

Supplementary 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 supplementary submission to the Australian Government's Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network.

The focus of our supplementary submission is on the following three areas discussed with the Committee at the public hearing on 4 July 2023:

- Key priorities to strengthen the resilience of our communities;
- Priority list of road corridors;
- Quarantining Australian Government funding and improving Indigenous outcomes from government spend.

Details provided in this supplementary submission support and are supported by information provided at the public hearing.

Supplementary Submission

Key priorities to strengthen the resilience of our communities

1. Place-based disaster resilience strategies

In our submission 07 June 2023 we identified the increased frequency and magnitude of weather events as severely impacting First Nations communities across Northern Australia. We provided examples of rain events during 2023 that led to the closure of large sections of roads, isolating communities for months at a time and requiring evacuations of some distance.

In our discussion we acknowledged that while flood-proofing a lot of communities will not be possible, what is possible is to reduce the time of isolation by improving accessibility and the resilience of civil infrastructure in and around our communities. Doing this requires the development of place-based disaster resilience strategies, working in collaboration with communities in design and delivery.

The example provided by IRG member and Doomadgee Council CEO, Mr. Troy Fraser, during the public hearing, is an illustration of where incorporating local knowledge could help reduce isolation times from months, to weeks. Mr. Fraser explained that there is no denying the need for better materials and better and improved ways of building infrastructure, however, had local knowledge around the need for a 1.5 metre high bridge been incorporated into planning this would have reduced those isolation times significantly. Place-based disaster resilience strategies,

by design, would embed and be informed by First Nations' knowledge and a deep understanding of local environments that build on more than 60,000 years of disaster resilience.

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 considerations and in consideration of a community's specific needs and vulnerabilities.

2. A better network of roads

To build the resilience of our communities we presented to the Committee the need to plan a better network of roads. For many communities, isolation comes when a single road is cut, not only impacting supply chains for food and fuel but also the opportunity to participate in social activities such as seeing family or participating in sports events. Disrupted supply chains intensify what is an already very high costs of living.

The road network for remote and First Nations communities is more than just roads. The road network provides connection to communication, education and access to Country. It contributes to the mental health and social wellbeing of our people. Access to funding to strengthen our road networks, however, generally relies on a cost benefit analysis, centred on population, use and value for money, with little consideration given to the social benefits derived from being and remaining connected.

The IRG recommends that the Australian Government:

2. Broaden the criteria for road funding to include social benefits.

3. Build back better.

In our discussion with the Committee we also outlined the need to 'build back better'. We noted that to build resilience in our infrastructure we need to improve roads and bridges that consider the natural flows of water across the terrain. Building back better requires place-based planning, using a common-sense approach and incorporating local knowledge and scientific evidence to build more accessible and resilient infrastructure.

The IRG recommends that the Australian Government:

3. Implements a 'Building back better' principle which aligns with Australia's commitments under the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 – 2030*.
4. 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.

4. Embedding training in recovery funding

Rebuilding in a post disaster environment provides significant opportunities for training and job creation with a particular focus on our First Nations youth. Our children are our future, and economic empowerment plays a vital role in breaking cycles of poverty and creating sustainable development, effectively ensuring our children's futures. It is essential for governments, industry, not for profit organisations, and the community as a whole to prioritise job creation efforts that specifically target First Nations youth and Indigenous communities.

By providing meaningful employment we can empower our youth, and help foster a sense of pride, connection and confidence in themselves, their culture and their community. We have the opportunity to create an inclusive workforce that celebrates the diversity of all involved particularly for our children, as it allows them to bring their unique perspectives, skills, and experiences to the table, enriching the workforce as a whole.

For these reasons, the IRG recommend that training opportunities be embedded in disaster recovery funding, ideally through inclusion of a dedicated youth stream in the funding to be made available.

The IRG recommends that the Australian Government:

5. Embed training opportunities for First Nations youth and Indigenous communities into disaster recovery funding programs.

Priority list of road corridors.

In our submission and through our discussion with the Committee we outlined the impact of increasing weather events on our communities and the need to strengthen alternative road networks, including sealing or substitute access roads such as the Tanami Road route connecting Alice Springs and Halls Creek. At the public hearing we noted the difficulty of the IRG identifying a priority list of corridors given the vast area of Northern Australia, and the number of priority roads (which is in turn dependent on your location).

Quarantining Australian Government funding. and improving Indigenous outcomes from government spend.

At the public hearing on 4 July 2023, the Committee acknowledged the challenges that local Indigenous Councils often have to raise co-contributions to access funding to build and maintain resilient infrastructure such roads and bridges. As non-ratable communities, Indigenous Councils, for the most part, work with severely constrained budgets to deliver a complex level of community services. Importantly this includes services generally not provided by mainstream local governments such as aged care and accommodation).

The IRG supports the proposition to quarantine or set aside funding to enable Indigenous Councils to seek up to 100 per cent of funding for road and bridge construction and maintenance projects where they can demonstrate need. This will help to ensure that our most vulnerable and disadvantaged Indigenous communities receive the support and resources they need. By prioritising these communities, more equitable distribution of funds can be achieved, whilst addressing historical inequalities and delivering on socio-economic objectives.

At the public hearing, we also argued that restrictions on Indigenous Councils making a profit from such funding should be lifted, treating Councils in the same way as external contractors. Indigenous Councils often have the plant, equipment and workforce to deliver projects such as road construction. Enabling Indigenous Councils to conduct business like the private sector, provides an opportunity to leverage their resources for economic growth and self-sufficiency and self-determination. This opportunity would lead to job creation within our communities and an improvement in living standards. Mindful that many of Australia's Indigenous communities face significant infrastructure gaps, including inadequate road networks, by enabling our communities to generate revenue from road projects, we would be better equipped to address the infrastructure needs and improve transportation access for our residents.

It is important to consider both sides of the argument when discussing whether Commonwealth funding should be quarantined for those Indigenous communities unable to contribute funding. Balancing the need for equitable distribution with promoting self-sufficiency and empowerment is key in ensuring positive outcomes for all Indigenous Australians.

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, with longer term community benefits.

The IRG recommends that the Australian Government:

6. A set aside of funding for Indigenous Councils to enable Indigenous Councils to seek up to 100 per cent of funding for road and bridge construction and maintenance.
7. A relaxation of restrictions on Indigenous Councils profiting from infrastructure funding programs where they are competitive and offer value for money and the arrangement will result in a longer term legacy of social and economic benefit to the Indigenous business community.

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.