

Feedback on the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation program - grant opportunity guidelines

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation program - grant opportunity guidelines to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts.

Connectivity in our communities is like a dot painting with a centre that radiates outwards, further and further. It is the means by which our communities can stay connected, inform and be informed, protect knowledge and customs and participate in the national and global economies. The task to stay connected is critical but not small.

Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

The IRG is an expertise-based advisory group comprised of Indigenous leaders 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 in the north. 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- Northern Australia¹

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.² It is on the frontline of the nation's defence, border

¹ Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Developing Northern Australia* Retrieved from ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au) (p.1)

² Invest Northern Territory. (2022) *Minerals*. Accessed on 24/10/2022. Retrieved from <https://invest.nt.gov.au/infrastructure-and-key-sectors/key-sectors/minerals>.

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.

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.³ 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 difficult⁴ and can lead to a prevalence of fly-in, fly-out workers with 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.⁵ The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the rest of the Australian population.⁶ Indigenous Australians are projected to constitute approximately half of the working age population of Northern Australia by 2050.⁷ Outside of major population centres in Northern Australia this is already the case.⁸

Submission

The IRG acknowledges the significant opportunities afforded to First Nations communities and businesses through the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program. That said, the task of improving connectivity across regional, rural and remote Australia is enormous. The Australian Digital Inclusion⁹ Index tells us that people living in one of the 1,100 First Nations remote communities are among the most digitally excluded Australians, and that exclusion worsens with the degree of remoteness. In recognition of this challenge, the Australian Government through the 2023 Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (Outcome

³ Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Developing Northern Australia*. Accessed on 29/10/2022. Retrieved from [ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf \(infrastructure.gov.au\)](#) (p.1)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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).

⁸ 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).

⁹ Australian Digital Inclusion Index Accessed on 22 May 2023 from [Home - Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#)

17) set a target of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having equal levels of digital inclusion by 2026.¹⁰

Digital inclusion is an essential requisite to disaster resilience. As Northern Australia's climate changes, with more frequent and intense weather events, the resilience of our communities and infrastructure will continue to be tested and the need for resilient communications systems becomes even more important. First Nations communities in regional and remote Northern Australia already face unique challenges relating to telecommunications services.

Telecommunications provides an essential link to day to day services such as health, education and social support, and this reliance intensifies during emergency and disaster situations. Ongoing challenges related to geographical remoteness, infrastructure limitations, and funding constraints make it crucial to prioritise equitable access to reliable telecommunications services for Indigenous communities in Northern Australia to build and maintain disaster resilience.

Community in the driver's seat

First Nations people living in remote communities have to utilise telecommunications just like other Australians, for basic banking, access to health and education services and accessing government and other services online. In the case of natural disasters, such as the recent floods across the Kimberley region in Western Australia, and parts of the Northern Territory and Queensland, access to reliable digital telecommunication services becomes critical to enable people in regional and remote communities to keep up to date with emergency service announcements and source response and recovery services including application for disaster payments. When the Northern Peninsular Area of Queensland and most of the Torres Strait lost mobile phone coverage for the best part of four days in January this year, access to life's daily essentials such as banks, food and fuel was limited.¹¹ In some circumstances, those who could not purchase food reportedly foraged in order to feed themselves and their families. This is not acceptable in the year 2023.

There have been numerous reports and parliamentary inquiries into telecommunications focusing on regional and remote communities,¹² the most recent, the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.¹³ There is an acknowledgment of community concerns in report recommendations but apparent inadequacies in implementation. In the meantime, for example,

¹⁰ [Outcome 17: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives | National Indigenous Australians Agency \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)

¹¹ Cape York Weekly (2023) Cape York Weekly, Cape York Needs Communications back-up: MP [Cape York needs telecommunications back-up: MP | Cape York Weekly](#)

¹² Every three years, under Part 9B of the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999, a Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) is formed to conduct a review into the adequacy of telecommunications in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

¹³ Review commenced on 2 June 2021 and deliver to Government in December 2021, tabled in Parliament on 14 Feb 2022

First Nations people in Central Australia that visit Alice Springs from surrounding communities attribute the lack of reliable telecommunications and digital services as one of the main issues causing the dislocation of young people and families from their home communities and remaining in Alice Springs for extended periods of time. Governments need to better understand that similar to the broader Australia community, telecommunications are engrained in First Nations communities particularly with First Nations youth. To help stem migration of First Nations youth off country, governments needs to deliver on review recommendations and closing the gap targets that have been committed to.

The IRG note that funding through the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program should be used to respond to the specific needs of the community in which they are expected to serve. Meaningful engagement is required to enable First Nations communities to outline the issues that need to be addressed, to understand the options available and to drive the identification of fit-for-purpose solutions. Ideally, First Nations people should be the lead applicants to the Program, although this is often not the case as programs are more accessible to larger organisations such as telecommunications providers and those with resources (staff and capability) available to pursue the application process.

The IRG recommends that:

1. Funds allocated under the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program should demonstrate place-based local engagement and a partnership approach with the relevant First Nations community or communities.
2. Eligible expenditure under the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program should be required to include First Nations parties in partnership with telecommunications providers in the application process.
3. Any Telecommunications Disaster Resilience partnership needs to account for the requirements of all agencies with a presence in community, including, emergency and not for profit organisations. This aims to build a joint network that provides a communications nucleus, with each pillar having the capability to individually sustain the network should other supports collapse.

.... And enabled to stay there

Maintaining infrastructure once installed is equally important to keep our communities connected. In the Northern Peninsular Area and Torres Strait Islander example provided above, rectifying the outage involved securing a helicopter to get a qualified technician to site to identify the problem and then returning some days later with the necessary part. The company at the time noted they “... couldn’t secure a helicopter on Tuesday but sent a technician to the site

*first thing on Wednesday*¹⁴. The community was without communications services for a day initially. Even then, despite the best efforts of the technician the communications equipment failed repeatedly and a new part was needed. This example demonstrates the limited resilience within the telecommunications system, including planning to respond to what could be considered a relatively foreseeable incident.

By way of a further example, during the COVID outbreak in the remote community of Ampiliwatja approximately 300 kilometres east of Alice Springs and home to around 400 people, the community experienced a two-month telecommunications blackout due to infrastructure failures in the region. This happened at a time when nationally and internationally towns and families were moving the entirety of their daily lives online. Community members explained, there was no landline, mobile or internet coverage, and only the few community members that had satellite phones were contactable. Interestingly, the messenger application remained operational and provided the only lifeline to the outside world. The only ATM at the local store was not functioning for the duration of this entire time which complicated the purchase basics such as food and fuel.

And again, during January 2023, communities on Cape York were without mobile coverage for up to six days due to Telstra outages in the region and reliance on fly-in-fly-out technicians to identify and fix the problem. Such examples are increasingly the case as extreme weather events increase in frequency and severity making the case for the training and equipping of local technicians the most practical solution. This will save time and money in the long run. Indeed, it may save lives.

The IRG recommends that:

4. The Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program preference project applications which include Indigenous employment outcomes, including the training of local technicians, to enable outages to be identified and resolved more quickly.
5. The Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program, in addition to training local technicians, consider warehousing a stockpile of essential parts, to enable quick resolution of outages.

In summary, First Nations communities in Northern Australia are accustomed to living in harsh conditions and to transacting online on par with mainstream Australia, often the only way to access services and support. However, First Nations Northern Australians are not prepared to deal with extreme weather events of the frequency and magnitude that we increasingly see.

¹⁴ Cape York Weekly (2023) Cape York Weekly, Cape York Needs Communications back-up: MP [Cape York needs telecommunications back-up: MP | Cape York Weekly](#)

There is an urgent need to plan for the future and a large part of that planning needs to include robust communications infrastructure.

The IRG acknowledge efforts being made to improve the telecommunications infrastructure in remote areas, including initiatives like the National Broadband Network. We again thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program guidelines in advance of them being finalised.

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.