



Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests

Communique #6, May 2024

28th meeting, Melbourne, Victoria

15–16 May 2024

The Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests (CAWI) met on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong/Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin in Melbourne, on 15–16 May 2024. The Victorian Government’s Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action hosted committee members at its offices. Mr Perry Wandin from the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Aboriginal Corporation welcomed us warmly to Melbourne.

Day 1. CAWI acknowledged and thanked two longstanding members who have resigned from the committee, Dr Rohan Henry and Ms Chontarle Bellottie, both have contributed significant time and effort to increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ access to, ownership of, and management of water.

Expressions of Interest will be invited from 3 June 2024 to 14 July 2024, in seeking to fill membership vacancies for Victoria, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory.

CAWI discussed the draft objectives and outcomes of the proposed National Water Agreement (NWA) that will be submitted to Water Ministers for consideration at the National Water Ministerial Council (MinCo) in mid-2024. CAWI participates diligently in the governmental bodies tasked with drafting the NWA (the National Water Reform Committee and National Water Initiative working group) and is proud to advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples water interests in the new NWA. Importantly, this has included advocacy on embedding national and international human rights principles into Australia’s water management processes and protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Cultural, spiritual, social, environmental, and economic water interests and values.

The committee has also been busy working with the Commonwealth, state, and territory governments, in partnership with the Coalition of Peaks, to develop a National Closing the Gap Inland Waters Target (15c).

Day 2. CAWI welcomed guests from the First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria, Birrarung Council, and the Victorian Environmental Water Holder. We heard about how water intersects with treaty-making in Victoria; progressive waterway restoration and watering projects; and the challenges Aboriginal people from Victoria face in engaging in the complex water management space. Listening to and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak groups and water and environment organisations is critical to our work because we need to hear about the issues on the ground to be able to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ water interests at a national level.

CAWI heard from guests on how important the [Water Is Life Roadmap](#) and the [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#) have been for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Victoria and how we must continue to advocate for rivers like the Birrarung (Yarra) River so that they are considered a living entity that needs holistic and coordinated protection. We also heard how important it is that governments make a concerted effort to follow up with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who they engage with about water matters.

It was also wonderful to welcome National Water Reform Committee members, including the Chair (Ms Lyn O’Connell) and State and Territory Government representatives, to our meeting to have a frank discussion about some of the challenges that jurisdictions face in water planning and implementation, including engaging with communities.

Next meeting

Our next meeting will be held online on 10 July 2024, followed by an in-person meeting in Canberra (Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country) from 10–12 September 2024.

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