

Working together for better drinking water in the bush

A summary of a national collaborative
forum held in Mparntwe (Alice Springs)
27-29 June 2023

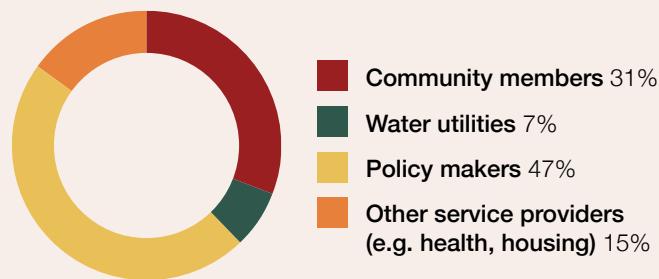
Safe drinking water is essential for life, but it's not guaranteed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote Australia. Water supplies and services in some of these communities are often unreliable and unsafe, and do not meet the same standards seen in non-Indigenous and non-remote areas (for example, the water does not meet the health-based targets of the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines).¹

In June 2023, people came together for a national forum, which the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, the Goyder Institute for Water Research and Desert Knowledge Australia delivered together. The forum aim was to discuss the water supply challenges faced by remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to identify actions that could help to resolve them. Presentations and workshops in the forum were designed to prioritise First Nations voices and make sure they are the focus of future decision-making. The forum was the first of its kind and represents a collective conversation on drinking water in the bush.

68 attendees

5 workshops

12 key actions



"I grew up thinking that bad water was for the community and good water was for white people."

"Some people reported spending \$30-50 on bottled water each week which made it challenging to afford a healthy diet."²

¹ Wyrwoll et al., 'Measuring the gaps in drinking water quality and policy across regional and remote Australia,' *NPI Clean Water*, 2022, 5, 32; Hall et al., 'Safe water and sanitation in remote Indigenous communities in Australia: conditions towards sustainable outcomes,' *Australasian Journal of Water Resources*, 2022, 26, 187-198.

² E Vanweydeveld, *Closing the water for people and communities gap: improving water services to First Nations remote communities*, Water Services Association of Australia, 2022.

Creating a culturally safe forum to build trust and listen in different ways

On the first day of the forum people from remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory spoke about their lived experiences accessing clean and secure drinking water. This session included their priorities and hopes for the future – what better drinking water looks like to them and what having better water can mean for bush communities. It was fitting that the forum was held at the Desert Knowledge Precinct, a culturally important space in the bush where Arrernte people would meet travellers and share information, stories and song. The forum heard stories from Country and built relationships in this spirit.

Five workshops were held throughout the forum to identify the challenges relating to drinking water for remote communities, the solutions, actions and information required to deliver change, and the things to prioritise to see that change happen sooner. The workshops made sure that all voices were heard and appreciated. Small group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and informal yarns happened alongside more formal presentations to the group. Videos, end-of-day summaries and handwritten notes were also used to capture information.

The safe forum environment and the diverse group of attendees meant genuine solutions, actions and pathways for outcomes were discussed honestly.

Truth-telling and governance were hot topics of conversation

Nine high-level challenges were identified in the first workshop, with truth-telling and governance for decision-making generating the most discussion. All attendees, and particularly Aboriginal community members, identified truth-telling as a key issue relating to sharing of knowledge and information, communication, transparency and developing trust and respect. Governance challenges highlighted in the forum included responsibility, accountability, complexity, transparency and a lack of consistency across the states and territories and the regions.

Attendees identified 9 high level challenges

Employment

Governance

Infrastructure

Planning

Social

Truth-telling

Uniqueness of place

Water quality

Water security

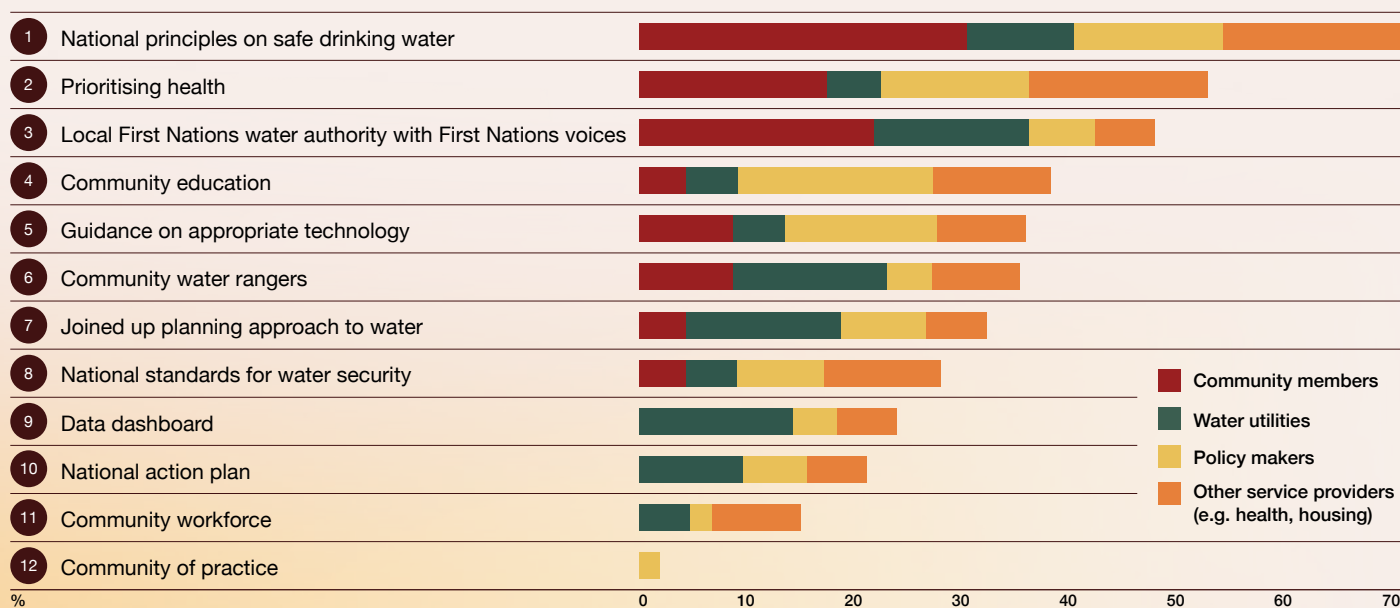
Focusing on national safe drinking water principles, prioritising health and a First Nations water authority

Twelve key focus items for action were identified as discussions progressed through the workshops. Three actions were prioritised by most attendees:

1. **Develop national principles on safe drinking water** that prioritise drinking water quality and water source protection, incorporate local Cultural Knowledge, and include Indigenous-led, localised community engagement.
2. **Prioritise health** by addressing national health targets through better understanding of water quantity and quality issues.
3. **Create a localised First Nations water authority** that includes First Nations voices and provides expertise on water in remote communities.

All 12 actions had value, in different combinations, to solve different challenges.

ACTIONS TO IMPROVE DRINKING WATER IN THE BUSH AS VOTED BY FORUM ATTENDEES



“When Aboriginal people lack a culturally safe space to express their truths, achieving sustainable change within their community becomes counterproductive and an unrealistic expectation. I take pride in our accomplishment of facilitating a forum where Aboriginal people could share their voices on a significant issue impacting their families and community.”

Raymond Penangke

Clear need for action heard from communities, service providers and government

The forum provided important signals for change in the way that we provide access to drinking water in the bush. There is a clear desire for:

- new kinds of partnerships that encourage shared decision-making, with greater First Nations self-determination
- data and information sharing to inform future planning across jurisdictions and among sectors, including health and planning sectors
- the creation of standards, principles and plans that prioritise the health of First Nations peoples.

Change can start now, together

Attendees were clear that “actions are urgent and need to be done immediately.” Although many of the actions will need time and resources to be effective, a commitment to start some initiatives could be made immediately, including:

- **Data dashboard** – create data infrastructure to hold drinking water quality and availability information centrally which would allow it to be used by communities
- **Water treatment technologies** – research and identify technologies that can be used by bush communities and monitor their effectiveness
- **Water forecasts** – forecast rain and groundwater availability under different water planning and climate scenarios to include in future planning and community development
- **Standard terms of reference** – standardise the definitions of *water security* and *basic level of service* across states and territories
- **Communities of practice** – set up communities of practice in states and territories to learn from others’ success towards improving water security
- **Water rangers** – set up culturally relevant community education and workforce development programs that lead to Water Ranger qualifications and positions.

We hope that those who can drive change in this area will harness the spirit and momentum of this forum, as well as the knowledge gathered and relationships made, to work towards better water for all communities.



Scan QR code to view the full report and appendices online or visit:

goyderinstitute.org/project/working-together-for-better-drinking-water-in-the-bush/

We would like to thank each of the First Nations community members who gave their time so willingly to attend the forum and contribute their knowledge and experiences to this important discussion. The authors were humbled by the generosity of spirit, dignity and resilience shown by each of these individuals, and their patience sharing their experiences with the broader group.

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