



Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests

Communiqué #12: Meeting 37, Gimuy (Cairns), Queensland, 15 – 17 July 2026

The Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests (CAWI) met on Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirrganydji Country in Gimuy (Cairns) from 15 – 17 July 2026. CAWI was welcomed to Country on the Cairns Esplanade by Ms Janine Taylor from the Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation (DWAC). The meeting was hosted by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (the department).

CAWI received updates from its members on the National Water Committee (NWC) sub-committees where CAWI provides advice.

CAWI noted that the information sheets it has drafted are in the final stages of design and the videos developed by CAWI are ready to be published on the CAWI webpage in August 2026. The video topics are:

1. The role of CAWI
2. The importance of water
3. What is cultural water
4. Cultural water rights

The department updated CAWI on the First Nations Water Branch's activities (including development of an Inland Waters Target under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap) and progress regarding the new National Water Agreement (NWA). CAWI continues to advocate for states and territories to sign the new NWA to elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' water rights and interests in national water policy.

Dr Teagan Shields, First Nations Advisor to the independent review of the *Water Act 2007* (Cth) (Water Act) shared themes emerging from the First Nations engagement roundtables. CAWI conveyed its view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be encouraged to engage more broadly in the review. First Nations peoples' views should not be limited to whether and how to incorporate the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into the Water Act, which was the focus of the First Nations engagement roundtables. Dr Shields confirmed that she has been encouraging First Nations peoples' participation in the broader water Act review process.

The committee also discussed the Productivity Commission Inquiry into National Water Reform Interim Updates. Members decided on key recommendations to include in the committee's submission to the process, which builds on advice provided previously to the Inquiry Commissioner. It was noted that the committee would meet with the Commissioners on Thursday 30 July 2026.

CAWI met with Queensland Government water officials and discussed Queensland's water management and barriers for First Nations peoples in accessing water reserves. CAWI noted that, while there is an opportunity for the Queensland Indigenous Leaders Accord Committee (established by the Queensland Government in October 2025) to consider water in the future, other critical matters have taken immediate priority for the Accord Committee.

In line with self-determination principles and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, CAWI encourages all First Nations peoples to establish and lead their own dialogues and platforms to have dialogue on water with governments.

CAWI also met with all state and territory government water officials and received updates on work happening in each respective jurisdiction. There was interest in CAWI convening discussions on shared issues or concerns across jurisdictions.

The committee met with several First Nations community facing organisations to hear about their water interests and challenges in far north Queensland and the Torres Strait. Meeting attendees included representatives from the Torres Shire Council, Torres Strait Regional Authority, Jaragun Ecoservices and the DWAC. CAWI also met with representatives of the Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council (YASC) and the Gunggandji-Mandingal Yidinji Peoples Prescribed Body Corporate during a visit to Yarrabah, which is Australia's largest discrete Aboriginal community.

CAWI heard concerns from Queensland First Nations peoples that water management processes have not always adequately considered the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In particular, it was noted that First Nations communities are not consistently involved early in the planning and design of water infrastructure projects, which can result in infrastructure that is not fit-for-purpose or responsive to local circumstances.

First Nations people identified a range of challenges affecting water infrastructure and water security in First Nations communities. These included insufficient training for local operators, no funding for maintenance, higher delivery and operational costs in remote areas, the expense of water testing, and difficulties complying with regulatory requirements. Concerns were also raised about infrastructure designs that rely on materials or components vulnerable to flood and cyclone events, or replacement parts that are costly and can take significant time to source.

At the same time, CAWI heard that projects designed by First Nations communities can achieve better outcomes. For example, the YASC's strong governance and leadership in the design and delivery of water infrastructure have meant facilities are fit-for-purpose, incorporate locally available materials, reduce costs and delays, and improved water security.

Several representatives described feeling "out of sight and out of mind" and expressed a desire for decision-makers to visit their communities to better understand the unique and complex challenges faced. Representatives also spoke positively about opportunities to connect and share knowledge through forums such as the biennial *Voices from the Bush* conference in Alice Springs and Indigenous infrastructure operator networks, which are valuable avenues for learning, collaboration and the exchange of practical approaches to water management.

[Next meeting](#)

CAWI's next meeting will be held virtually between August and October 2026.

CAWI's next face to face meeting will be held in Perth during the week of 23 November 2026.

[Other CAWI activities and ongoing work](#)

Since the last communiqué, CAWI made a submission on the [Murray—Darling Basin Plan Review: discussion paper](#) and the [Productivity Commission's Inquiry into National Water Reform](#). It has also participated on the Inquiry's Stakeholder Working Group.

CAWI continues to be involved advocating for the new NWA and will be involved in drafting the new Commonwealth Action Plan, and jurisdiction action plans if requested. CAWI also participates on the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Inland Waters Target 15c working group.

Members have participated in the First Nations engagement roundtables on the Water Act review, and the committee will prepare a submission to the review's discussion paper.

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