

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## Gaps to fill to ensure safe drinking water for First Nations communities

The Water Services Association of Australia, the peak body for water utilities across Australia, has today released its Report 'CLOSING THE WATER FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES GAP: IMPROVING WATER SERVICES TO FIRST NATIONS REMOTE COMMUNITIES'.

'We estimate that it will require invest of a minimum 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 Adam Lovell, Executive Director of the Water Services Association of Australia.

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.

WSAA welcomes the recent Australian Government changes to the Investment Framework for National Water Grid funding to allow for a broader range of projects to be considered including essential town water supplies in regional and remote communities, as well as increased project involvement of First Nations peoples. However, it is short on details about how First Nations communities will benefit.

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, Shepparton or Yuendumu.
- Ongoing significant investment is needed in both water quality monitoring and an innovation fund to develop new technologies that are resilient to climate change impacts, and ideally integrated with renewable energy and digital communications.
- 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.

There are signs of positive action emerging. For example:

- The WA Government is investing in water infrastructure for communities in the Kimberley
- In the APY lands in South Australia, plumbing courses are helping communities to maintain their health hardware
- In Borroloola in the NT, there has been a significant shift in engagement and a new water treatment facility



- In Queensland, the Health Department has been working hard with local Indigenous councils on improving skills of operators of water treatment plants.

WSAA believes that this is also an opportunity – a time to invest in culturally sensitive skills and training and for First Nations businesses to grow and expand expertise in water services.

'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.

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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**Media inquiries**

Water Services Association of Australia

Sandi Kolbe 0427 224 694

Email: [sandi.kolbe@wsaa.asn.au](mailto:sandi.kolbe@wsaa.asn.au)

Website: [www.wsaa.asn.au](http://www.wsaa.asn.au)

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ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

Sandi Kolbe 0427 224 694

Email: [sandi.kolbe@wsaa.asn.au](mailto:sandi.kolbe@wsaa.asn.au) Website: [www.wsaa.asn.au](http://www.wsaa.asn.au)