



NACCHO

National Aboriginal Community
Controlled Health Organisation
Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands

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Australia's waste management and recycling industries

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on
Industry, Innovation,
Science and Resources

SUBMISSION

May 2020

About NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 143 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) Australia wide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing issues. NACCHO's work is focused on liaising with governments, its membership, and other organisations on health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs. Our members provide about three million episodes of care per year for about 350,000 people across Australia, including about one million episodes of care in very remote regions.

Sector Support Organisations, also known as affiliates, are State based and represent ACCHOs offering a wide range of support services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs to their members including advocacy, governance and the delivery of state, territory and national primary health care policies.

ACCHOs range from large multi-functional services employing several medical practitioners and providing a wide range of services, to small services which rely on Aboriginal Health Workers/Practitioners and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary health care services, often with a preventive, health education focus. Our 143 ACCHOs operate approximately 700 facilities, including about 450 clinics. ACCHOs and their facilities and clinics contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive holistic primary health care, and by integrating and coordinating care and services. Many provide home and site visits; medical, public health and health promotion services; allied health; nursing services; assistance with making appointments and transport; help accessing childcare or dealing with the justice system; drug and alcohol services; and help with income support.

Collectively, we employ about 6,000 staff, 56 per cent of whom are Indigenous, making us the single largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country.

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Introduction

NACCHO welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry into Australia's waste management and recycling industries. With input from NACCHO affiliates Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council (AHMRC), Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC) and Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC), this submission focuses on:

- improving waste management in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- protecting the environment and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to land, water and traditional food sources, and
- creating enterprise and job opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission and our recommendations with you.

Key points

- Waste management and recycling are essential determinants of the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Reducing waste and improving waste management and recycling practices would improve air, land and water quality and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who access land and water, including for traditional foods and to engage in cultural practices.
- Increasing employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in waste management, recycling and related industries would optimise their health and wellbeing.

Improving waste management in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Recommendation 1

That state and territory governments, in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, identify and implement waste management and recycling strategies to protect the environment and the health and wellbeing of residents.

Waste is a significant environmental issue, and each Australian state and territory government has its own arrangements and standards for managing waste in communities. All jurisdictions and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities identify that avoiding, reducing, reusing, repairing, repurposing and recycling rubbish is much more preferable to disposing it, in light of the costs and the risks to the environment and the health of residents. However, current provisions for regulating and managing waste in rural and remote communities are often insufficient in ensuring the health and wellbeing of residents.

If waste is not managed well the health problems for communities are significant. Food waste attracts pests and vermin which starts and spreads diseases, including skin infections, tetanus, hepatitis A, Ross River virus and hook and threadworms. If sewage disposal is not properly controlled, diarrhoea, gastroenteritis and giardiasis is easily and quickly spread across the community. Illnesses can also be caused when pesticides, motor oil and other chemicals are illegally dumped and find their way into water supply.

Environmental health risk factors impacting on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities include: water treatment and supply, damage to country, food security (access to affordable and healthy food), rubbish collection and disposal and sewage disposal.¹ These risk factors make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more susceptible to diseases and infections, including bloodborne, gastrointestinal, vaccine preventable and vector borne diseases, and bacterial infections. Entrenched poverty from unemployment and low income exacerbates illness and premature death.²

¹ Prüss-Üstün, A., & Corvalán C., (2006). *Preventing Disease through Healthy Environments*. World Health Organisation.

² Dillon, M. (2018). Tactics vs Strategy in Aboriginal Housing. [Accessed 23/1/2020](#).

The Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority points out that poor environmental and human health outcomes result from:

- a lack of appropriate management practices and controls, and regulatory monitoring of waste
- explosion hazards from landfill gas and pollution to the atmosphere, soil, groundwater and adjoining surface waters from waste contamination, and
- odour, noise and dust associated with waste management.

Consideration needs to be given to the issues faced by smaller communities as compared to larger communities. Larger communities generate greater volumes of domestic and construction waste, resulting in a heavier load on existing waste facilities, and engage more in mining, oil and gas production. Smaller communities on the other hand, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, face economic constraints to implementing industry standard recycling and resource recovery practices, with waste that could otherwise be recycled ending up in landfill. Fiscal constraints also often result in communities not correctly disposing of hazardous wastes, including asbestos, batteries, paint and clinical waste.

Smaller communities (500 residents or less) may use trenches to manage waste/rubbish disposal. This involves digging trenches ready for rubbish, with soil piled along the side to cover the rubbish once the trench is full. The number of trenches and their depth depends on the size of the community and for how long people intend to remain in that location. Clearly marked signs should show where rubbish should be dumped so rubbish is not left everywhere, and so that sewage is not dumped with rubbish.

Because the success of local waste management, recycling and reuse solutions largely depends on how these processes fit into broader initiatives and activities at the community level, participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members is crucial. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members are likely to want to participate in decision making about sites for landfill, the types and numbers of bins, and the placement of communal bins, which is often best done via information-sharing sessions. Community involvement in decision making about waste management services and practices will vary for each community, and should be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Workers (EHWs) and Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) are vital for ensuring that housing and built environment are kept healthy.

Challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:³

- limited transportation options (trucks, etc.)
- irregular waste collection services
- high costs to setting up and maintaining waste management systems
- limited waste infrastructure or access to markets for recyclables
- difficulties recruiting and retaining staff
- vast distances and poor road conditions between towns, restricting opportunity to transport recyclable and hazardous wastes to appropriate facilities landfills are often designed below minimum standards for environmental protection (yet may be the only disposal option provided)
- inability to afford the relocation or redesign of landfills to better protect the environment
- difficulties identifying custodians of the land and getting consent from land owners to develop landfill areas, and
- limited waste data to better assess waste management and recycling infrastructure needs.

The National Indigenous Infrastructure Guide outlines that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities requirements include:⁴

- improving household rubbish collection / waste disposal, including trucks (general purpose trucks being adequate for smaller communities)
- improving landfill methods, comprising either trench landfill, area fill and/or cell landfill (or waste landfill cages in smaller communities)
- introducing of new and upgraded waste deposit and transfer stations

³ Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority, 2015

⁴ National Indigenous Infrastructure Guide, 2010, <https://cfat.org.au/national-indigenous-infrastructure-guide>

- improving separation and recycling systems, including crushers, balers and shredders
- handling/managing hazardous materials, including clinical waste
- installing and maintaining wind breaks, fencing and water drainage in and around landfill sites
- conducting audits using a waste assessment tool to ascertain what waste is generated, its source, and how it is currently being managed
- providing sustainable training, jobs and income in waste management and recycling, and
- better designing landfill sites and recycling depots to better protect the community's water resources and to prevent flooding damage by wastewater and stormwater.

Numerous recent national level environmental health initiatives have in part recognised some of the social and environmental health issues associated with waste management and recycling, including:

- Preventing Disease and Injury through Healthy Environments: Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth) Strategic Plan 2016—2020, and
- Department of Health's Expert Reference Panel on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health (ERPAboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EH) Action Plan 2019—2023.

These initiatives should place greater emphasis on strategies for improving waste management and recycling issues that currently impact the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Specific solutions are required in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including:³

- community education and awareness raising of the need to avoid and reduce waste, including food waste which has enormous health, economic, environmental and social consequences (health promotion activities developed and implemented in conjunction with Aboriginal communities)
- accessing grants programs for reducing and reusing waste
- circulating best-practice guidance materials for handling and disposing of various wastes
- identifying emerging and ongoing waste management issues requiring multi-faceted solutions
- increasing coordination of localised waste arrangements to prevent litter and illegal dumping
- improving transportation of hazardous wastes out of communities (including reducing costs)
- expanding the container deposit scheme and plastic bag bans
- funding regional councils to work together and share recycling infrastructure (see case study)
- assessing landfill sites and prioritising fixing those that are an environment and health risk
- identifying and pursuing innovative technologies and systems (recycling, clean energy, etc.)
- funding research and data management into meeting targets in waste reduction, and
- conducting regulatory reviews and providing reports on progress in waste reduction.

The National Indigenous Infrastructure Guide identifies that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities also require:⁴

- access and equity in relation to adequate waste management services
- support in protecting their health and safety, and awareness of risks of untreated waste
- appropriate waste management approaches that factor weather conditions (e.g. high rainfall)
- more affordable waste management systems, and
- greater involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as service users and providers (including employed positions).

Community and regional environmental waste management strategies and health plans must be developed in genuine partnership between local residents and state/territory governments, with key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in place. For instance, when the Queensland Government developed the waste management strategy in 2019 an Advisory Group was established with representatives from Government and key peak bodies.⁵ Waste management systems need to allow for effective separation of waste into organics, recycling and landfill, which would involve providing specific bins for households.

⁵ Queensland Government, 2019. [Queensland Waste Management Strategy](#).

Environmental health standards and appropriate guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be rationalized, adopted and enforced.

Protecting the environment and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to land, water and traditional food sources

Recommendation 2

That state and territory governments, in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, ensure that waste management practices protect the environment and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to land, water and traditional food sources.

It is imperative that current and future waste management and recycling infrastructure and systems do not pollute surrounding waterways, and that the quality of water in waterways is maintained via regular testing and maintenance procedures.⁴ Improving and maintaining air and water quality, which includes ensuring high quality equipment is in place, as well as qualified staff to maintain this equipment, benefits the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who access waterways and surrounding traditional foods and medicines as well as the nearby flora and fauna.⁶

Waste also harms biodiversity and ecosystems, adversely impacting cultural landscapes, soil, groundwater, coastlines, waterways, birds and other animals. In Lutruwita, Tasmania, plastics have been found in mutton birds, which is an important cultural food for Aboriginal people. Due to the high cost of transporting rubbish out of communities, such as the Truwana region in Tasmania, it is often burnt on site, which adversely impacts air quality.

Unfortunately, in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities water quality is also a problem, including tap water on Palm Island due to poor industrial waste management.⁷ Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's access to clean and healthy water would increase their access to traditional foods and medicines. Enabling access to waterways increases connection to Country and cultural practices, while overall improving the health and strengthening the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Increasing land and water access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would also foster greater innovation in business ventures in primary and secondary industry, generate new income streams and build community infrastructure and sustainability.

Poor waste management and recycling practices puts air and water quality and supply at risk, with current levels diminishing and often critical. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal for water⁸ identifies that safe drinking water is an essential determinant of health and wellbeing, with wastewater treatment and hygiene practices essential. However, despite Australia being a signatory to the SDG, which involves being committed to ensuring all Australians have access to quality water, there are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote communities who do not.

Unsatisfactory and unsafe water quality and a lack of access to healthy waterways is linked to excessive sugary drink consumption in rural and remote Australia, resulting in adverse health outcomes.⁹ Water supplies in many communities are increasingly contaminated by microbes or naturally occurring chemicals. Broome and its surrounding regions, for instance, face particular water quality and supply issues due to susceptibility to industrial contamination, with the impacts of climate change worsening the situation.¹⁰

⁶ Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia, 2019. [Accessed 15/4/2020.](#)

⁷ ABC, 2019, [Water quality on Palm Island](#)

⁸ Water Source, 2019, Australian Indigenous remote communities and water, sanitation and hygiene. [Accessed 15/4/2020.](#)

⁹ AWA, 2019, Poor water quality is linked to sugary drink consumption. [Accessed 15/4/2020.](#)

¹⁰ NACCHO, 2019, Submission to the WA Governments' WA climate health inquiry. [Accessed 18/3/2020.](#)

Creating enterprise and job opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Recommendation 3

That Federal, State and Territory Governments, in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, create enterprise and job opportunities for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in waste management, recycling and related industries.

An overhaul of existing waste management and recycling systems in urban, rural and remote communities would provide a range of jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, remedying high unemployment rates and improving their physical, mental social and emotional wellbeing.⁴

There is particular need for the expansion of jobs and the economy in general in rural and remote communities, and we appreciate that the Australian Government has undertaken a range of initiatives to do so that can be further expanded, including:

- the Productivity Commission's Study Report *Transitioning Regional Economies* (2017)
- the appointment of an external Expert Panel to respond to the House of Representatives Select Committee's report *Regions at the Ready: Investing in Australia's Future* (2019), and
- the pending Regional Australia White Paper that will outline the Government's regional development policy following the Green Paper public consultation process.

These initiatives can be expanded and better funded to achieve greater waste management and related employment outcomes, and the same applies to the following regional initiatives:

- Regional Development Australia—a collaboration with relevant stakeholders for identifying economic opportunities and leveraging private and public sector investment
- Regional Jobs and Investment Packages—\$222.3 million funding to assist regions diversify their economies, stimulate long-term economic growth and deliver sustainable jobs, and
- Regional Australia Institute—informs government and communities on the impact of gaps in training and re-skilling in particular regions and the shrinking pool of labour to fill jobs.

More jobs in waste management, recycling and related industries could be included in the Fair Work Strong Communities scheme, aimed at creating 10,500 part time jobs (20 hours per week) at the minimum wage and with standard rights and conditions, including superannuation. The Government's intention is to provide these jobs through local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations across regions that facilitate the Community Development Program (CDP). We argue these jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be overseen by local Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

Jobs in these regions under the Fair Work Strong Communities scheme would achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as compared to CDP. CDP only provides participants (80% of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) with the Newstart income support payment and does not provide superannuation nor other standard rights and conditions. The Fair Work Strong Communities scheme also provides a training account that enables participants to develop their job skills as well as their literacy and numeracy, which CDP does not provide.

The development of innovative ways to reuse materials either within the community or externally may assist in stimulating new business enterprises. Small businesses could be created to salvage readily accessible spare parts from landfill and elsewhere that could be resold or reused (see case study).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Workers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Workers (EHWs) and Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) are vital in educating residents in rural and remote community about best practises in the use of internal and external bins, and to monitor these practices. Environmental health services delivered by ACCHOs and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff can help achieve better health outcomes for local communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have confidence in Aboriginal community control health service models and can engage effectively if the environmental and waste management services are provided by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in a culturally competent manner.

Case study – Innovation and collaboration in the Big Rivers region, NT

The Big Rivers Waste Management Working Group comprises representatives of Roper Gulf Regional Council, Victoria Daly Regional Council and West Daly Regional Council, with funding from the Northern Territory Department of Health, the three councils and in-kind support from Katherine Town Council. What had been an issue in the Big Rivers region became the communities' financial solution when rubbish adding to landfills started being used for financial and environmental benefits.

The Working Group had initially assessed how waste had been managed at landfills operated by the three regional councils, before Working Group members provided their expertise and support to improve operational practices for the betterment of surrounding communities and the environment. The main waste management issues in the communities had been outdated landfilling methods, which were improperly designed without separating recyclable and hazardous materials, causing adverse health and environmental outcomes. The three councils took a unified and financially viable approach to resource recovery, which is often too expensive for individual regional councils to afford. Costs transporting materials to a processing centre were shared between them.

Making the most of resource recovery opportunities created additional revenue streams and boosted local employment. Resource recovery became a viable industry, an employer of unskilled labour, and a cost saver in that facilities did not need to be as extensively rebuilt, upgraded or extended. The federal and state government were attracted to the innovation and collaboration approach of good partnership, and saw the need for improved waste management and recycling in the region, which has secured numerous grants for the Working Group's initiatives.

In numerous states/territories EHWs have been employed by ACCHOs to improve living conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households and communities. In Queensland, EHWs tend to be government officers and quite distinct from the ATSIACCHO (ACCHO) sector. There is scope to improve integration and place EHWs within ACCHOs, and to increase the role of Aboriginal Health Workers to the provision of environmental health services. With additional funding, ACCHOs are well placed to oversee the employment of EHWs and their delivery of environmental health services. Ideally, many of these jobs should be identified positions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. ACCHOs and EHWs can promote the use of internal household bins and secured, child-proof external bins, and ensure litter hot spots such as community parks, ovals and community service centres have visible, secure public bins. EHWs can also help to make the public aware of the risks associated with incorrect handling of hazardous materials (including paint, batteries, oil and clinical waste) and burning rubbish, and monitor the frequency and consistency of the collection of household bins so community members do not resort to burning waste.

