

The Office of Water Security | Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security  
Northern Territory Government  
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February 21, 2022

## RESPONSE TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY STRATEGIC WATER PLAN: DIRECTIONS PAPER

To Whom it May Concern,

Thank you for providing Central Australian Aboriginal Congress ('Congress') with an extension of time to allow us to provide input to the *Northern Territory Strategic Water Plan: Directions Paper*. Whilst much of our focus at present remains on the current COVID-19 outbreak impacting Central Australia, the issue of water security is critically important to our communities and, as such, warrants our attention in providing a brief response.

Congress notes that the peak body for Aboriginal community controlled health services in the NT, the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT), has provided a more detailed submission. Congress supports the matters raised within AMSANT's submission and in particular we note the technical detail that serves to address a range of issues set out in the Directions Paper.

For context, Congress is a large Aboriginal community controlled health services based in Mparntwe Alice Springs. Established almost 50 years ago, Congress is one of the most experienced organisations in the country in Aboriginal health, a national leader in primary health care (PHC), and a strong advocate for the health of our people. Congress delivers services to more than 15,000 Aboriginal people living in Alice Springs and remote communities across Central Australia including Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa), Ntaria (Hermannsburg), Wallace Rockhole, Utju (Areyonga), Mutitjulu and Amoonguna.

Water is precious and essential for human health. It is Congress' view that the issue of water security in the Northern Territory and, specifically, Central Australia cannot be considered separately to climate change. Climate change is one of the most significant threats to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and will put additional pressure on pre-existing health conditions including heat stress compounding chronic disease; increased rates of infectious disease; poor respiratory health; and malnutrition/obesity due to food insecurity.

Aboriginal people have cared for and sustainably regulated the natural ecosystems of this continent for tens of thousands of years. However, the process of colonisation in Australia has profoundly undermine our ability to care for Country. The deregulated non-Aboriginal economic system and its unrestrained pursuit of profit is now causing irreparable damage to the living systems – including our water resources – that sustain life in the Northern Territory, across Australia and around the world.

Congress' key points for consideration to inform the development of the Strategic Water Plan are outlined below:

### 1. Principles of climate justice are centred in the Plan

The Northern Territory Strategic Water Plan must acknowledge that climate change, particularly as it relates to water security, impacts Aboriginal communities earlier and more severely than other populations, yet these communities contribute the least to its drivers<sup>i</sup> <sup>ii</sup>. This serves to compound and

amplify pre-existing health and socio-economic inequalities, and contributes to further disempower Aboriginal people. Therefore the Plan must recognise the rights to self-determination of Aboriginal people as established under the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and agreement to which Australia is a signatory<sup>iii</sup>.

**2. Aboriginal knowledges and voices are centred in all aspects of the Plan, particularly processes and decision making**

Whilst Aboriginal people are on the frontline of the impacts of climate change and specifically water security, we are often excluded from the decision making processes. Aboriginal people, as Traditional Owners and experts in the natural environment, must play a central role in developing solutions to address water management and use.

**3. The protection of ecological health and sacred sites is critical to the continued survival of the oldest living culture on earth, in which the health of country and people are connected**

For Aboriginal people, health encompasses not just individual physical wellbeing, but is inclusive of the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. Within the widely accepted definition of Aboriginal health, the importance of 'connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community'<sup>iv</sup> is recognised, which includes the 'interdependent relationships between families, communities, land, sea and spirit and the cyclical concept of life-death-life'. Therefore the Plan must ensure that there is no further damage to the interconnected relationship between Aboriginal people and country, including waterways, is perpetuated and this relationship is upheld to allow Aboriginal people and culture to thrive.

**4. Access to safe and affordable drinking water is a basic human right**

Universal access to safe drinking water is a basic human right and is essential for human health. In the context of the Central Australia and Barkly regions, access to water is also essential for the safe management of renal health and dialysis. This basic human right is threatened by a lack of comprehensive regulatory protections, which is especially pronounced in the face of climate change.

**5. Safe drinking water requires an effective legal and regulatory framework**

It is Congress' view that in order to ensure that all people in the Northern Territory, and especially Aboriginal communities, have access to safe drinking water, major regulatory reform is required and must be set out in the Plan. Measures to achieve this basic human right should include reforms such as a Safe Drinking Water Act<sup>v</sup> and an independent statutory water commission.

**6. Finite resources must be adequately regulated with sufficient resources for enforcement to prevent unsustainable exploitation**

To achieve this, genuine partnership and mechanisms for water governance between Aboriginal communities and government regulatory bodies must be established. Accountability and transparency need to be embedded into all regulatory processes.

**7. Long term access to quality, safe drinking water must be prioritised over all other interests**

The Plan must ensure that all considerations of water use are evidence-based and informed by cultural knowledge and best scientific practice, so that long-term health outcomes are not traded off in the interest of possible short-term economic development.



Thank you once again for the opportunity to make comment on the NT Strategic Water Plan Directions Paper. Should you have any questions or require further clarification on Congress' feedback, please don't hesitate to contact Emma Delahunty, Health Policy Advisor by email on [emma.delahunty@caac.org.au](mailto:emma.delahunty@caac.org.au).

Sincerely,

Donna Ah Chee  
**Chief Executive Officer**

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<sup>i</sup> Friel, S., Marmot, M., McMichael, A. J., Kjellstrom, T. & Vågerö, D. 2008, Global Health Equity and Climate Stabilisation: A common agenda, *The Lancet*, 372(9650), pp. 1677–83. DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(08)61692-X

<sup>ii</sup> Whyte, K. 2017, Indigenous Climate Change Studies : Indigenizing futures, decolonizing the anthropocene, *Project MUSE*, vol. 55(1), pp. 153–62. DOI: muse.jhu.edu/ article/711473

<sup>iii</sup> United Nations. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. 2007; Available from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> Dudgeon P, et al., *Effective strategies to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. 2014, Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare / Australian Institute of Family Studies: Canberra / Melbourne.

<sup>v</sup> Beavan L and Brash S. 2020, *Push for stronger NT water security laws ahead of looming election*. Australian Broadcasting Association, available from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-27/remote-water-security-policies-under-the-microscope/12486866>

