

Opening Statement – Tiwi Land Council

Senate Estimates – 9 February 2026

Chair, Senators.

My name is Simon Munkara, Trustee for the Jikilaruwu clan.

Beside me is Bonaventure Timaepatua, member for Mantiyupwi.

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, Traditional Owners of this land that we meet on.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today on behalf of the Tiwi Land Council.

On 19 January the Tiwi Land Council finalised a 40-year lease with Tiwi Plantations Corporation to plant 30,000 hectares of *Eucalyptus Pellita* on Melville Island.

This is a nationally significant project:

- It will be the largest Indigenous owned plantation project in northern Australia, representing almost 5 per cent of the total Australian hardwood forestry estate.
- It is expected to generate five million Australian Carbon Credit Units over the life of the project.
- The project is backed by \$40 million investment from the Clean Energy Finance Corporation and \$41 million from a private investor, River Capital.

The agreement follows a comprehensive and robust consultation process with Tiwi people.

The Tiwi Land Council is proud to have facilitated this process. We are hopeful that the project will deliver significant long-term economic benefits for Tiwi people and appropriately manage risks to Tiwi country.

Negotiated benefits include:

- Direct rental income to Tiwi land-owning groups.
- A mandatory requirement of 50 per cent Tiwi employment.
- A profit share for Tiwi Plantations Corporation, which is 100% owned by Tiwi people.
- Annual income to Port Melville Pty Ltd (another Tiwi-owned entity) for the use of its facilities.
- Repayment of existing Tiwi family debts, advanced to support the prior rotation.
- Active management of the weedy *Acacia Mangium* species from the existing plantations.

The signing of this lease supports our vision and commitment to Tiwi economic self-determination.

But that vision has limitations, given the state of essential infrastructure on the Tiwi Islands, which limits both the forestry project and the development of other new industry opportunities. And it affects the day-to-day lives of Tiwi people.

We continue to advocate for:

- Further Federal and NT Government investment in the Tiwi road network.
- Federal investment to help us fix the waste management challenges on our islands, working with the NT Government and Tiwi Islands Regional Council.
- Continued investment in housing in our communities and on our homelands.

Senators, my name is Brendan Ferguson, CEO of the Tiwi Land Council.

I'm proud to be here again at Estimates, together with my Council members, Simon Munkara and Bonaventure Timaepatua.

I want to inform the Committee that this will be my last hearing. In December last year, I notified the Chair and Council members, that I would be relocating to Melbourne and finishing up at the Land Council. This decision is driven by a need to be closer to family. While the decision was very difficult, I've received nothing but support from my Council members; as Simon here has repeatedly told me, "family comes first".

I have committed to stay on as CEO until April 2026, by which time we hope to have appointed and on-boarded a new CEO. Our Council has engaged a recruiter, established a selection panel and is now midway through the recruitment process.

I want to thank the Committee for affording us the opportunity to report to the Australian Government about our progress over the last two years. In that time, 17 of our 40 Council members have attended an Estimates hearing; a valuable opportunity for them to observe the public scrutiny to which our Land Councils are subject.

Accountability is critical, as is compliance with the legislation and regulations that govern the Land Council. But our governing framework is in constant tension with community expectations. If there is one reflection that I would like to share, it is the importance of ensuring that our Land Councils are afforded the reasonable opportunity to pursue the priorities, and reflect the governance expectations, of Tiwi people. This is essential if we are to sustain the trust of Tiwi people to represent their interests, manage their country and revitalise their culture for the benefit of future generations of Tiwis.

Thank you, and we welcome your questions.