



Submission to the Australian Government on the development of a *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy* September 2021

Executive Summary [see text for details]

The development of a National Climate Resilience & Adaptation Strategy

- A. The public consultation process for the development of a *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy* is inadequate. The Australian Government should significantly extend the deadline for public submissions and widely publicise the consultation process.
- B. The Australian Government's internationally recognised failure to act to mitigate climate change by reducing carbon emissions inevitably contributes to a situation where greater adaptation efforts are required, and the burden of adaption is borne disproportionately by disadvantaged communities.
- C. The Australian Government has responsibility for leading and resourcing adaptation efforts in a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, including resourcing the delivery of primary health care services .

Principles for action

- D. Action to assist Aboriginal communities to adapt to climate change must recognise the rights to self-determination of Aboriginal peoples as established under international agreements to which Australia is a signatory, including the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Climate change in Central Australia

- E. The effects of climate change in Central Australia are likely to include: increased temperatures; more hot days; more variable rainfall; increased risk of extreme weather events; and continuing loss of biodiversity with some plants and animals sacred to Aboriginal people already extinct. Aboriginal people already recognise the effects of climate change on local ecosystems.

Aboriginal communities at risk from climate change

- F. Climate change affects everyone's health. However, Aboriginal communities are disproportionately at risk due to the having higher rates of poverty; pre-existing low levels of health; living in remote areas; having poor quality drinking water; having limited shade in arid environments; and living in poor housing often without functional air-conditioning.

Health effects of climate change

- G. The Aboriginal conception of health includes the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community and the relationships between families, communities, land, sea and spirit. It is a spiritual system in which the physical environment is sacred. The disruption of the living world that climate change creates is therefore in itself a harm to the health of Aboriginal communities.
- H. There are a range of other direct effects on population health that climate change is creating. These include increased sickness and mortality due to heat stress; increased food insecurity and malnutrition; increased risk from infectious disease; poorer social and emotional wellbeing / mental health; poorer respiratory health; reduced fresh water supply; and an increased potential for social conflict.
- I. Climate change will reduce the capacity of the health system to respond to the health needs of communities in the Northern Territory because of increased difficulty in recruiting and retaining health staff; increased health facility infrastructure costs; and reduced productivity of health staff.

Limiting the amount the climate changes (mitigation)

- J. In order to limit the amount or rate of climate change and avoid the most serious effects on the health of Aboriginal people, all Australian Governments should commit to a target of net zero emissions by 2050
- K. In order for this target to be met, the following actions should be prioritised:
- substantially reducing the use of fossil fuels of all types, including through a ban on Hydraulic Fracturing ('fracking'),
 - investing in sustainable renewable power,
 - recognising and investing in Aboriginal traditional ecological knowledge, and
 - adopting and advocating for an economic paradigm that is focused on public health and the reduction of inequality.

Reducing the negative effects of climate change (adaptation)

- L. The *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy* should commit to the following to minimise the adverse health effects of climate change:
- addressing the social and economic determinants of health,
 - increasing the resources for comprehensive primary health care under Aboriginal community control,
 - increasing investment in health infrastructure,
 - substantially improving community housing, and
 - advocating for and establishing appropriate regulatory and taxation regimes.

Background

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress

1. Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) is a large Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS) based in Alice Springs. We are one of the most experienced organisations in the country in Aboriginal¹ health, a national leader in primary health care (PHC), and a strong advocate for the health of our people.
2. Congress delivers services to more than 17,000 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.
3. Since the 1970s, Congress has developed a comprehensive model of PHC that includes multidisciplinary clinical care; health promotion and disease prevention programs; and action on the social, cultural, economic and political determinants of health and wellbeing.
4. Climate change has been identified by Congress' community-elected Aboriginal Board of Directors as one of the most significant threats to health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people.

The Central Australia and Barkly Region Aboriginal Climate Justice Alliance

5. Congress has collaborated with other Aboriginal organisations² to form the Central Australia and Barkly Region Aboriginal Climate Justice Alliance (CABRACJA) to stand in solidarity together and advocate for prompt policy action to mitigate and address the impacts of climate change. A platform has been drafted and will be publicly launched later this year, but in the meantime the Alliance has identified its top priorities for action as follows:
 - Recognising, harnessing and investing in Aboriginal traditional knowledge to mitigate climate change.
 - Legislating for zero net emissions by 2050
 - Investing in a transition to climate-safe and clean energy future
 - Protection of biodiversity, cultural systems and ecosystems
 - Universal access to safe drinking water
 - Mitigating the impacts of climate change through better housing
 - Addressing energy poverty
 - Food security

¹ In this document we use the term 'Aboriginal' as the most appropriate terms in the Central Australian context to refer to Australia's First Peoples

² As well as Congress, CABRACJA includes senior membership from the Central Land Council; Tangentyere Council; the Centre for Appropriate Technology; Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation; and Julalikari Council.

- Health-specific matters
- Building community resilience to extreme weather events and natural disasters
- Climate sensitive urban design

The development of a *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy*

6. In relation to the current Australian Government development of a *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy*, we make the following points.
7. The public consultation process opened on 12 August 2021 and closes on 6 September 2021. This gives less than 4 weeks for public consultation on what is one of the most serious health and economic threats that Australia has ever faced. This is clearly inadequate and we urge the Australian Government to significantly extend the deadline and widely publicise the consultation process.
8. We understand that the new strategy will focus on climate adaptation only. However, mitigation and adaptation are obviously closely linked. The Australian Government ranks last amongst 170 nations in responding to climate change [1]. This internationally recognised failure to act to mitigate climate change through reducing carbon emissions inevitably contributes to a situation where greater adaptation efforts are required, both here and in other parts of the world. Without effective mitigation there are climate change scenarios for which adaptation may only possible for some and certainly not for the most disadvantaged. Accordingly, in this submission we address both mitigation and adaptation as interlinked strategies to prevent the harm to Aboriginal communities caused by human-induced climate change.
9. We note the *Roles and Responsibilities for Climate Change Adaptation in Australia* agreed by the then Select Council on Climate Change in 2012 [2]. This document recognises that:

Climate change impacts may also affect the delivery of a range of public good services for which the Commonwealth either has significant responsibility or provides substantial funding.

This includes primary responsibility for a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs – including resourcing the delivery of primary health care services – as per the *2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap* [3] formally agreed between Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (the Coalition of Peaks). **Accordingly, the Australian Government has responsibility for leading and resourcing adaptation efforts in these programs.**

Principles for action

10. Through our diverse cultures, Aboriginal peoples 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 undermined 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 that sustain life in the Northern Territory, across Australia, and around the world.
11. Climate change is a fundamental threat to the planet's living systems and to all human societies. It poses threats to the health and wellbeing of vulnerable peoples, including the Aboriginal nations of the Northern Territory.
12. These threats are not in the future – they are happening now. If they are not to become ever more serious, climate change must be tackled immediately. This means all governments taking immediate and effective action to:
 - mitigate the effects of climate change in particular by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and
 - assist communities, especially vulnerable communities such as Aboriginal nations – to adapt to the effects of climate change.
13. Aboriginal people did not create climate change, but our peoples are amongst those who are most affected by it. Accordingly, action to mitigate the effects of climate change, or assist Aboriginal communities to adapt to it, must recognise the rights to self-determination of Aboriginal peoples as established under international agreements to which Australia is a signatory, including the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* [4], which states:

Article 23: Indigenous peoples ... have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions;

Article 29: Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programmes for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination.

Climate change in Central Australia

14. Climate change means the human-caused changes in climate and weather patterns due to rises in the temperature of the world's oceans, land and atmosphere [5].

15. Climate change is an established scientific fact. However, while the consequences are already being felt across the world, its local effects over the coming decades are still uncertain. In Central Australia they are likely to include [6-8]:

- increased temperatures;
- more hot days, with the number of days per year over 35°C estimated to increase from around 90 currently to an estimated 118 by 2030 and 180 by 2070);
- more variable rainfall (for example, more average rainfall but greater variation of wet and dry periods and continuing droughts); and
- more extreme weather events such as storms, bushfires, cold snaps, and heatwaves.
- continued loss of biodiversity including of native fauna and flora which are sacred to Aboriginal people.

16. While the science to show regional-level changes is still developing, Aboriginal people already recognise climate change and its effects on the ecosystem in Central Australia [6]:

I think it is changing, sometimes hotter, sometimes colder. Weather more mixed up. Not hot all the time in summer, cold in winter. People talking about this now, now everything's changing, one day hot, one day cold. (Ltyentye Apurte ranger)

Blossom flowers come on at different times. Atwakeye (Wild Orange) should be flowering at Christmas time, but they are coming early. Other things come late or early, but are all mixed up. (Longterm resident of Ltyentye Apurte)

In the old days, the stars and the weather lined up. (Eastern Arrernte elder)

Aboriginal communities at risk from climate change

17. Climate change is affecting everyone. However, just as ill-health is not distributed evenly across society, the negative effects of climate change is posing greater risks to some populations compared to others. Populations at

particular health risk include those living in poverty; those with pre-existing poor health; those in remote areas; and those living in poor housing. The following table shows how Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory are particularly vulnerable on these factors.

Vulnerable Population [9-11]	Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory
Living in poverty	Median total personal income for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is a quarter of that for non-Aboriginal people (\$281 compared to \$1,072 per week) [12] In very remote areas, Aboriginal incomes are falling, and the income gap to non-Aboriginal people rapidly widening [13]
Pre-existing low levels of health (especially respiratory / cardio-vascular disease, alcohol/drug issues or other mental health issues)	In 2014–15, a fifth (18%) of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory self-assessed their health as only as fair or poor [14] Aboriginal Territorians die from respiratory disease at 2.7 times the rate for non-Indigenous Australians and at higher rates than Aboriginal people elsewhere in Australia [14] More than one in five (22%) of Aboriginal Territorians report high or very high levels of psychological distress compared with 8% for non-Indigenous Australians [14] The life expectancy gap is still 13.5 years for Aboriginal Territorians compared to non-Indigenous Australians [15]
Living in remote areas	In 2011 in the Northern Territory, almost four out of five Aboriginal people lived in Remote (21%) and Very remote areas (58%) [14] Three quarters (75%) of those living in very remote areas are Aboriginal [14]
Living in poor housing	A third (33%) of Aboriginal Territorians live in houses that need 1 or more extra bedrooms, six times the rate (5%) for non-Aboriginal people [12]

18. Therefore, while climate change affects everyone's health in Australia, Aboriginal people are disproportionately at risk due to the burden of disadvantage and poor health that they already carry as a result of colonisation as well as the harsher climate that they have lived in for thousands of years

Health effects of climate change in Central Australia

19. For Aboriginal people health is *not just the physical well-being of an individual but includes the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community* [16]. This definition:

... recognises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community, how these connections have been shaped across generations, and the processes by which they affect individual wellbeing. It is a whole-of-life view, and it includes the interdependent relationships between families, communities, land, sea and spirit and the cyclical concept of life–death–life. [17]

20. Accordingly, the disruption and damage to the living world that climate change creates is in itself a harm to the health of Aboriginal people as it undermines the relationships to land and sea that are at the heart of Aboriginal wellbeing. In Aboriginal culture the human spirit is one with the physical environment from which it was formed. An insult to the physical environment creates human un-wellness in and of itself. This relationship and the responsibility for maintaining it has recently been beautifully expressed by Warlpiri leader Ned Hargraves Jampijimpa [18].
21. There are also a range of direct effects on population health that climate change is creating. These include the following [9, 10, 19-22]
- a. *increased sickness and mortality* due to heat stress with Aboriginal people particularly vulnerable due to poorer underlying health in general and higher rates of cardio-respiratory disease in particular.
 - b. *Increased food insecurity and malnutrition* with remote Aboriginal communities particularly vulnerable due to pre-existing poverty and poor access to healthy food, and expected increases in prices of food and damage to ecosystems that disrupts access to traditional foods.
 - c. *Increased risk from infectious disease* and increased range of some vector-borne diseases. Remote Aboriginal communities are particularly vulnerable to food- and water-borne disease – in Central Australia there is already a high incidence of Aboriginal children being admitted to care with diarrhoea, and nationally such admissions are predicted to rise by up to 18% by 2015.
 - d. *Poorer social and emotional wellbeing / mental health*, with increasing temperatures contributing to disrupted sleep, greater stress and higher rates of suicide. For Aboriginal people, social and emotional wellbeing is also undermined by damage to Country and disruption of cultural practices.
 - e. *Poorer respiratory health* due to increased smoke from bushfires and/or dust.
 - f. *Reduced fresh water supply* (both quantity and quality) due to changed rainfall and increased evaporation rates as well as potential contamination from mining and other extraction industries.

- g. Increased potential for social conflict* due to displacement of populations (climate refugees) for example due to changing temperatures or sea level rise elsewhere.
22. In addition, climate change will increasingly reduce the capacity of the health system to respond to the health needs of Aboriginal communities, particularly in remote areas, because of [9, 10, 19]:
- a. increased difficulty in recruiting and retaining health staff*, especially to remote areas affected by increased temperatures and more extreme weather events;
 - b. increased health facility infrastructure costs* to ensure health buildings and staff accommodation are appropriately insulated and cooled;
 - c. reduced productivity of health staff* due to heat stress and sickness.

Limiting the amount the climate changes (mitigation)

23. Limiting the amount or rate of climate change involves reducing the levels of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere: dangerous global warming of 1.5°C will be exceeded by 2100 unless deep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions occur as a matter of urgency [5]. All governments will need to implement substantial cuts in greenhouse gas emissions if catastrophic effects on human health are to be avoided. To achieve this goal, all Australian Governments must put in place a target of net zero emissions by 2050.
24. In order for this target to be met, the following actions are required:
- a. substantially reducing the use of fossil fuels of all types, including through a ban on Hydraulic Fracturing ('fracking')* as this is incompatible with reducing greenhouse gas emissions and poses a range of other environmental threats to the health;
 - b. investing in sustainable renewable power* (e.g. solar) especially in remote communities, including well-resourced systems for maintenance and back up; and
 - c. recognising and investing in Aboriginal traditional ecological knowledge* to manage Country and reduce the release of greenhouse gases for example through Ranger programs to manage fire regimes, feral animals etc.
 - d. adopting and advocating for an economic paradigm that is focused on public health and the reduction of inequality*, rather than the unrestrained pursuit of private profit and the exploitation of the natural world.

Reducing the negative effects of climate change (adaptation)

25. The effects of climate change are unpredictable and may change over time. However, the *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy* should commit to the following investments which can be expected to help minimise the adverse health effects outlined above:

- a. *addressing the social and economic determinants of health* that increase the vulnerability of Aboriginal communities to the health effects of climate change. This includes action on poverty, lack of appropriate education, employment, housing and the reduction of economic inequality;
- b. *increasing the resources for comprehensive primary health care* under Aboriginal community control, including social and emotional wellbeing services, to respond at the grassroots level to increased health risks posed by climate change and provide a centre for coordinated action and advocacy on health needs;
- c. *increasing investment in health infrastructure* to ensure that all clinics and staff housing are fit for purpose in the context of increasing temperatures and more extreme weather;
- d. *substantially improving community housing*, to ensure that public housing and houses in Aboriginal communities meet the needs of Aboriginal families facing increasing temperatures (improved insulation, air-conditioning, and water) supply; that construction specifications are updated and enforced; and that increased maintenance is provided;
- e. *advocating for and establishing appropriate regulatory and taxation regimes* to ensure that government both address inequality and has the revenue to invest in transitioning to a low carbon economy and which ensure that the effects of climate change are not felt disproportionately by poor and marginalised communities.

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