January 2025

CRANAplus submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia - Energy, food, and water security enquiry

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CRANAplus submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia - Energy, food, and water security enquiry

Thank you for allowing CRANAplus (Council of Remote Area Nurses Australia) to submit to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia regarding the Energy, food, and water security enquiry.

CRANAplus is a grassroots, not-for-profit, membership-based organisation founded in 1983. We provide a wide range of services, support, and opportunities to nurses, midwives, and other health professionals to ensure the delivery of safe, high-quality primary healthcare to remote and isolated areas of Australia. We advocate for change on issues affecting the health workforce and remote populations, including safety, health inequality, and workforce availability. We offer feedback from this position, acknowledging that we are not experts on energy, food or water sustainability. We would additionally like to highlight the long history of inquiries investigating the challenges of energy, water and food security in remote areas to which CRANAplus has contributed directly through submissions and indirectly through collaborative advocacy, including but not limited to

- CRANAplus submission to the Indigenous Affairs Committee Inquiry into Food Prices and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities
- National Rural Health Alliance Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities

In this instance, our submission is not focused on legislation, funding or frameworks. Additionally, ample information is available detailing the inequity of access to services and resources experienced in remote communities, including energy, food and water resourcing, the impact of transport and cost and the disparity in multiple outcomes experienced by remote communities. Instead, CRANAplus would like to encourage a holistic approach that recognises these issues as human rights with generational impacts on the health and wellbeing of remote communities in the future.

The context and extent of energy, food and water security in Northern Australia

> '*The increasing temperatures we have been seeing have resulted in community members being without power for longer periods due to the increased use of electricity for cooling and the subsequent increase in cost. Further, the wild extremes such as cyclones and mass storm systems are cutting off communities for longer periods due to flooding and poor road conditions. With the separate cost of living and transport costs, communities are being left without essentials such as food and clean water for up to 3 months with no assistance or potential airdrops with supplies.*'
>
> CRANAplus Member, December 2024

Energy, food, and water security are related but cannot be untangled from additional contextual factors in remote areas, including northern Australia. For this reason, CRANAplus includes these

concerns, along with other social determinants of health and meeting Closing the Gap and Sustainable Development Goals, in submissions on a broad range of concerns, including absolute poverty, housing, health, and climate change.

The views of CRANAplus members are reflected in this submission. We invite the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia to consider a selected range of comments presented by CRANAplus members (Appendix A). Their experiences and observations reflect a selection of communities in rural and remote northern Australia, where they live, visit and work. Recognising that geographically isolated communities are not only thin markets for delivering services and infrastructure, including energy, water, and food, is vital. Each community is unique, with community norms, expectations, strengths and weaknesses, services, resources, and infrastructure. Options and redundancies in infrastructure and services are not equivalent to those in regional and metropolitan communities. Remote and isolated communities face challenges in a range of social determinants of health, leading to increased chronic ill health, accidents, disability, and shorter life expectancy. CRANAplus members also experience these impacts while living and working in the community.

The impact this has on communities, particularly remote communities

> '*extreme heat has a significant impact on people's health. We have inadequate access to electricity, no solar panels, at times no air-conditioning, no fridge for food storage and limited access to drinkable water.*
>
> CRANAplus Member, December 2024

Energy, food, and water supply in remote communities are part of a larger picture of inequity of service access, and the evidence of its impact on the health, education, and wellbeing of individuals and communities is not contested.

- Skin infections leading to life-limiting illnesses remain among the highest in the world, and the rate of long-term impact is worsened by limited functional water infrastructure and housing
- Malnutrition and related chronic illnesses are impacted by unreliable and limited access to fresh, nutritious and affordable food and the availability of suitable infrastructure (energy and reliable refrigeration) to store and maintain safe food supplies for community members.
- The impact of extreme temperature on the health of the additionally vulnerable in community (the elderly, very young and those with chronic illnesses) with the high cost and lack of reliable energy, particularly for air-conditioning
- Variability in supply and quality of water between communities
- The inequitable financial burden of extreme prices for food, energy and water
- Intermittent energy and the internet frequently impact health service delivery.
- Workforce retention challenges impacted by access to nutritious food, living conditions such as extreme heat and cold with unreliable air-conditioning

The challenges and potential actions to improving energy, food and water security

CRANAplus encourages a holistic, human rights-based approach to improving energy, food, and water security. The following principles form the foundation of our suggested actions.

Principle 1 - Clarity and accountability

After multiple inquiries, projects, and strategies over many years, any improvements in energy, water, and food security in remote communities are unclear. Lack of transparency, and hence accountability, are likely to be foundational challenges to making any broad, consistent, and meaningful impact.

Each community should have publicly available, real-time data. The relative invisibility of remote communities means that a lack of awareness of system breakdowns can hinder appropriate remediation and responses and lessen accountability. As energy, food, and water accessibility are health issues, data on energy, food, and water security should be available in a similar way to other health data.

Challenge 1 - Lack of data transparency around real-time access to energy, water and food from each community.

Action — In regional and metropolitan areas, power, water, and road conditions (influencing food delivery) are publicly available in real-time, as are service interruptions. This is not the case for most remote communities. Real-time information should be publicly available so communities and the broader Australian community can see where remote areas are not receiving services and resources to which they are entitled. External bodies can identify issues and respond promptly or publicly justify delays.

Challenge 2 -Lack of public information and accountability for supply strategies, cost and planning across energy, water and food at all decision-maker levels

Action—The focus on responding to urgent issues over planning ahead is not effective for continuity of service, funding, or community development. Each community should have a publicly available medium and long-term supply strategy for energy, water, and food that includes redundancy plans and emergency response strategies for significant risks.

Challenge 3 - Lack of data on the impact of disruptions in access to energy, food and water at the community level, including health, education, workforce sustainability and community development capacity.

Action – The absence of data is not an indicator of no impact. Using standard benchmarks to measure community impact of energy, food and water disruptions would improve the broader visibility of challenges and encourage timely responses. For communities to plan, develop and innovate for their future, reliability and predictability are required. Examples of useful data might include

- the number of days without access to laundry or hygiene facilities (water/electricity)
- school days where the classroom temperature was unsuitable for effective learning
- the number of skin infections treated monthly
- reasons for staff leaving community-focused services (health and education), such as extreme heat and no air-conditioning
- days without fresh fruit or vegetables in stores per month and cost benchmarking

- clinically detected childhood and elder malnutrition
- estimated ratio of refrigeration volume to population per month
- incidence of food wastage due to energy supply loss

Challenge 4 - Lack of transparency around the type and condition of infrastructure, supply and maintenance costs

Action – A publicly available profile of current energy, food and water strategies and infrastructure would be helpful for each community. This should include the type of energy supply (solar, diesel generator, wind or other), source of water supply and treatment strategy, frequency of food delivery and diversity of produce available. Risk profiles regarding interrupted services and plans should also be clarified (flood, cyclone, population movements and similar).

Challenge 5 - Lack of benchmarked expectations and standards regarding community access to energy, food and water.

Action – Communities should know what reasonable access to energy, food and water is. If equity is to be addressed, these should reflect all other Australian locations; however, isolation does impact services. Establishing a minimum expectation increases accountability. Examples could include

- the ratio of functional refrigerator volume to the average population
- food delivery frequency and price
- water availability (including reserves)
- maximum permittable power outages over a set period

Principle 2 – Infrastructure and services are a benefit, not a cost

Challenge 6 – Everything is more expensive in remote areas, particularly infrastructure building and maintenance.

Action - Economic analysis into addressing energy, water and food security should incorporate to cost of not resolving energy, food and water security over generational time frames, including long-term health, education and employment impacts, Closing the Gap targets and outcomes. While remote communities do not enjoy the benefits of education, health, wellbeing and lifespan as the rest of the Australian community, the lifelong and multigenerational cost of insecure energy, food and water should be factored into the economic evaluations of providing access to these services.

Principle 3 - Matched to the community. Fit for purpose. Sustainable

> '*The housing shortage in very remote communities is not an easy fix. Before building more houses, they need to check if there is enough water in bores to sustain houses. They need to check if diesel generators are big enough to power more houses. Before building houses, they need to invest millions into alternative power and water sources. It takes time and knowledge to do this.*'
>
> CRANAplus Member, January 2025

Challenge 7—Historical programs and approaches to energy, water, and food security in remote communities Australia-wide have resulted in patchworks of inappropriate, inadequate, and unsustainable infrastructure.

There have been intentions and decisions to undertake jurisdiction-wide projects and implement these over large areas; however, the results have been less than hoped for. Short-term fixes of issues have been prioritised over long-term infrastructure and supply security and community development.

Action—Develop the following with each community based on an established community profile, underpinned by a medium—and long-term community plan for energy, food, and water security.

- A community-centric, co-designed, comprehensive long-term infrastructure plan to deliver services to meet the community's long-term development needs and expectations.
- Design, build, and implement an infrastructure plan that incorporates the principles of self-determination, community capacity building, sustainable service continuity, and climate sustainability.
- Phase out the use of fossil fuel-based energy in remote communities, particularly diesel, which requires road transport and is expensive.

If the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia would like the opportunity to speak with CRANAplus members regarding energy, food and water security in remote northern Australia, CRANAplus would be pleased to facilitate the conversation.

Should further clarification or information concerning feedback from this submission be sought CRANAplus would be pleased to assist. Please contact Professional Officer

31 January 2025

Appendix A – CRANAplus Member comments and photos

Food

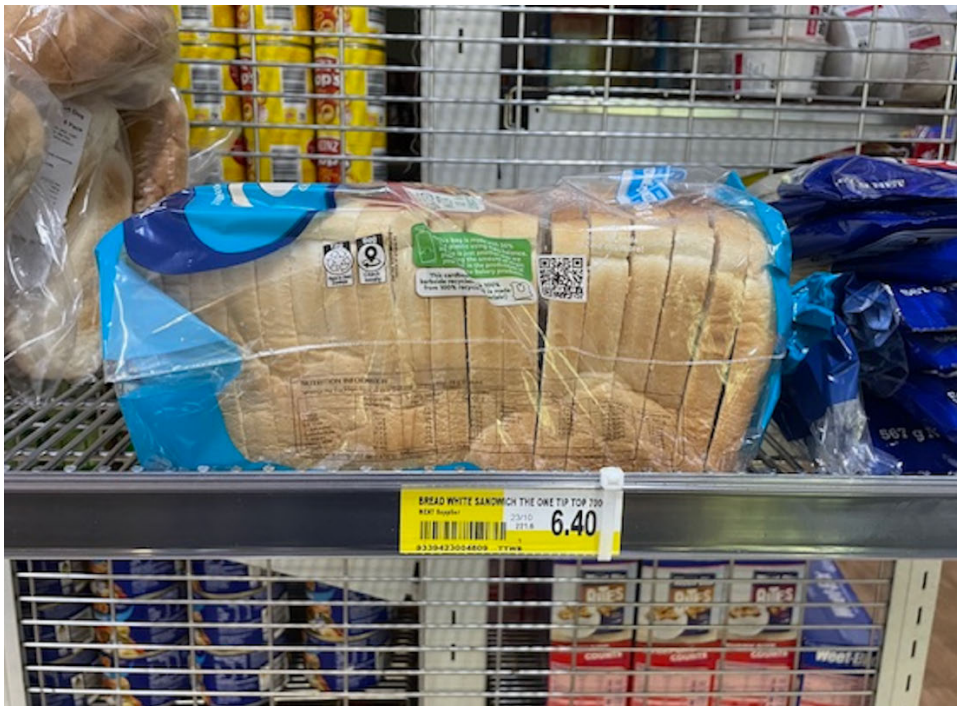
- Costs of wages, diesel, wear and tear on trucks all increase cost of food in very remote communities
- Base cost of food has gone up, wholesalers then pass this onto retailers which pass onto customers- remote stores are not exempt.
- Range has reduced and shortages across Australia due to natural disasters ie avian flu affecting egg supplier, also impact on remote communities
- I (RN) used to live out of remote stores – now struggling to buy basics. RN has much better income and still finds costs exorbitant - $25.00 for a kg of grapes one week.
- Support agencies advise the requests made to them for food vouchers and help has never been so high. No foodbanks etc in remote communities only food access is local store.
- Climate change has impacted on food to hunt, ability to hunt i.e. heat waves mean not safe to go out into wild country, floods.
- Hunting no longer feeds a family, it's a leisure activity.

Power

- Impact of no power at Oodnadatta in recent heat wave of 47 degrees. Clinic only place with generator so 3 nurse post, (lucky fully staffed) had to accommodate up to 20 people camping in the building, old people and babies, whilst running a health service. Staff in same boat, no power for air conditioning, cooking, freezer food had to be discarded.
- Power supplied by purchasing power cards. With money so short, power cards not purchased, unreliable fridge, air conditioners etc.
- Community power comes from diesel generators. Trucks need to be able to bring the diesel to communities, increased costs. Problems with roads cut off by weather.

Water

- Usually from bores. In many places water being used faster than what bore replenishes. Already some communities likely to be running out of water.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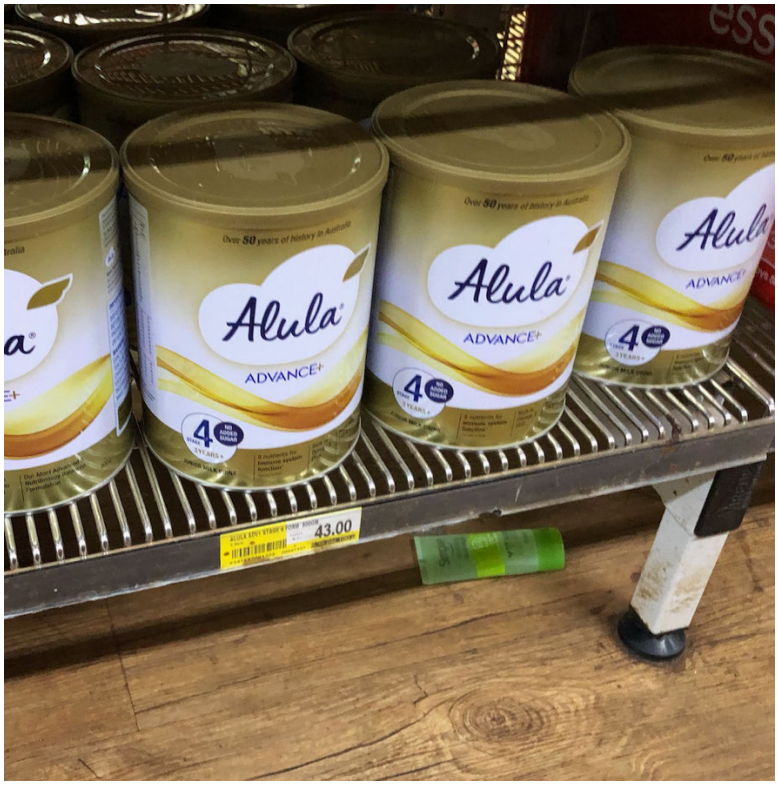
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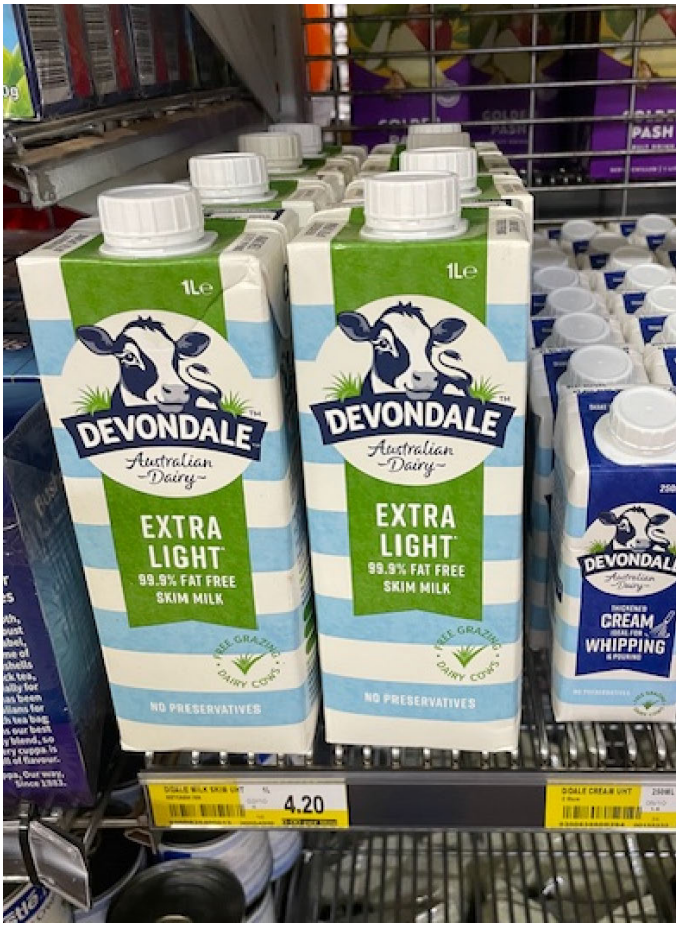
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