



**Australian Government**  
**National Indigenous  
Australians Agency**



**NIAA**

# **NIAA submission to Senate Select Committee**

**Inquiry into Australia's Disaster Resilience**

*Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*



# Introduction

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience.

The Terms of Reference for this enquiry focus largely on the role and capability of the Australian Defence Force in the context of natural disasters. NIAA does not wish to comment on the ADF's role but does wish to comment on the role that First Nations people, communities and organisations can play in preparing for and responding to natural disasters. This is a short submission that focuses on the potential to increase engagement with First Nations people and communities, especially in remote parts of Australia that are more likely to be affected by natural disasters including floods, bushfires and cyclones.

By way of background, it is helpful to note that NIAA works in genuine partnership to enable the self-determination and aspirations of First Nations communities. We lead and influence change across government to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a say in the decisions that affect them. The NIAA works directly to, and supports, the Minister for Indigenous Australians.

First Australians and Indigenous communities face unique risks and disproportionate vulnerabilities in the face of natural disasters, increasing extreme weather and climate events. These impacts present significant social, cultural, ecological and economic challenges such as:

- loss of access to traditional land and sea Country, and loss or changes to cultural practices;
- impacts on infrastructure, housing, land-based food production systems and marine industries;
- health issues including increased disease and heat-related illness; and
- significant barriers to accessing services such as language, especially in remote locations.

NIAA's principal objective in preparing this submission is to suggest that First Nations people and communities play an even greater role than they do already in preparing for and responding to natural disasters. NIAA as an Agency can also play a role in community engagement, facilitation and planning responses when natural disasters occur, working with emergency management authorities and Defence.

Disaster response and recovery are whole-of-government, whole-of-nation endeavours. One of the greatest hurdles is gaining, collating, assessing and distributing information in a timely manner to those that need to know. In recent years the NIAA has benefited from being involved in the National Emergency Management Agency's Crisis Recovery Committee meetings and briefings. Relevant information from these meetings has been shared across NIAA's regional network and used to inform business continuity and disaster recovery planning.

In addition to the enhanced role First Nations people, communities and organisations can play, the NIAA may be able to offer significant assistance through our liaison, relationships, community engagement, cultural knowledge and on-ground knowledge to contribute to the higher level situational understanding (operational information and intelligence). Our regional presence understanding of country and communities could be more formally weaved into Commonwealth and State disaster preparedness and management architectures. The NIAA looks forward to further engagement with the Committee and organisations to see how and where our relationship and knowledge of First Nations communities, culture and country can contribute to better national disaster resilience.



## Making greater use of First Nations expertise

First Nations Peoples and communities are uniquely positioned through their traditional knowledge and experience with managing Country to inform emergency management planning and preparedness, ensuring greater policy and program effectiveness. This includes through delivering services, potentially on a fee-for-service basis, for reading the landscape and condition of Country; understanding past and potential flood and fire behaviour; and undertaking cultural burning, fire management and water and flood management to improve the resilience of Country and communities to natural disasters. First Nations peoples and communities expertise would be particularly valuable in enhanced planning and preparedness for disasters.

The Terms of Reference for this Committee's enquiry include consideration of the role of the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability. The Terms of Reference also invite consideration of alternative models, including repurposing or adapting existing Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services.

NIAA considers that any repurposing or adapting of existing support groups should consider the First Nations organisations and communities positioned to assist in both preparedness and recovery. Consideration should also be given to providing those organisations and communities with additional support. Organisations that could be considered include Prescribed Bodies Corporate, Indigenous Ranger Groups and ranger groups associated with Indigenous Protected Areas, Land Councils or similar, Aboriginal community controlled organisations such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Health organisations or similar organisations across other sectors.

These organisations provide ready points of contact into communities, ensuring communication occurs with appropriate cultural authority. These organisations would require increased funding and resources to undertake preparedness, response and recovery activities in addition to day-to-day business. They would also benefit from specialised training and resourcing to allow them to assist further in planning for and responding to disasters.

Adapting and repurposing of support groups should consider the needs and disproportionate vulnerability of First Nations communities and how to reduce the risks to these communities.

- All strategies, programs and polices implemented should be undertaken in a culturally sensitive manner.
- Alternative models should consider methods for improving the capacity and capability of First Nations communities to prepare, respond and recover from natural hazards.
- Any alternatives should not introduce infrastructure or systems which increase reliance and dependence on costly expert or external resources, especially if they require ongoing maintenance. Solutions need to be simple, low cost, and low tech so they can be easily maintained by local First Nations communities.

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry refer specifically to the role of the Australian Defence Force in disaster resilience. The ADF has a number of existing relationships with First Nations peoples and improving on those existing relationships would enhance the ADF's ability to plan for and respond to disasters. The Army, for example, has for many years worked closely with remote First Nations communities through the Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program (AACAP). This program, which began in 1997, includes the design, planning,



coordination and control of engineering and infrastructure works. Projects undertaken in partnership with the community through AACAP have delivered a range of projects including housing, road construction and upgrades, airfield construction and improved telecommunications infrastructure. These have had significant benefits for the communities including improving disaster resilience and recovery. These and other similar programs benefit both the First Nations people and communities involved in the projects (including through employment opportunities) and broader benefits in improved disaster resilience.

Defence is also a significant employer of First Nations people and has a range of excellent programs and pathways to support and develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Defence was one of the first Australian Government agencies to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan and continues to be a leader in that context. This also allows Defence to draw on the expertise of its own members when planning for and responding to disasters.

### **Food Security: a practical example of working with First Nations Communities to respond to disasters**

A practical example of the role First Nations communities and organisations have played to the overall benefit of disaster recovery has been in the area of remote food security in light of recent disasters such as bushfires and floods, and the consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic.

It is well understood that geographic isolation, language barriers and fluctuating populations add complexity to remote disaster risk management. When it comes to food security following disaster, a single community store is often the only source of essential items for hundreds of kilometres. Ensuring remote community residents have access to critical supplies is a challenging exercise requiring careful planning and coordination.

Remote communities experience unique and specific barriers compared to urban and regional centres. This includes long transport routes, complex supply chains, limited access, seasonal isolation and incredibly high operating, repair and maintenance costs. In addition, remote First Nations households have lower on average incomes, fewer transport options, higher fuel prices and longer distances to alternative services than non-remote households. Remote disaster resilience is dependent on a coordinated approach to food security in remote areas, in close collaboration with the impacted communities. This requires active participation of government, wholesalers, manufacturers, suppliers and distributors to support communities' continuous access to food and other essentials in times of crisis.

Remote community stores are one vehicle that can be used to support disaster recovery. Remote community stores have a critical role in remote disaster preparedness, response and recovery efforts. Remote stores are often the only source of food and essential groceries in a community can act as a hub for supply distribution and community messaging. Unlike retailers in regional or urban contexts, remote stores operate in uniquely challenging environments and have both social and economic roles.

The NIAA established a Remote Food Security Working Group in April 2020 in response to COVID-19 related supply chain issues in remote First Nations communities. The terms of reference was expanded in 2022 to include remote food security risks as a consequence of events including but not limited to other pandemics, natural disasters and seasonal changes – a recommendation of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote First Nations communities.



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Some key lessons learned from the approach to food security taken by the Working Group provide a useful case study to inform response planning for other largescale disasters. This includes:

- First Nations community organisations collaborated with charities and other emergency services to provide remote food distribution tailored to local contexts.
- Large wholesalers ring-fenced stock for remote communities to provide equitable distribution of limited supplies.
- Remote suppliers worked directly with food and grocery manufacturers to prioritise availability of essential products in remote community stores.
- Engagement between the NIAA and managers of remote stores servicing First Nations communities enabled governments to understand pressure points and where support needed to be directed.
- One of the largest distributors in Northern Australia, Metcash doubled their shipping volume and prioritised supplies for remote communities.

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