Feeding Australia: A National Food Security Strategy

Submission to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Lowitja Institute, September 2025

September 2025

Dear Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry,

Re: National Food Security Strategy: discussion paper

Lowitja Institute is Australia's national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, named in honour of our Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG. We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the National Food Security Strategy.

Climate and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, including the intersecting issues relating to food and food security, is a policy priority for Lowitja Institute. The lack of healthy and affordable food in remote First Nations Communities, tied in with the challenges posed by an increasingly unstable climate, have a direct and negative impact on the health and wellbeing of our peoples. Climate change undermines and threatens the availability and health of traditional food sources and ecosystems, extreme heat combined with energy insecurity make it challenging to store food, and extreme weather events from climate change threaten supply chains and infrastructure critical to food production, compromising food affordability and accessibility.

It is vital that there is a focus on the importance of climate change mitigation and adaptation to food security, as food production, transport storage, affordability and accessibility are challenges faced by many remote First Nations communities that strongly impact on health and wellbeing.

For several years, Lowitja Institute has been advocating for our peoples' rights in the context of climate change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. In addition to our submission below, we refer the Department to the following Lowitja Institute documents, which will provide helpful context, information and insight, both of which are available on our website:
- Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health
- Let's walk together, work together, we'll be stronger together: The need for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health

Please find our submission attached. We would welcome any opportunities to further discuss our recommendations therein.

Warm regards

Rosemary Smith
Executive Manager, Policy & Consulting, Lowitja Institute

General preamble – about Lowitja Institute

Lowitja Institute is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through high-impact quality research, knowledge translation, and by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers.

Established in January 2010, we operate on the key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing, and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact.

The Lowitja Institute has a longstanding commitment to the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, as members of the Coalition of Peaks, National Health Leadership Forum and the Close the Gap Steering Committee, including authoring the Close the Gap Campaign Report over four of the past five years.

Based on this experience we offer the following general comments and note some specific issues for consideration.

Submission

1.   What other principles should government, industry and community prioritise to support the development of the strategy and why are these important?

Self determination, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance

Achieving the objectives outlined in the future National Food Security Strategy requires research, policy, and data collection to be led and designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These objectives include supporting genuine partnerships and co-design, building capacity, and providing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to own and protect their foodways for generations for come.

Alongside ensuring the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, academics, health climate and environmental scientists, is ensuring that Indigenous Data Sovereignty is embedded within the future National Strategy. Data is a valuable resource and a cultural, strategic, and economic asset for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[1] There is an emerging and urgent need to address how data is collected and used in ways that shift ownership and control to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all sectors. Historically data development

---

[1] Taking Control of Our Data: A Discussion Paper on Indigenous Data Governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Communities, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne. DOI: 10.48455/rtvd-7782

and analysis has excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, undermining our rights to self-determination and decision-making over our Cultural, spiritual, social, environmental, and economic water interests and values.

We encourage the Department to consider and embed the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (ID-SOV) and Governance (ID-GOV) within the future National Food Security Strategy. Defined, Indigenous Data Sovereignty:

> *refers to the inherent and inalienable rights relating to the collection, ownership, and application of data about Indigenous peoples, and about their lifeways and territories. This includes Indigenous peoples' right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional cultural expressions, as well as their right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over these.[2]*

Related is the concept of Indigenous Data Governance, which enacts ID-SOV by:

> *providing processes and mechanisms for ensuring Indigenous Peoples' rights and interest are reflected in data policies and practices. It refers to the right of Indigenous peoples to autonomously decide what, how, and why Indigenous Data are collected, accessed, and used. It ensures that data on or about Indigenous peoples reflects Indigenous priorities, values, cultures and worldviews, and diversity.[3]*

ID-SOV relates to individual and collective information or knowledge, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to govern our own data, including its creation, collection, and use. It supports the rights of Indigenous peoples, our experiences, values, and understandings are developed and reflected in the data and information that pertains to us, our communities, and our cultural knowledges.

We recommend that Indigenous Data Sovereignty be embedded within the future National Food Security Strategy.

Considering data will underpin evidence-based decision making in food security under the future National Food Security Strategy, it is critical that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's cultural knowledge and data is collected by and owned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This would increase self-determination through empowering communities to lead the design of sustainable, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions that inform food security and better health outcomes into the future.

---

[2] Griffiths K.E., Johnston M., Bowman-Derrick S. 2021, Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Readiness Assessment and Evaluation Toolkit, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p.5

[3] Griffiths K.E., Johnston M., Bowman-Derrick S. 2021, Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Readiness Assessment and Evaluation Toolkit, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p.5

Equity and Justice

Equity and justice must be at the centre of any National Food Security Strategy. While the discussion paper recognises that food security is not equitable across Australia, there is a need for a sharper focus on addressing the upstream structural and social determinants of health - such as housing, income, transport, and access - that shape inequitable food security. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, these inequities are compounded by the ongoing impacts of colonisation, which continue to affect access, affordability, and distribution of food.

One of the ways that colonisation functions is by taking control of land, waterways and seas, including natural resources. Colonial practices are not sustainable, they are profit driven rather than driven by a desire to maintain balance and good health and wellbeing. Colonisation is ongoing in this country; one of its methods was and still is locking our peoples out of decision-making regarding Country, including decisions around food systems and food security.

This not only undermines health and wellbeing but also has broader environmental impacts, damaging ecosystems and threatening cultural sites. Embedding equity as an underpinning principle, requires a roadmap for systemic reform - one that restores decision-making authority, and ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can fully exercise their rights to health, food, and Country.

Climate change, energy insecurity and the impact of natural disasters

Energy insecurity is significant contributor to food insecurity, particularly in rural and remote Australia. Energy security can be defined as "an inability to meet basic households' energy needs'[4], and is a common experience for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households in remote areas across the country.

More than 10,000 Indigenous households in the Northern Territory access electricity via pre-paid power card meters, which disconnect when the credit runs out. Nearly 91% of all households experiences a disconnection from electricity over 2018-2019[5], and almost three quarters of households were disconnected more than ten times during this year.[6] Lack of access to affordable or reliable power contributes to food insecurity – sudden and frequent disconnection makes it challenging to keep food fresh and prevent it from spoiling.[7]

---

[44] Hernández, D; 2016, 'Understanding 'energy insecurity and why it matters to health', *Social Science & Medicine,* vol.167, pp.1-10

[5] Longden, T; Quilty, S; Riley, B; et al. 2022, 'Energy insecurity during temperature extremes in remote Australia', Nature Energy, vol.7, pp.43-54

[6] Lowitja Institute, 2022, Transforming Power: Voices for Generational Change, Close the Gap Campaign Report 2022, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee

[7] Quilty, S; Jupurrurla, N.F; Bailie, R.S; Gruen, R.L; 2022, 'Climate, housing, energy and Indigenous health: a call to action', Medical Journal of Australia, vol.217, no.1, pp.1-59

These failures are exacerbated by inadequate and poor-quality housing, with inadequate housing having a strong influence on food insecurity and strong links between outcomes for health. In the Northern Territory, for example, the houses being built by the Northern Territory Government are inadequate, with no ventilation, little to no insultation and often no running water. They often lack food storage and preparation spaces and reliable refrigeration. During hot weather these houses are as hot, or hotter on the inside than on the outside without the air conditioning running, meaning families have to pay exorbitant electricity bills to keep their homes cool and safe in hot weather,[8] or forced to live outdoors.[9]

Without access to clean, affordable and reliable power supplies means that families in a lot of communities are regularly forced to choose between power and food.[10]

Over 3.4 million Australian houses have rooftop solar, but this is not the case in remote First Nations communities. Solar is a great solution, considering the impacts of energy insecurity on health, wellbeing and food security, and trials have demonstrated that solar can work well for communities.[11]

We recommend that the National Food Security Strategy include specific commitments to support the transition to clean energy and housing solutions for communities as a key mechanism to improve food security.

Climate change related natural disasters and the increasingly unstable climate exacerbate energy and food insecurity. Floods and extreme heat threaten supply chains and the availability and accessibility of healthy food in remote communities.[12] As well as causing crop destruction, extreme weather is related to loss of certain vegetation, bushtucker and tradition medicines, and the disappearance of wildlife on Country, with many communities concerned about being unable to practice traditional hunting and fishing on Country.[13] These have a profound impact on nutrition and healthy lifestyles.

---

[8] Liz Drummond, n/d, 'Living in a hot box', *ANU,* https://health.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/living-hot-box

[9] Lowitja Institute, 2022, Transforming Power: Voices for Generational Change, Close the Gap

Campaign Report 2022, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee

[10] Lowitja Institute, 2022, Transforming Power: Voices for Generational Change, Close the Gap

Campaign Report 2022, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee

[11] Quilty, S; Riley, B; White, L; Jupurrurla, 2023, 'Many First Nations communities swelter without power. Why isn't there solar on every rooftop?, *ANU, https://iceds.anu.edu.au/research/research-stories/many-first-nations-communities-swelter-without-power-why-isn%E2%80%99t-there-solar*

[12] Climate change dp

[13] Climate change position paper

2.   What timeframe should the strategy work towards – short (1 to 2 years), medium (5 to 10 years) or long (10-plus years) term, and why?

Food insecurity is an immediate crisis but requires sustained structural reform to address systemic inequities and ensure intergenerational impact. Therefore, there is a need for the food security strategy to work towards outcomes in the short, medium and long term.

- Short-term (1–2 years): Urgent actions to reduce food insecurity in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (e.g. through increased income support payments to compensate for the high cost of food in remote communities, freight subsidies to increase food availability / incentives, nutrition programs).[14] While food relief doesn't address food insecurity, it is a critical short term policy decision which can improve health and wellbeing. The government could also consider legislating the right to food for all Australians to improve health and wellbeing outcomes.

- Medium-term (5–10 years): Strengthen community-led food enterprises, improve supply chain resilience, and invest in local infrastructure.[15] Ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are actively involved in decisions related to the supply of food and essentials in their community.

- Long-term (10+ years): Build sustainable, culturally grounded food systems that embed First Nations leadership and knowledge.

3.   Are there examples of current or planned initiatives by you or your organisation to improve food security in your sector?

The role of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance on Climate and Health in National Food Security Strategy Governance

Lowitja Institute's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during 2023, revealed that many stakeholders are either being left out of engagement processes or are being over-consulted on issues regarding climate, health, and related areas such as food security. This puts pressure on community members and organisations who do not have the resources and capacity to engage and thus this can lead to their exclusion. This results in many of our peoples' voices being unheard in policy and decision making. It is important that the Department considers this in its implementation of the National Food Security Strategy.

There is no specific forum at present that is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and resourced to focus on health and climate – this is a huge governance gap that needs to be filled. Lowitja Institute led a significant body of work during 2022 and 2023 engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples nationally and assessing the feasibility of a national governance body to fill this governance gap.

---

[14] Commonwealth of Australia, National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

[15] Commonwealth of Australia, National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

We have previously recommended the establishment of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health. This body would bring relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and community representatives across various sectors together to have input into and lead policy development relating to climate, environment and health. It would be a nexus between portfolio areas and ensure broad representation of our peoples. Further, it would be able to facilitate and guide the establishment of stronger partnerships between government departments and our peoples.

Alongside the abovementioned position paper, Lowitja Institute also published a business case for the Coalition that we encourage the Department to review.[16] A copy can be downloaded via our website. The more that we engage with our communities, the stronger our conviction becomes that such a body would significantly enhance our peoples' voices and leadership on this important policy issue.

We recommend committing funding for the establishment and operation of a Coalition or like governance body that is designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It is also important that the future National Food Security Strategy connects to and supports other policies, such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2023, the National Climate and Health and Climate Strategy, the National Climate Risk Assessment and National Climate Adaptation Plan, and the National Food Security Strategy for Food Security.

4.   Do the proposed key priority areas and whole of system considerations adequately represent the actions needed for an effective food security strategy? If not, what is missing?

There should be a stronger emphasis on cultural determinants as a whole of system consideration within the National Food Security Strategy. Prior to colonisation, our peoples looked after the health of individuals, communities and Country as one, applying a holistic approach to health and social and emotional wellbeing. It is widely acknowledged by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak health organisations that there are several 'non-medical and behavioural influences on health',[17] which include 'social and cultural determinants' of health. Social and cultural determinants can be influenced by a wide range of economic, political and environment factors, which all impact significantly on the health and wellbeing of our peoples and communities. These determinants can be influenced, and any

---

[16] Lowitja Institute, 2023, Business Case for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health, Short Summary.

[17] Anderson, I., Baum, F. & Bentley, M. (eds) 2004, *Beyond Bandaids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health*. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide, July 2004, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, p. x-xi.

adverse impacts ameliorated, through sound policy changes[18] and system reform. Access to – and control of – food products is such a determinant.

As noted in Lowitja Institute's 2021 discussion paper, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, healthy diets rich in sustainable natural produce 'nurture [our peoples'] identity, spirituality, and culture.'[19]

> *Good health is dependent on respectful and reciprocal relationships to Country, culture, spirituality, community and family (Figure 2). It is a cultural responsibility to look after and respect oneself (connection to body, mind and emotions), each other (family, kinship, community) and the environment (connection to Country). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had unfettered access to food and water within their traditional lands and managed these resources sustainably, taking cues from the environment and working to protect it for future times and generations. These traditional knowledges, developed through processes of observation, learning and adapting over millennia, have been transmitted through generations as lore and cultural practice, forming a code for maintaining balance with one another, with Country and other living beings.[20]*

Colonisation disrupted these practices for our peoples, by disconnecting us from our communities and Countries. We were prevented from being able to access and care for Country, something that is key to our cultural protocols – often for the purpose of settler-colonists appropriating land to grow non-traditional crops and graze introduced farm animals, while we were blocked from traditional hunting and cultivating practices. From an international perspective, this is a common harm to Indigenous peoples caused by colonisation globally; in this way, colonisation, climate change and food insecurity are related. This connection was recognised in the most recent International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report.[21]

---

[18] Anderson, I., Baum, F. & Bentley, M. (eds) 2004, *Beyond Bandaids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health*. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide, July 2004, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, p. x.

[19] HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE, 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne p. 19

[20] HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE, 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne p. 13.

[21] IPCC, 2022, Summary for Policymakers [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, E.S. Poloczanska, et.al (eds.)], in: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability.* Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, p. 12.

5.   What actions could the strategy take to address challenges under each key priority area?

Resilient supply chains

Remote and very remote First Nations communities are highly vulnerable to disruptions in supply chains and experience more severe levels of food insecurity when these disruptions occur.

- Focus on strengthening local and regional food supplies, including increasing local food production.[22]

- Work with First Nations people, communities, and other sector specialists to implement actions to improve resilience and deliver sustainable price reductions on healthy essential items in remote community stores.

- Facilitate and provide assistance to bulk buying increase cooperative purchasing to reduce prices and improve the quality and range of healthy foods available.[23]

- Introduce freight subsidies for healthy foods into remote communities to reduce costs and help break the cycle of poverty.

Productivity, innovation and economic growth

Supporting productivity, innovation, and economic growth is essential to building sustainable food systems in remote communities. Indigenous-led businesses and community-controlled initiatives play a vital role in strengthening local economies and creating long-term employment opportunities.

- Continue to fund, establish and foster Indigenous led sustainable business opportunities, and to create more community controlled food security related jobs.

Competition and cost of living:

Addressing affordability and ensuring fair competition are critical to reducing food insecurity and supporting families to meet their basic needs.

- Increase income support payments to accurate reflect the higher price of healthy food, especially in remote areas.[24]

- Expand school breakfast club programs to all government schools. Research shows that a child's ability to concentrate, self-regulate, and learn is negatively impacted if they are hungry. [25] The rising cost of living makes it increasingly difficult, particularly for families experiencing disadvantage, to

---

[22] Commonwealth of Australia, National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

[23] Commonwealth of Australia, National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

[24] Commonwealth of Australia, National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

[25] Victorian Government, Schools Breakfast Clubs Program, accessed 23rd September 2025: https://www.vic.gov.au/school-breakfast-clubs-program#more-information

provide enough healthy food each week. In Victoria, the *School Breakfast Clubs* program seeks to address the impact disadvantage can have on education outcomes by offering free and healthy food for students in all government schools that opt in. The program provides healthy breakfast and lunch options, as well as take-home packs and cooking classes for families in participating schools.

Conclusion

Achieving food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires more than short-term fixes to supply chains and affordability - it demands structural reform grounded in equity, justice, and self-determination. Embedding cultural determinants, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, and community-led governance within the National Food Security Strategy will ensure that solutions are sustainable, culturally safe, and responsive to local needs. By centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, strengthening community-controlled initiatives, and addressing the upstream determinants of health, the National Food Security Strategy can improve access to healthy, affordable food and work towards National policy priorities.