity and it is home to a young and growing Indigenous population which will play an increasing role in its growth. Unlocking the north's potential is key to the development of the nation as a whole.

<sup>1</sup> Invest Northern Territory. (2022) *Minerals*. Accessed on 24/10/2022. Retrieved from <https://invest.nt.gov.au/infrastructure-and-key-sectors/key-sectors/minerals>.

Developing the north, however, is not without its challenges. Northern Australia is home to only 1.3 million people or around 5.3 per cent of the Australian population.<sup>2</sup> Its sparse population, the vast distances between major centres and extreme weather conditions can make it difficult, and costly, to do business and to provide adequate social and economic infrastructure. Housing shortages and higher costs of living can make attracting and retaining a skilled workforce difficult<sup>3</sup> and can lead to a prevalence of fly-in, fly-out workers leading to the benefits of economic activity being siphoned away to southern centres.

Indigenous Australians have significant assets to bring to the Northern Australia development agenda. Indigenous people comprise 16 per cent of the Northern Australian population, far greater than their three per cent share of the national population, and maintain rights or interests in around 78 per cent of the land mass in Northern Australia.<sup>4</sup> The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the rest of the Australian population.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Australians are projected to constitute approximately half of the working age population of Northern Australia by 2050.<sup>6</sup> Outside of major population centres in Northern Australia this is already the case.<sup>7</sup>

## Submission

Northern Australia's climate is changing and becoming more variable, and this has a significant impact on the resilience of our communities and infrastructure. The effects of natural disasters on major and regional cities have been devastating. For Indigenous communities some of these events have been catastrophic.

For example, the 2022-23 wet season saw the Kimberley region in northern Western Australia experience a 'once-in-a-century' weather event causing extensive flooding. This prompted the evacuation of the township of Fitzroy Crossing and dozens of First Nations communities, isolation of around 3000 residents in Derby, and closure of a 700 kilometre section of the Great Northern Highway between Broome and Halls Creek, the only transport route to the state's north. The slow-moving weather system went on to cause unprecedented damage to the

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<sup>2</sup> Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Developing Northern Australia*. Accessed on 29/10/2022. Retrieved from [ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf](https://ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf) ([infrastructure.gov.au](https://infrastructure.gov.au)) (p.1)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

<sup>6</sup> Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia (2014) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

remote road network in Central Australia, cutting off more than a dozen Indigenous communities from essential services.

North Queensland experienced its own extreme weather event in March 2023 with record flooding of Burketown resulting in residents being evacuated by helicopter to Doomadgee (150 kilometres away) or even further away to Mt Isa (300 kilometres away).



*Figure 2: Rapid floodwaters badly damaged the Fitzroy River bridge (approximately 165 kilometres east of Broome, Western Australia)<sup>8</sup>*



*Figure 2: The roads into the remote community of Yuendumu (approximately 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs, Northern Territory) flooded from ex-tropical Cyclone Ellie<sup>9</sup>*



*Figure 4: Burketown (425 kilometres north of Mount Isa, Queensland) residents were being flown to neighbouring communities via helicopter because the airstrip was partially flooded<sup>10</sup>*

The social, psychological, economic and logistical impacts of such events have long lasting impacts for our people. For many of our communities a lack of disaster resilient infrastructure results in people being isolated or displaced, often by very large distances. Indigenous people not only lose their home and belongings but their lives are disrupted through loss of access to food, health, education and areas of cultural significance.

Flooding of major arterial roads, often for many months at a time, isolates communities, blocks supply chains and exacerbates already very high costs of living. McCubbing and Macdonald-Smith (2023) compared the transportation and logistics impacts from the loss of the Fitzroy

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<sup>8</sup> News.com.au Vital WA bridge devastated by floodwaters, downloaded from <https://content.api.news> on 21 May 2023

<sup>9</sup> ABC News (2023) Remote NT communities remain cut off by floodwaters (photo courtesy of Lacklan Moulton), downloaded from [Remote NT communities remain cut off by floodwaters as Timber Creek region mayor calls for new evacuation plan - ABC News](#) on 21 May 2023

<sup>10</sup> ABC News (2023) Burketown residents flown to safety amid record flooding (photo courtesy of Chris Shan Moren), downloaded from [Burketown residents flown to safety amid record flooding in Gulf of Carpentaria - ABC News](#) on 21 May 2023

River Bridge in Western Australia, to that which would occur from a collapse of the Sydney Harbour Bridge<sup>11</sup>.

Indigenous communities in Northern Australia are accustomed to flooding that wet seasons have brought for millennia, but are not prepared to deal with inundation of this frequency and magnitude. The long-term impacts on the well-being of Indigenous people, as events increase in frequency and severity, are yet to be fully understood. There is an urgent need to plan for future extreme flooding and other events.

Importantly government needs to enable local Indigenous business to deliver future road construction projects to enhance community resilience, create employment and promote economic growth. This will also foster collaboration between the local Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses, which longer term community benefits.

The IRG recommends that the Australian Government:

1. Invests in First Nations-led, place-based disaster resilience, response and recovery strategies enabling communities to implement disaster resilience plans inclusive of culture and considering a community's specific needs and vulnerabilities.
2. Ensures that tender processes consider conditions in regional, remote and First Nations communities to better enable local businesses to bid including:
  - Prioritising local Indigenous businesses through procurement practices including specific consideration of smaller work packages.
  - Enabling local authorities (including local governments) to bid to undertake work particularly where there is limited local private sector capacity. Local authorities often have the relevant plant and equipment, can sub-contract to local Indigenous businesses who are more likely to employ locals.
  - Opening tender processes to external contractors as a means of last resort.
3. Supports local, place-based capability building in disaster resilience and response and purchase of equipment to dramatically reduce response times and overcome the tyranny of distance.

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<sup>11</sup> McCubbing, G. & Macdonald-Smith, A (2023) Freight costs spike as Kimberley floods cut off artery to WA's north, in Financial Review accessed on 21 May 2023 at [Fitzroy Crossing: Freight costs spike as Kimberley floods cut off artery to Western Australia's north \(afr.com\)](https://www.afr.com/news/national/freight-costs-spike-as-kimberley-floods-cut-off-artery-to-western-australia-s-north-20230518)

4. Builds First Nations' knowledge into local, state and national disaster resilience policies and plans enabling strategies to be informed by a deep understanding of local environments building on more than 60,000 years of disaster resilience;
5. Invests in long lasting road repairs that make roads more resilient to wet season damage and save tax payers money in the medium to longer term. Current funding for declared incidents generally only allows for repairs to bring the infrastructure back to its original condition and does not permit improvements to prevent future failures in the same area;
6. Implements a 'Building back better' principle which aligns with Australia's commitments under the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 – 2030*.
7. Expands the definition of key freight routes to consider access to remote and regional populations in addition to the volume of freight moved.
8. Strengthens alternative road networks including sealing of substitute access routes, such as the Tanami Road between Alice Springs and Halls Creek, to reduce dependence on single access roads.
9. Improves storage capacity in remote and regional centres and First Nations communities and supporting local production (particularly of fresh produce) to manage food security where road networks are damaged by severe weather events.

In summary, improving the resilience of First Nations communities facing an increasing frequency and magnitude of extreme weather events is about empowerment. First Nations communities have the capacity and governance structures to mitigate risks, accept responsibility and implement disaster resilience, response and recovery initiatives. They understand that critical infrastructure is more resilient through risk reduction, mitigation, and innovation and they have the knowledge, built over centuries, to develop solutions.

## Attachment A

### IRG members

- **Mr Colin Saltmere**, Chair - Managing Director of the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu Aboriginal Corporation, the Myuma and Rainbow Gateway companies, and Adjunct Professor with the University of Queensland's Aboriginal Environments Research Centre.
- **Ms Tara Craigie** – Managing Director of J&T Craigie Pty Ltd, Indigenous Engagement Consultant at AAM Investment Group, and President at Northern Cowboys Association and Founder of Territory Rodeo Services.
- **Mr Jerome Cubillo** - Chief Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, Chairperson of Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (LNAC), and on the Board of Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation representing LNAC.
- **Mr Troy Fraser** - Chief Executive Officer at Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council and formerly worked as Community, Youth and Economic Development Manager at the Aboriginal Development Benefits Trust.
- **Mr Peter Jeffries** - Chief Executive Officer of Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation and has formerly worked with the WA Police Force, Rio Tinto, the Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation, Woodside and his own business offering consulting services and Aboriginal cultural tourism.
- **Ms Gillian Mailman** - Managing Director of Fibre Optics NQ, Chief Executive Officer of MJB Solutions Pty Ltd, Director of Indigenous Wealth Hub, and Director of Illuminate FNQ.
- **Ms Cara Peek** - a multi-award-winning social disruptor from Remote Northern Australia. She identifies as a Yawuru/Bunuba woman, a successful lawyer, a diverse entrepreneurial leader, and an innovative Cultural Intelligence Strategist. Cara has worked closely with many regional communities across Australia, the U.S., and Canada as part of her personal mission to create deep, positive social change for First Peoples globally.