

Northern Australia
Indigenous Reference Group 2025-26

30 January 2026

Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia

Re: IRG submission to the inquiry into preparing for emerging industries across northern Australia

Dear Committee members,

On behalf of the Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG), I am pleased to provide the attached submission to the Committee's inquiry into preparing for emerging industries in northern Australia.

Northern Australia represents a unique intersection of national priorities, including Net Zero transition, critical minerals development, Future Made in Australia, renewable energy and regional growth. These agendas align closely with the Northern Australia Action Plan 2024–2029 and present significant opportunities to advance Indigenous economic participation and asset ownership.

The IRG's submission focuses on ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can participate in emerging sectors from a position of economic authority, with pathways that convert existing rights, capabilities and cultural knowledge into durable, intergenerational wealth. The submission outlines the structural settings necessary to achieve this including capital access, capability development, regulatory design, infrastructure readiness and community-led evaluation frameworks.

We welcome the Committee's attention to these matters and would be pleased to engage further as the inquiry progresses.

Yours sincerely,



Prof. N M Nakata

Chair, Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

Enclosure: IRG submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia's inquiry into preparing for emerging industries across northern Australia

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia inquiry into preparing for emerging industries across Northern Australia

January 2026

Northern Australia's economic future is strongest when grounded in the rights, knowledge and leadership of First Nations peoples. Indigenous communities in the north hold the longest continuous land and sea management traditions on Earth, a unique capability base, and a deep cultural and economic connection to Country.

The emergence of new sectors across northern Australia such as critical minerals, renewable energy, carbon markets, bioindustries, digital services and land and sea management economies, creates significant potential for long-term economic transformation. Achieving this transformation in a fair and sustainable way requires industry and government to embed First Nations economic self-determination at the heart of any strategy preparing the north for emerging industries. This submission calls for structural settings to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate fully in, and benefit from, emerging industries of the north, and to build intergenerational wealth by leveraging rights, cultural knowledge, and capabilities, supported by improved access to capital, skills development, regulatory settings, infrastructure, and community-led governance.

Recommendations

To prepare for emerging industries in northern Australia, the Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) recommends that governments and industry:

1. Embed First Nations leadership in all emerging industry frameworks, ensuring that the negotiation settings, benefit sharing structures and regulatory processes are consistent with self-determination and informed consent. For example, the *First Nations Clean Energy Strategy 2024–2030*, developed through extensive First Nations engagement and guided by principles that place First Nations people at the centre of Australia's clean energy transition, demonstrates how co-design can operationalise First Nations leadership in emerging industry frameworks.
2. Create coordinated capital pathways including microfinance, community revolving funds and a First Nations Special Investment Vehicle to support investment readiness and overcome barriers related to asset exclusion.
3. Reform regulatory and land tenure frameworks to simplify land administration arrangements, enabling First Nations people to exercise meaningful control over culturally held assets and to realise economic benefits from those assets.

4. Invest in workforce and enterprise capability through multi-year, place-based programs that build technical, commercial and governance skills aligned with emerging industry requirements.
5. Improve enabling infrastructure in northern Australia including First Nations communities particularly digital connectivity, transport access and energy reliability, to support enterprise development and reduce project risk.
6. Facilitate First Nations participation in higher value supply chain roles, supported by capability-building programs, equitable procurement processes and partnerships that allow businesses to grow and diversify.
7. Embed co-design evaluation frameworks into all programs relating to emerging industries, ensuring that intergenerational capability, community defined outcomes and long-term economic benefits are measured transparently.

Northern Australia is predominantly First Nations Country

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 16 per cent of the northern Australian population, far greater than the three per cent share of the national population and maintain rights or interests in around 78 per cent of the land mass in the north.¹ Most of the coastline of northern Australia is owned or managed by Traditional Owners under native title, land rights, or Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) arrangements. Any emerging industry is intertwined with First Nations governance, land tenure, and community aspirations.

Untapped economic strengths

First Nations peoples bring critical capabilities that are foundational to emerging industries in the north. These include:

- **Environmental, marine, and land management expertise** – First Nations people possess sophisticated, place-based knowledge systems developed over thousands of years, providing essential insight into sustainable land and marine development.
- **Cultural and ecological knowledge systems** – Indigenous knowledge is both an intellectual resource and an essential guide for industries such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. This knowledge includes methods of regenerating ecosystems and sustaining biodiversity.
- **Established ranger networks** – Across Australia Indigenous ranger groups manage large areas of land and sea, delivering environmental services, protecting cultural heritage, and conducting conservation activities that align with emerging green opportunities.
- **Increasing business ownership in diverse sectors** – There has been significant growth in Indigenous entrepreneurship, with increasing participation in agriculture, tourism, energy and construction sectors. These businesses are poised to expand further, especially in areas of environmental and cultural enterprise.

¹ Office of Northern Australia. (2021) [Our North, Our Future: 2021-2022](#).

- **Governance structures enabling joint ventures and local decision-making** – Traditional Owners and Indigenous corporations have governance structures that support joint ventures with non-Indigenous entities, ensuring local participation, decision-making and equitable benefit sharing.
- **Strong community leadership, networks and partnerships** – Indigenous communities possess strong leadership, networks and partnerships, strengthening regional stability and economic growth and enabling collaboration and shared resources.
- **Resilience and adaptability** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are resilient and adaptable, grounded in generations of innovation in challenging environments.

Longstanding, culturally-rooted, and place-based capabilities provide an extremely strong foundation for northern Australia to leverage as it develops new industries, particularly those tied to sustainability, environmental care, and low-carbon futures.

Systemic barriers remain

Industry in northern Australia operates under structural constraints of remoteness, weak infrastructure, thin markets and high, unreliable logistics cost (seasonally impacted). For First Nations people and businesses, these place-based challenges sit on top of a longer history of exclusion from land, capital and opportunity, making participation harder, risks greater and pathways into higher value economic roles far more limited.

The barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities continue to face to participating in and benefitting from emerging industries, include:

- **Legacy of wealth and asset exclusion:** The emerging Indigenous business sector in northern Australia faces ongoing structural barriers because of historic asset exclusion, including limited access to networks and markets, industry connections and mentors and established supply chains.
- **Restrictive or complex tenure frameworks:** Although much of the land in the north falls within the Indigenous Estate, overlapping forms of tenure – such as freehold, native title, co-management, other special rights – create complexity and perceived commercial risk, discouraging investment and making large-scale projects difficult.² For traditional owners, land rights, native title and other special rights are essential for cultural and legal recognition, but their current structure limits First Nations peoples' ability to leverage land, sea country and cultural heritage as productive economic assets.³
- **Limited capital access:** While First Nations businesses contribute \$16 billion annually to the national economy and employ over 116,000 people, access to affordable capital remains a central barrier. Mainstream banks and financial institutions often regard Indigenous businesses as higher risk and lower levels of inherited wealth or collateral reduce the ability to secure loans. This lack of capital undermines the ability to start, expand, or sustain businesses and prevents pathways to intergenerational wealth.

² Dale, A., Taylor, B., & Lane, M., (2021) [Land Tenure and Development in Northern Australia](#)

³ Australian Museum (2024) [Limitations of Native Title](#)

- **Insufficient local infrastructure:** Many northern Indigenous communities experience gaps in essential infrastructure, including gaps in transport corridors, logistics systems, energy reliability, digital connectivity, water systems and waste services. These deficiencies hinder participation in emerging industries such as renewable energy, tourism and ecological land management. They also increase the cost of doing business, reduce access to markets and restrict the ability to scale up or meet supply chain requirements.
- **Short funding cycles and fragmented policy support:** Government funding and support programs operate on short-term or project-by-project bases, rarely aligning with long-term planning horizons required for sustainable community-led industry development. In addition, policy settings can be fragmented across sectors creating barriers for cohesive, long term Indigenous enterprise growth.
- **Workforce readiness constraints:** Persistent infrastructure deficits in communities, higher levels of social and economic disadvantage and limited availability of culturally appropriate education, training and workplaces constrains workforce participation. Lower English Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) rates (particularly where English is not first language), digital literacy and industrial skills gaps and housing undersupply directly affects workforce participation and retention.
- **Challenges of remoteness:** The high cost and seasonal unreliability of travel and logistics in remote and regional northern Australia constitute a structural constraint on economic participation. These conditions limit access to training and effective governance and undermine business viability through elevated mobilisation costs, operational downtime and disruptions to cash flow. The impacts are particularly acute for First Nations enterprises seeking to progress into higher-value roles within regional supply chains, where compliance, coordination, and reliability requirements are more demanding.

Principles for First Nations–Led Industry Development

Self-determination as the foundation for economic participation

First Nations economic participation rests on the ability of communities to determine their own development pathways. While land, water and cultural rights create the platform for this authority, rights alone do not guarantee that communities can convert these assets into sustained value.

To ensure self-determination is realised in practice, government and industry settings must support:

- **Economic development aligned with First Nations’ values and priorities,** ensuring respect for culture, identity and long-term sustainability rooted in First Nations’ capacities, knowledge and connection to country.
- **Negotiation processes grounded in free, prior and informed consent,** enabling communities to move from short term, transactional benefits to co-ownership and transformational equity. Approval timeframes for emerging industries must allow

sufficient time for communities to receive information, seek independent advice, deliberate, and respond.

- **Local decision-making**, ensuring regulatory settings uphold community authority and aspirations.
- **Protection and appropriate commercial use of Cultural and Intellectual Property**, ensuring that emerging industries strengthen, rather than dilute, community ownership of cultural knowledge and associated economic opportunities.
- **Equitable benefit sharing**, ensuring profits and benefits of development are shared equitably with the First Nations communities whose land, knowledge and labour made possible.

Embedding these foundations ensures economic development proceeds on terms that reflect community priorities, cultural values and long-term aspirations.

Translating rights and capabilities into durable wealth

The Indigenous estate across northern Australia holds deep rights, knowledge systems and land and sea assets that can underpin emerging industry participation. But turning this foundation into durable wealth requires removing structural barriers that limit agency and access.

Key enablers include:

- **Leveraging rights and assets** to generate sustainable economic outcomes. Reforms to land-use regulation, clarity of tenure and governance and mechanisms to enable First Nations entities to lease, partner, invest or hold equity.
- **Access to capital** tailored to the realities of asset exclusion: The creation of financing vehicles, appropriate investment mechanisms and policy changes to support Indigenous participation in emerging industries – especially high capital sectors like renewables, critical minerals, infrastructure.
- **Long term, flexible funding and investment arrangements**, rather than short-term or pilot-only initiatives, with funding suites that embed planning, skills development, and workforce capability building.
- **Prioritising First Nation return on procurement weighting**: Procurement purchasing policies must place higher importance on ensuring that financial and social benefits reach First Nations businesses and communities.
- **Protect and leverage Cultural and Intellectual Property of Indigenous people**: Clear mechanisms to safeguard cultural and intellectual property, ensuring communities can retain control over how their knowledge contributes to new industries.
- **Capital mobilisation at scale**: Where appropriate, the Government can play a catalytic role by using its balance sheet to de-risk private and concessional investment into First Nations enterprises. An arms-length Special Investment Vehicle would provide patient capital at scale, complementing microfinance and revolving funds, and help build a coherent and accessible funding ecosystem.

- **Culturally appropriate education, training and workplaces**, including wrap around support services to address LLN, digital literacy and industrial skills gaps.

Building Capabilities, Governance and Participation Pathways

Emerging industries of the north will only succeed if workforce development, governance capability and enterprise leadership can endure across generations. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, intergenerational capability-building is fundamental. It requires strengthening the skills and agency of younger cohorts, supporting the stewardship roles of Elders, and ensuring that cultural authority is respected as new industries take shape. Policies focused solely on short term outcomes risk undermining the continuity of community decision-making, local ownership, and cultural integrity that underpin sustainable participation.

Intergenerational capability development depends on investment in education, leadership pathways, community-driven enterprise planning and mechanisms that enable families and clans to translate land-based and cultural knowledge into economic participation aligned with community priorities. Approaches that recognise the interdependence of cultural and economic capabilities position Indigenous communities to shape emerging industries rather than remain at their margins.

The following elements are required to achieve this trajectory:

- **Workforce and Skills:** Emerging industries require specialised skills. Multi-year, place-based workforce programs that are co-designed with local organisations are essential for building technical and digital literacy and supporting pathways into higher value roles. Local workforce growth must be prioritised, with intentional investment in pathways, mentoring and capability transfer. While some imported specialist and surge labour will be required in the short term, housing supply and housing types must be planned to support this growth without crowding out local access.
- **Enterprise and Governance Capability:** Access to consistent commercial, legal and technical advice supports informed negotiations and enterprise planning. Strong governance structures enable communities to steward wealth, manage risk and participate in joint ventures with confidence.
- **Participation across supply chains:** Policy settings should support First Nations enterprises to move beyond low-value roles into processing, logistics, monitoring, certification and digital services, ensuring participation in parts of the supply chains where long-term value is created.
- **Fit-for-purpose infrastructure:** Government investment should focus on transport, logistics and digital connectivity to market access, enable co-location models and Indigenous-led enterprise zones, to unlock business activity and enable communities to build locally owned assets over time.
- **Fit-for-purpose regulation:** Regulatory frameworks should embed First Nations participation from the outset. This includes co-designed licensing processes, benefit-sharing arrangements and cultural governance components, including safeguarding

Cultural and Intellectual Property ensuring new industries do not exploit Indigenous knowledge without consent or fair returns.

The Importance of Evaluation and Measuring Impact

For governments and communities to assess whether emerging industry policies are producing meaningful, long-lasting outcomes, strong evaluation frameworks are essential. Many existing evaluation approaches focus narrowly on outputs, such as program participation or short-term employment numbers, and do not adequately capture changes in community capability or long-term economic positioning.

Key elements for effective evaluation

Evaluation frameworks for emerging industries in northern Australia should be designed to measure:

- **Intergenerational impact**, including leadership development, knowledge transfer, and the strengthening of community governance.
- **Community defined outcomes**, ensuring that measures reflect local priorities, cultural values and long-term community aspirations rather than externally imposed indicators.
- **Structural change**, such as shifts in market access, capital readiness, partnership equity, and the removal of barriers that limit Indigenous participation.
- **Durability of economic benefits**, including whether wealth, skills and ownership are being built in ways that remain within communities over time.

Governance and Oversight

- **Independent oversight:** There is a fundamental need for independent oversight mechanisms to ensure emerging industry frameworks deliver on their commitments to First Nations communities.
- **Future Legacy and self-determination:** Embedding a long-term legacy objective in policy design and governance can ensure investment is directed towards building enduring Indigenous capability, self-reliance and locally held assets, rather than short-term outputs that do not deliver lasting benefit.

Embedding evaluation in program design

- Evaluation should be embedded from the outset, with clear accountability and transparent reporting, enabling timely adjustments and a shared understanding of progress between governments and Indigenous stakeholders.
- Integrated national longitudinal data infrastructure that tracks outcomes across education, training, and employment over time is needed to provide robust, long-term evidence to assess policy effectiveness.
- Evaluation should prioritise learning, continuous improvement and adaptation over short-term, compliance driven reporting, so that evidence meaningfully informs better outcomes over time.

Opportunities for First Nations-Led Emerging Industries

Given the combination of large-scale Indigenous tenure, deep environmental and cultural knowledge, existing ranger and land-management capacity, and emerging global commitments for sustainability, there are clear opportunities for First Nations led industries in northern Australia. Key sectors include:

- **Clean energy and Bioenergy:** Indigenous-led bioenergy and land management enterprises are already showing success. For example, the Arnhem Land Biomass Project combines traditional fire-management practices with modern carbon-farming and bioenergy production to deliver sustainable income and environmental outcomes. Such initiatives offer potential for remote communities to transition from diesel or unsustainable energy sources to renewable, locally managed energy, building energy sovereignty while creating meaningful employment pathways.
- **Critical minerals and other resources:** Significant critical mineral and resource deposits across northern Australia overlap with Indigenous Country, creating opportunities for First Nations led participation in consent-based access, environmental management, rehabilitation, downstream processing and ownership.
- **Environmental markets and Carbon/Offset Schemes:** Through fire management, land care, and conservation-driven activities, Indigenous ranger groups and communities are well positioned to supply carbon credits, biodiversity offsets, or environmental services, especially given their stewardship of large, high-value landscapes and seascapes.
- **Blue Economy: Marine conservation, fisheries, eco-tourism:** Many Indigenous communities manage sea-country as part of their cultural responsibilities; IPAs that extend into marine environments provide a basis for sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, marine conservation and culturally respectful eco-tourism.
- **Sustainable Land Use, Bushfoods and Agribusiness:** Traditional ecological knowledge underpins understanding of native plant species, bushfoods, sustainable harvesting, land regeneration, and land care. With tenure and support, First Nations communities could lead in sustainable bush-food enterprises, native species cultivation, regenerative agriculture, and value-added products rooted in cultural knowledge and Country.
- **Cultural Industries, Eco-tourism and Arts:** First Nations cultural heritage, art, storytelling and cultural practices provide a foundation for culturally grounded tourism, art enterprises, and place-based services, offering social, cultural and economic benefits while preserving and celebrating Indigenous identity.
- **Digital Knowledge sectors and Indigenous Data Sovereignty:** As Australia moves further into the digital age, there is potential for Indigenous-led digital enterprises rooted in cultural knowledge, land and sea data management, remote service delivery, digital media and culturally appropriate tech-enables business. Securing data sovereignty – ensuring that Indigenous communities control their own knowledge, environmental data and cultural data – is both right and a vital foundation for sustainable, self-determined development.

The IRG views the committee's inquiry as a vital opportunity to shape emerging industries in northern Australia in a way that delivers fair, sustainable and culturally grounded outcomes for First Nations communities. With careful design, grounded in self-determination, appropriate capital access, supporting infrastructure and robust governance, the Australian Government can lay the groundwork for a northern economy in which First Nations peoples are central architects and long-term beneficiaries of new opportunities.

IRG Biographies

Professor Martin Nakata, Chair – Townsville, Qld



Professor Martin Nakata, AM, PhD, is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Indigenous Education & Strategy at James Cook University (Member of the Northern Australia University Alliance).

Prof. Nakata has over 30-years of Indigenous education, research, and community engagement experience.

Troy Fraser, Doomadgee (Gulf of Carpentaria), Qld



Mr. Fraser is Chief Executive Officer at Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council, and formerly worked as Community, Youth and Economic Development Manager at the Aboriginal Development Benefits Trust.

Mr. Fraser represented the IRG at several parliamentary inquiries and on one occasion Mr. Fraser's insights prompted the parliamentary select committee to ask for a supplementary submission on the topic.

Alinta McGuire, Darwin, NT



Ms. Alinta McGuire has experience in the banking industry, having served at Westpac as the State Manager for Indigenous Banking in the Northern Territory from 2015 to 2024. In September 2024, she commenced in a new position as Director of Impact and Innovation Learning Projects at Impact North. Impact North is a not-for-profit organisation empowering social entrepreneurship. Ms. McGuire has strong networks and strategic leadership in empowering Indigenous communities.

Damien Djerrkura, Nhulunbuy, NT



Mr. Damien Djerrkura is the CEO of the North East Arnhem Land (NEAL) Aboriginal Corporation, which oversees the development of North East Arnhem Land's resources. Mr. Djerrkura demonstrates expertise in Indigenous community development, strategic program design, stakeholder engagement and training and development.

Nini Mills, Broome, WA



Ms. Mills is CEO of Nyamba Buru Yawuru, the operational company of the Yawuru Native Title Holders Aboriginal Corporation based in Broome. Ms. Mills has previously held senior management and leadership roles within government agencies and community organisations that are focused on leading strategic direction, policy reform, program design and service delivery.

Flora Warrior, Torres Strait, Qld



Ms. Warrior has a background in Indigenous health and is also a former local government CEO. Ms Warrior is also involved as a community advocate in the Education, Economic Development, Health, Languages and Fisheries space. Ms Warrior is well known throughout North Queensland Indigenous communities for her Cultural Brokerage work and was also a state and national winner in the People Development category at the Queensland (2018) and Australian Seafood Industry Awards 2019.

She has a Bachelor of Arts, and a Master of Business Administration, is a principal consultant in her business, Saltwater Blue Consultancy Services and is involved in several sectors.