Australian Government
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests

Communique #9, February 2025

Meeting 32, Adelaide, 3-5 February 2025

The Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests (the Committee) met on the land of the Kaurna people from 3 to 5 February 2025. The Committee was Welcomed to Country by Kaurna Elder, Uncle Rod O'Brien. The meeting was hosted by the Australian Government's Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (the department).

The Committee met with representatives from several First Nations organisations, including the South Australian Native Title Services (SANTS) and the Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT). SANTS briefed the Committee on the organisation's aspirations regarding First Nations' rights, the work they are doing to support communities to achieve native title, and the challenges that First Nations' communities are facing in South Australia due to the lack of water ownership and agency. ALT briefed the Committee on the organisation's priorities and strategic direction and discussed a range of water matters with Committee members. Traditional Owners, on invitation from ALT, shared with the Committee 'lived experiences' of the significant water issues and challenges facing their communities and the need to scale-up advocacy.

The Committee also met with Professor Sarah Wheeler, Water and Economics from Flinders University to discuss her extensive academic work on water issues in the Murray Darling Basin (the Basin). Professor Wheeler's research highlighted the minimal media reporting of First Nations' engagement in water nationally, as well as water market issues in the Basin, including water availability, environmental water and Cultural water allocations.

During an on-Country tour to Ngadjuri Country with Uncle Quenten Agius, from Aboriginal Cultural Tours (South Australia), the Committee witnessed firsthand some of the enduring impacts of drought on the region's waterways. The Committee heard stories from Uncle Quenten about the Cultural significance of Ngadjuri waterways and the challenges faced by First Nations people in caring for their Country.

The Committee also met with representatives from the South Australian Department of Environment and Water and discussed the government's engagement approach to develop a co-designed Framework to Advance First Nations' Water Interests with Traditional Owners.

The Committee received updates from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water on several water initiatives including: the National Water Agreement; the Murray-Darling Basin Aboriginal Water Entitlements Program; national and Murray-Darling Basin enduring water holding arrangements; the Cultural Flows Planning for Cultural Economies Program; and the development of the Inland Waters Target.

Next meeting

The Committee's next meeting will be virtual and scheduled for 29 April 2025.

Other Committee activities and ongoing work

Submissions

The Committee has recently drafted and submitted submissions to the Joint Select Committee (JSC) on Northern Australia's inquiry into energy, food and water security, and to the Australian Law Reform Commission's (ALRC) Issues Paper 50 inquiry into the Future Acts regime under the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth).

The ALRC review submission focused on water issues of the future acts regime of the Act. The submission to the JSC inquiry focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water interests and values, the definition of 'water security', the impact of climate change on water quality and availability, and sustainable management of water amid increasing demand.

Fact Sheets

The Committee is currently developing a series of fact sheets with the aim of building broader water literacy knowledge, and to assist governments with water action planning and management processes under the National Water Agreement. Fact sheet topics in draft are 'Living Waters', 'Cultural Values' and 'Interconnection of groundwater and surface water' but *may* also include:

- Water Management Frameworks
- Cultural fire and water management
- Gendered roles
- Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)
- Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC)
- Data sovereignty
- The role of skies.

The fact sheets will be published on the department's website once finalised.

Expressions of Interest- Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria

An expression of interest (EOI) for new Committee members in Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia closed on 28 February 2025.

For more information, visit the department's website or contact the CAWI Secretariat at CAWI.EOI@dcceew.gov.au.

Contact: CAWI@dcceew.gov.au