

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## Gaps will fill for safe drinking water in First Nations communities – but more to be done

The Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA), the peak body for water utilities across Australia, welcomes the Federal Government injection of \$150 million to ensure safe drinking water for First Nations communities.

In November 2022, WSAA released its Report 'CLOSING THE WATER FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES GAP: IMPROVING WATER SERVICES TO FIRST NATIONS REMOTE COMMUNITIES'.

'The announcement today on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stolen Generations apology to Parliament is a significant step by the Federal Government. By expanding the rules for funding through the National Water Grid after many years of inaction, finally there is money on the table to invest in improving water quality and health outcomes for First Nations communities, said Adam Lovell, Executive Director of the Water Services Association of Australia.

But there will be more investment required in the future. We estimate that it will require a minimum investment of \$2.2 billion to bring drinking water in line with the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines, more when you include replacing old pipes and plumbing' said Mr Lovell.

Over 500 First Nations communities do not have regular water quality testing. First Nations communities, particularly in remote areas, are receiving drinking water with levels of uranium, arsenic, fluoride and nitrate that are above levels against the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines.

Our Report finds that:

- All states and territories should formalise the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines to ensure at least a minimum quality standard is met whether you live in Sydney, Cape York or Yuendumu.
- Ongoing significant investment is needed to build capacity and capability in First Nations Communities on the journey to self empowerment and to build First Nations businesses to grow expertise to manage these water infrastructure investments.
- First Nations communities need a stronger voice in the services they receive. Our stakeholder mapping shows complex interactions across a myriad of agencies and unclear accountability.

The Report contains case studies which show that dirty or smelly water, or taps clogged with calcium deposits cause significant knock on effects for communities beyond drinking water which adds to the urgency of the recommendations. The health hardware in housing is equally important, bathing and washing, air conditioning, these are all impacted by poor water quality.

'The time to improve this situation is now. The Closing the Gap targets for infrastructure which calls for equitable services and the UN conference on Water and the Sustainable Development Goals in New York in March 2023 is both an opportunity and a call to urgently improve water quality for First Nations communities', said Mr Lovell.



Following the release of the Report, WSAA has been developing a proposal to assist State and Federal governments, water utilities, Indigenous councils, community organisations and communities to better integrate the human experience and embed Indigenous participation into the conception, delivery, and operations of drinking water supplies.

This includes the development of series of national frameworks including a good practice guide to design and operate remote water supplies, First Nations engagement in drinking water supplies and training capabilities through the concept of a water ranger program.

We are pleased to see the announcement by the Federal Government today includes a requirement to engage with impacted First Nations communities as part of project development to ensure their views, aspirations and priorities for their own communities are known.

The full report is available on the WSAA website here:

<https://www.wsaa.asn.au/publication/closing-water-people-and-communities-gap-review-management-drinking-water-supplies>

WSAA is the peak body representing the urban water industry in Australia. Its members provide water and wastewater services to over 24 million customers in Australia and New Zealand, including many of Australia's largest industrial and commercial enterprises.

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