

Opening Statement – Tiwi Land Council  
Senate Estimates – 2 December 2025

Chair, Senators,

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.

Just over two weeks ago, Cyclone Fina passed through the Tiwi Islands. This cyclone cut power, damaged homes and community facilities, and isolated parts of Bathurst and Melville Islands for days. Staff at Tiwi College and residents of Takamprimilli were cut off from the rest of the Islands by fallen trees. Damage to critical infrastructure at Tiwi College led to the forced evacuation of 38 people.

We are grateful that, even though it was a very strong cyclone, no Tiwi people were injured. This outcome reflects the strength and resilience of our communities.

Since the cyclone hit, the Tiwi Land Council has been working cooperatively with Territory and Commonwealth agencies, the regional council, and other service providers to help our communities recover.

Our rangers and Access to Country teams have cleared fallen trees and opened tracks; our staff have assisted with food distribution and community BBQs; and we have helped coordinate access for emergency services.

I want to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of everyone involved. The cyclone recovery has shown our strong community spirit.

But the cyclone has also highlighted the limits of our resilience when essential infrastructure is not in place.

When our Executive met last week, we were clear that this time we were lucky. We may not be so lucky next time. We need to be prepared.

Our main priority is to get cyclone shelters in all Tiwi communities. Many homes are not built to weather cyclones. There is no existing shared infrastructure, like a recreation hall, that is fit-for-purpose.

Making sure every community has shelter is not only a safety issue — it is an equity issue. Damaged roads, limited transport options, and the distances between communities mean people cannot reliably relocate to where a shelter is available. We need a safe, purpose-built shelter in every community, and we stand ready to work with all levels of government to urgently progress this.

Long-term challenges around waste management and road infrastructure have also made cyclone recovery harder.

Our landfills were never fit-for-purpose and now they are full. This makes debris disposal very hard. Access, particularly to the communities on Melville Island, is very difficult because of the condition of roads.

These are not new issues. But they become even more serious during natural disasters.

The Tiwi Land Council has been taking proactive steps to address these challenges, but we need support.

On waste management, we have been leading collaborative planning with the regional council, NT Government, and other partners. We have set up a successful and popular container deposit scheme that is reducing landfill pressures and providing economic and environmental benefits. But the scale of the waste management challenge on our islands is still big: it requires coordinated investment, and we continue to advocate for Federal support.

On roads, we have developed a comprehensive plan based on cultural knowledge, environmental constraints, and community need. We are advocating for further Commonwealth–Territory investment to finish our roads and ensure safe, all-weather access.

The past two weeks have been challenging. But we are always looking ahead.

Next week, we will proudly celebrate the dedication of the Tiwi Indigenous Protected Area. The dedication has added more than 700,000 hectares to the Australian National Reserve System. It recognises Tiwi stewardship of our Country and the importance of the islands for biodiversity conservation. It is the culmination of five years of work by traditional owners, elders and rangers to secure support to manage their country in line with their values and protect the islands for future generations.

Our next step is to progress a Sea Country IPA and advance Tiwi rights and responsibilities over our surrounding waters through a native title sea claim, on which we are working constructively with the Northern Land Council. These complementary processes are an assertion of our rights and role as sea country managers and the strong connection of land and sea for Tiwi people.

Chair and Senators, the Tiwi Land Council remains committed to good governance, practical cooperation, long-term planning, and advocating for the essential infrastructure and services our people need.

Thank you, and we welcome your questions.