

Submission to Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia on Inquiry into energy, food and water security.

31 January 2025

The Western Australian Council of Social Service Inc. (WACOSS) welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia on the Inquiry into Energy, Food and Water Security.

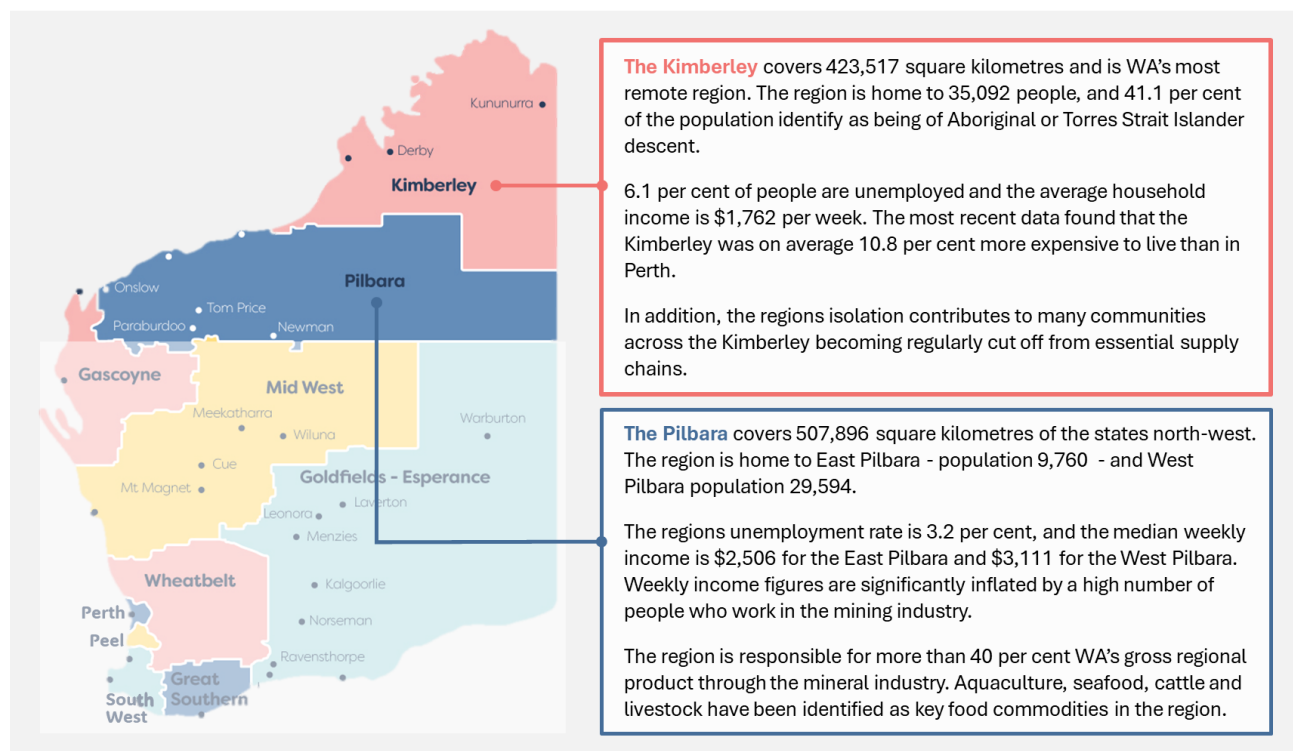
WACOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in WA and works to create an inclusive, just and equitable society. We advocate for social and economic change to improve the wellbeing of Western Australians, and to strengthen the community services sector that supports them. WACOSS is part of a national network of Councils of Social Service.

We acknowledge the contributions of our members in preparing this submission, particularly the Food Community Project from Edith Cowan University.

Introduction

Northern WA - known for its pristine coastline, remote landscape, and booming natural resource sector – commonly refers to the Pilbara (East & West) and Kimberley regions of Western Australia (WA).¹ This area is vast, covering over 93,1413 square kilometres, and is home to approximately 74,446 permanent residents. A high proportion of residents in Northern WA are Aboriginal.

Figure 1| Northern WA Regional Snapshot²



¹ The Gascoyne, Mid-West and Goldfields-Esperance regions experience similar challenges relating to food, water and energy security.

² Map of WA adapted from: Preventing Violence Together, [Primary Prevention in WA](#) (2021).

Despite the significant wealth within these regions, and the significant contribution of the Pilbara³ and Kimberley to WA's economy, experiences of energy, water and food insecurity are common. Households in regional and remote WA are 30 per cent more likely to experience food insecurity than those in capital cities.⁴ While there are many factors, including the ongoing impacts of colonisation, which make residents of Northern WA more susceptible to food, energy and water insecurity, two key drivers are the *vast nature of the region* and *disproportionately high rates of economic disadvantage*.

The vast nature of the region makes service delivery expensive, and susceptible to disruption.

Effective delivery of food, energy and water to Northern WA relies on complex and lengthy supply chains and distribution networks. These are expensive to deliver, susceptible to disruption, and difficult to maintain. For example, the barge service from Darwin to Kalumburu in the State's north – a critical service in transporting resources around the region - costs around \$25,000 per fortnight.⁵

Across Northern WA, to cover these costs, consumers are charged a premium at the checkout – a phenomenon often referred to as the “Pilbara Tax”. As shown in the WA 2023 Regional Price Index, prices for essential items across Northern WA far exceed prices in the metro area.⁶ For all index categories – including food, clothing, housing, household equipment and operation, health, transport, education and recreation - both the Kimberly and the Pilbara showed prices significantly higher than Perth. The Kimberley reported the highest food prices in the state.

Living costs in the region are also inflated by local industries, such as mining and tourism. In the Kimberley, residents often face housing shortages – or incredibly inflated housing prices – as landowners can make more profit renting their house to tourists than on the long-term rental market. Similarly, in the Pilbara, mining companies often cover the exorbitant cost of housing to ensure they have access to employees. This keeps prices high. The median price of a rental unit in the Pilbara is currently \$685 per week, and \$590 per week in the Kimberley.⁷ Prices for a rental house are even higher, with Pilbara residents paying \$1000 per week to rent a house, and Kimberley residents paying \$950 per week.

As well as being expensive, the supply and distribution networks that provide the regions essential goods are lengthy and vulnerable to disruption, particularly from extreme weather events including cyclones and floods. For example, the 2023 Fitzroy floods rendered many roads unusable, which in turn saw the region cut off from essential services for days on end.

As the earth's climate continues to change, and disaster events become increasingly common, the food, water, and energy systems of Northern Australia will become increasingly vulnerable. Rising temperatures will also place food, water and energy systems under pressure.

³ The Pilbara region contributes nearly 15 per cent of WA's total economic output. A quarter of the State Government's annual revenue can be attributed to royalties paid by mining in the region. The region also accounts for almost 60,000 jobs in WA.

⁴ Landrigan, T., Kerr, D., Dhaliwal, S., & Pollard, C. [Protocol for the Development of a Food Stress Index to Identify Households Most at Risk of Food Insecurity in Western Australia](#). (2018).

⁵ ABC News. [Federal government acts to rein in chronically high cost of living in remote Indigenous communities](#). (2024).

⁶ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. [WA Regional Price Index](#). (2023).

⁷ REIWA. [Market Insights](#). (2025).

High rates of economic disadvantage mean many can't afford essential goods and services.

Residents of Northern WA disproportionately experience economic disadvantage. The Dropping off the Edge Study⁸ found that most of the disadvantaged localities in WA lay in the north and east of the state – with these regions experiencing high rates of economic disadvantage as well as reduced access to essential services, including GPs and the internet. During 2024 WACOSS conducted several consultations with community service providers in the Pilbara and heard time and time again that, due to the high cost of living, unless you had a high wage it was nearly impossible to cover living expenses in the region.

Median weekly income data for the Pilbara and Kimberley (see Figure 1) does not adequately capture the complex story around income disparity that exists in Northern WA. There are significant wealth disparities across the area, with a few accruing wealth from the region's resources and many more unable to make ends meet.

Across Northern WA, particularly the Kimberley region, a high proportion of the population receive income via income support payments. For example, as of the last Census (2021), over 40 per cent of the population in the SA2 Halls Creek were on income support payments.⁹ Similarly, in the Derby SA2 37.9 per cent of residents were on income support payments.¹⁰ When we look to the Pilbara, a similar story emerges with 4 to 10 per cent of the population on income support payments.¹¹ Across both the Pilbara and Kimberley, residents most commonly access JobSeeker, with the Age Pension, Parenting Payment (Single) and the Disability Support Pension also utilised.¹²

As of September 2024, an individual who is on Job Seeker and eligible for the Energy Supplement would receive up to \$393 a week, or \$56 a day. In a region like Northern WA, where it costs \$590 per week to rent a unit, it is clear - income support payments do not sufficiently cover the costs of basics. For many families, this economic disadvantage is both persistent and intergenerational.¹³

As low-income families prioritise paying the high cost of housing, they look to reduce spending on budget items that are more flexible, such as the amount of food they purchase or the water and energy they use. For low-income households, this often leads to food, water and energy insecurity which in practice can mean skipping meals, or foregoing cooling their homes.

A note on Closing the Gap Target 9b

Target 9b states that, by 2031, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households:

- within discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard
- in or near to a town receive essential services that meet or exceed the same standard as applies generally within the town (including if the household might be classified for other

⁸ Dropping off the Edge. [Western Australia](#). (2021).

⁹ Australia Government Department of Social Services. [Digital Atlas of Australia, Understanding Income Support Payment Recipients](#). (2021).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dropping off the Edge. [Western Australia Fact Sheet](#). (2021).

purposes as a part of a discrete settlement such as a “town camp” or “town-based reserve”.)

As discussed throughout our submission, for many Aboriginal communities in remote WA this is currently not the case, with essential services such as food services and energy and water provision not being delivered to relevant jurisdictional standards. For example, residents in remote Aboriginal communities experience more power disruptions than people in other parts of the state.¹⁴

WA is transferring responsibility for delivery of power and water services in remote Aboriginal communities from the Department of Communities to State-owned utilities Water Corporation and Horizon Power. This action commenced in April 2023 and will involve significant upgrades to infrastructure over ten years. This is a positive step. Delivering on this target is complex and will require significant cross-agency motivation and effort.

Closing the Gap targets broadly cover a range of development areas including health, education and employment. As we explore in more depth below, these are all adversely impacted by energy, water and food insecurity.

¹⁴ White, L., Riely, B., Wilson, S., Markham, F., O’Neill, L., Klerck, M., Napaltjari Davis, V. [Geographies of regulatory disparity underlying Australia’s energy transition](#). (2024).

Food Security

Context

Food insecurity is the reduced, irregular or unreliable access to nutritionally appropriate or safe foods required for good health and wellbeing.¹⁵ It is underpinned by six pillars: affordability, availability, access, utilisation, stability, agency and sustainability.¹⁶ In 2023, more than 370,000 WA households experienced food insecurity.¹⁷

Data on the extent of food insecurity in the North-West is limited, yet research shows that food insecurity increases with remoteness. The further one lives from a major city the more likely they are to experience food insecurity.¹⁸ This makes WA's north one of the most food insecure regions in the state.

A complex and intersecting challenge

It is impossible to ignore the intersection between food, water and energy security. Access to clean and adequate water is necessary for a nutritious diet and a healthy life. Water is necessary across the food system, from growing crops and irrigating pastures, all the way through to food production and preparation. Conversations about strengthening food systems must therefore consider the corresponding need for water security.

Similarly, reliable energy systems are vital for food security and impact the transportation, storage, and sale of food products. Many people are unable to afford common appliances like fridges or ovens and regularly experience power disconnections. This significantly impacts their ability to store and prepare food without disruption.

Emergency relief providers have reported to WACOSS that high rates of water and energy insecurity have prompted changes to the food products they offer to people experiencing hardship. Services are now working to ensure emergency food products do not need to be cooled, cooked or washed.

Challenges & Impact

Residents in Northern WA experience a range of challenges when trying to achieve food security. Key challenges relating to food affordability, food access, food availability, and the food environment are outlined below.

1. Food Affordability

High food prices in Northern Australia prevent people from accessing sufficient nutritious food. When surveyed, 93 per cent of West Australians agree that the cost of food has increased, leading to behaviours such as cutting back on the amount of food consumed and choosing cheaper, less-nutritious foods.¹⁹ The WA Regional Price Index confirms that food is more

¹⁵ WACOSS. [WA Food Relief Framework](#). (2019).

¹⁶ Food and Agriculture Organisation. [Food security and nutrition: building a global narrative towards 2030](#). (2020).

¹⁷ Foodbank. [Foodbank Hunger Report](#). (2024).

¹⁸ Landrigan, T., Kerr, D., Dhaliwal S., & Pollard C. (2018). Protocol for the Development of a Food Stress Index to Identify Households Most at Risk of Food Insecurity in Western Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(1), 79.

¹⁹ Financial Counsellors' Association of Western Australia. [Cost of Living Survey Report](#). (2024).

expensive in Northern WA. A basket of food in WA's Kimberley region costs around 7.2 per cent more than in the Perth metropolitan area.^{20,21}

A recent report found that Aldi was the most affordable supermarket in Australia, with IGA being the most expensive.²² There are currently no Aldi stores in Northern WA, while IGA operates 12 stores in the North-West region and is the only supermarket operating in 8 of these 12 locations.

Community consultations reveal high food prices

During the Food Community Project consultations in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions, high food costs were identified as a significant problem. Participants reported the increased cost of food in these regions compared to metropolitan areas, and reported paying \$14 for a piece of watermelon and \$50 for five lamb chops. These high food costs were identified not only as a barrier for individuals and families trying to afford healthy food, but for the capacity of community organisations to provide food relief.²³

Food relief

Food relief provides an important short-term response to support people impacted by food insecurity when all other options have been exhausted. Food relief includes community meals, hampers, pre-packed foods, or supermarket vouchers.

Organisations providing food relief in Northern WA are severely under resourced and experience the same barriers to accessing food as the general population, such as limited access, availability and high food prices. This means that services are not always well equipped to provide food that meets the dietary requirements, cultural needs, and personal preferences of people experiencing food insecurity. Whilst food relief services provide vital support, current resourcing means services have limited resources to help people experiencing chronic food insecurity to address the underlying drivers of their hardship.

2. Food Access

The type and location of food stores in Northern WA influences people's access to healthy and affordable food. There are fewer large supermarkets in Northern WA and these are often built in major town centres. Smaller regional or remote communities often rely on a single community store that is more expensive and stocks fewer healthy food options than larger supermarkets.²⁴ Due to the scale of WA's north, people may be required to travel for several hours to reach the nearest supermarkets. This leads to the consumption of calorie-dense convenience meals from takeaway outlets in place of a healthy and nutritious diet.

Several communities are responding to access challenges by operating a public bus service to transport people to larger supermarkets in neighbouring towns. For some, this may be the only transport available, yet operating schedules do not always align with when people have money

²⁰ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. [Regional Price Index 2023](#). (2024).

²¹ Australian Broadcasting Corporation. [Price pain as cost of living in some WA towns hits 15pc higher than Perth](#). (2024).

²² Choice. [Which is the cheapest supermarket chain in Australia? | CHOICE](#). (2024).

²³ [Food Community Project](#). (2023).

²⁴ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs. [Report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities](#). (2020).

for food, busses may be infrequent or easily missed, and facilities not suitable for the elderly or people with a disability. Similarly, people in regional areas may rely on the local taxi service to access food stores. This can be a significant added expense for households.

Roebourne General Store (Ieramugadu Store Maya)

A unique example of how lack of food access is being addressed is the Ieramugadu Store Maya. The Store is owned and led by Traditional Owners and food is rescued from major supermarkets in nearby towns. The Store provides food to community members in need at low or no cost, and, for those who can afford to pay, at full price under a social enterprise model. This model supports food access by making healthy food more affordable for local people.

3. Food Availability

Food availability considers the amount, type, quality and variety of food that is available in each level of the food system. Appropriate food availability requires food system stability, and that adequate supply must be maintained without disruption.

Distributing food across WA requires several modes of transport including rail, road, ship and barge.²⁵ Of the grocery products sold in WA supermarkets, 80 per cent of products enter the state through freight corridors from the east. Once food reaches a distribution hub in Perth, it then travels to some of WA's most remote communities in the Northern WA, which can add a further 3000+ kilometres to the journey. The length of supply chains in WA increases the risk of disruption and this can impact the quantity, quality, affordability and variety of food available.

Current infrastructure inefficiencies limit the ability to quickly transfer freight between different modes such as rail to road. In the context of food transport, inappropriate food handling and storage across the supply chain can also lead to spoilage, compromised quality, reduced nutritional value, and food waste.²⁶ Food waste costs the Australian economy around \$36.6 billion each year.²⁷

As mentioned, supply chains and infrastructure in the state's north are highly susceptible to disruption from hazards and weather events. The north-west region experiences a summer wet season. During this period of high rainfall there is a risk of flooding and cyclones across the region. During dry periods, bushfires may burn uncontrolled, halting major transport routes.

4. Food Environments

Food environments can influence the health and wellbeing of our community. In WA's East Pilbara region, 42 per cent of adults aged 16 years and over experience obesity compared to

²⁵ WA Department of Transport. [WA Shipping and Supply Chain Taskforce Final Report](#). (2023).

²⁶ Rojas-Reyes, J., Rivera – Cadavid., & Pena Orozco, D. [Disruptions in the food supply chain: A literature review](#). (2024).

²⁷ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. [Reducing Australia's Food Waste](#). <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/protection/waste/food-waste#:~:text=Food%20waste%20costs%20the%20Australian,%242%2C500%20per%20household%20per%20year>.

just 29.7 per cent of the state's overall average.²⁸ Behavioural risk factors such as 89.6 per cent of the population not eating the daily recommended serves of vegetables, and 50.8 per cent consuming an inadequate amount of fruit, are driving diet-related health conditions.²⁹ The Kimberley region has the state's highest rate of preventable hospitalisations for chronic conditions including diabetes complications and congestive heart failure.³⁰ These statistics highlight the devastating yet preventable impacts of poor diet on population health in the Northern WA.

There are many opportunities to improve food environments in Northern WA and through store policies, marketing controls, and community education.

Retail Stores & Marketing

Food retail environments can play a role in supporting consumers in Northern WA to make healthy dietary choices. Interventions focused on promoting healthy eating in food environments have shown to positively impact consumers dietary behaviours.³¹ Conversely, the availability and promotion of unhealthy foods, through a range of means including ambassadors, offers and games, drive poor diets and negative health outcomes.³²

Implementing policies which restrict advertising of unhealthy food and drinks in public spaces and online, can minimise harm caused through marketing. For example, a trial to reduce merchandising of unhealthy food and drinks in remote community stores highlighted that considered merchandising can reduce the purchasing of unhealthy items such as sugar sweetened beverages and confectionary, with no adverse impact on business outcomes.³³ This demonstrates opportunity to work with food stores to strengthen their support for and ability to provide healthy retail environments.

The Skutta Tucker Shelf Label project

Nindilingarri Cultural Health Services have developed a culturally appropriate food labelling system designed to support the community to make healthier choices. The labels have been introduced into the local Fitzroy IGA, and they have been put onto shelves to identify healthier, more affordable food and drink options. Based on consultations with the initiative leader, they described receiving positive feedback from the community in relation to the labels, including that people enjoyed seeing them on the shelves and it encouraged them to choose "Skutta foods".

Food Literacy and Nutrition Education

Equipping people with the knowledge and skills to make healthy food choices can empower them to prepare and consume foods for good health and nutrition. Food literacy refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to make decisions about the food we consume and

²⁸ WA Primary Health Alliance. [Pilbara Needs Assessment](#). (2024).

²⁹ WA Country Health Service. [Pilbara Health Profile](#). (2022).

³⁰ WA Primary Health Alliance. [Kimberley Needs Assessment](#). (2024).

³¹ Pulker, C., Thornton, L., & Trapp, G. (2018). What is known about consumer nutrition environments in Australia? A scoping review of the literature. *Obesity Science and Practice*, 21(4), 318 – 337. doi: 10.1002/osp4.275

³² Monash University. [Commercial factors driving unhealthy diets](#). (2022).

³³ Brimblecombe, J et al. (2020). Effect of restricted retail merchandising of discretionary food and beverages on population diet: a pragmatic randomised controlled trial. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 4 (10) e463 – e473.

how it will impact on health. For people experiencing food insecurity, making healthy food choices is not always an option and other unmet needs may be prioritised. However, building food literacy helps to empower people who may be struggling with everyday tasks such as planning meals and purchasing food.

Barriers to healthy cooking and eating

Health professionals involved in the Food Community Project Pilbara and Kimberley consultations, described difficulties adapting recipes for nutrition education programs due to the lack of ingredients available at local stores in smaller towns. This emphasises the limited success of education without access to a stable supply of healthy options.

Actions & Recommendations

There are several actions that would support increased food security in northern WA, including:

- 1. Urgently increase the rate of income support payments, as outlined in the [Raise the Rate Campaign](#).** People on income support payments such as Job Seeker are most at risk of food insecurity. A national survey showed that 93 per cent of survey respondents on income support found it difficult to cover the cost of groceries and resorted to cutting back on healthy foods or skipping meals.
- 2. Increase funding for the food relief sector to provide support to people experiencing food insecurity in Northern Australia.** It will take time to reduce the need for food relief and strengthen local food systems. In the interim, more funding is needed to support the food relief sector to aid households in the Northern WA who are living with food insecurity.
- 3. Adopt a national price monitoring mechanism to record the cost of food in all parts of the country.** There is currently no nation-wide mechanism to monitor the cost of food in Northern Australia compared to other parts of the country. This means that the true impact of food costs on food insecurity on regional households is not fully known, and the success of policies and programs focused on improving food security outcomes is limited.
- 4. Work with State and Territory Government's to establish a freight assistance scheme to reduce the cost of food and essential items in Northern Australia's most geographically isolated communities.** Reducing the burden of high freight costs on consumers can make accessing healthy food more affordable. Freight subsidisation is already successfully operating in parts of Northern Australia, including through the Queensland Government's Remote Communities Freight Assistance Scheme.
- 5. Work with regional and remote communities to develop place-based responses to improving healthy food access in Northern Australia.** Access to affordable and healthy food in the Northern WA is a major barrier to food security. The Federal Government must work with communities to strengthen local food systems and where needed, respond to current barriers preventing access to healthy and affordable food.
- 6. Work with communities in Northern Australia to develop solutions that reduce the length of supply chains and strengthen local food systems.** Improving the efficiency and stability of supply chains across the food system is critical to increasing food security in Northern Australia. Local communities should be included in the design and delivery of infrastructure projects that improve supply chains and increase local food supply. Examples of such initiatives could include asset mapping, procuring back-up power generators, building contingency storage, or purchasing refrigerated vehicles.

- 7. Work with State Governments to improve national supply chain infrastructure and establish contingency measures for food security in Northern Australia.** Local supply chains rely on a strong, national supply chain infrastructure.
- 8. Introduce nutrition standards in stores through policies which consider price, product, promotion and placement of food.** Interventions such as retail strategies, food labelling, procurement policies, taxation, community programs, zoning laws, and transportation have been shown to influence the food environment. Such strategies are already being implemented through the Northern Territory Government, Remote Stores Program. The Federal Government should explore the application of a nutrition focused program across all stores in Northern Australia.
- 9. Increase opportunities for First Nations people to participate in the health education and nutrition workforce.** To improve dietary behaviours and subsequent health outcomes across Northern-Australia, the involvement of First Nations people in developing culturally relevant solutions is fundamental. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce have a large role supporting population and community health across a range of different health determinants. To ensure this sector is adequately resourced and equipped to provide sustainable culturally appropriate nutrition education, further opportunities for specialised training and employment are needed.
- 10. Provide community-wide nutrition education in Northern Australia.** There is currently no community wide food literacy education in Northern Australia that supports people to adopt healthy dietary preferences, with existing programs run as one-off workshops or to only some of the population. To ensure that policies are effective and do not lead to unintended consequences for consumers, they must exist alongside education campaigns focused on health promotion and improving food literacy.

As the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities is currently under development, we urge the Committee to consider its recommendations alongside this process and ensure a coordinated and strategic response to addressing food security in Northern Australia.

Energy Security

Context

Secure access to electricity is a challenge for many living in Northern West Australia, particularly those living in geographically isolated communities and those living on low income.

Horizon Power, a Government Trading Enterprise, generates, distributes and sells electricity to residential properties in Northern WA. It is regulated by the Economic Regulation Authority.³⁴ Tariffs are set by the State Government and are consistent across the state through the Uniform Tariff Policy.³⁵ Electricity customers pay via post-pay or pre-payment meters. Pre-payment exists almost exclusively in Aboriginal communities.

In Northern WA, Horizon Power distributes electricity through the North West Interconnected System (NWIS), and microgrids or isolated power stations in remote towns and communities.³⁶ Some communities rely on diesel-powered generators, renewable generation (solar and wind) or a mix of both.³⁷ There are multiple Horizon Power partnerships with Aboriginal communities to upgrade energy assets or install renewable assets, as well as Aboriginal community investment in renewable systems.³⁸

While Northern WA households are currently energised by electricity and gas, it is increasingly clear that electricity is a safer, more efficient and cheaper energy supply.³⁹ As such, this submission will focus on ensuring the safe, secure and affordable supply of electricity.

Challenges & Impact

People on low incomes and experiencing other forms of marginalisation in Northern WA experience considerable energy insecurity. Their experience of energy insecurity perpetuates and exacerbates existing disadvantages by creating new financial burden and new barriers to economic, educational and social participation.

Electricity bills are more burdensome in the North, especially for people on low income and renters.

Low-income households spend a significantly higher percentage of their income on energy compared to high income households.⁴⁰ This is exacerbated in Northern WA by high heat and humidity, poor household thermal efficiency, overcrowding and barriers to distributed energy resources. Ultimately, those in the North least able to afford it are paying more.

Northern WA residents require air-conditioning to keep their homes at a safe temperature. Without meaningful minimum rental standards, rental properties, public housing in particular, are of substandard quality and thermally inefficient, putting strain on cooling systems and driving up energy prices.⁴¹ For example, public housing tenants in the Kimberley, mostly Aboriginal families, are often not provided air-conditioning units by the Department of Communities Housing Authority. Rather, they must install their own box air conditioner (the up-front cheapest option) in a large hole in the wall - an extremely inefficient and ultimately

³⁴ Economic Regulation Authority, [Code of Conduct for the Supply of Electricity to Small Use Customers](#).

³⁵ WA Government, [Household Electricity Pricing](#).

³⁶ First Nations Clean Energy Network, [Western Australia Policy Overview: First Nations and Clean Energy](#).

³⁷ First Nations Clean Energy Network, [Western Australia Policy Overview: First Nations and Clean Energy](#).

³⁸ First Nations Clean Energy Network, [Western Australia Policy Overview: First Nations and Clean Energy](#).

³⁹ Climate Council, [Switch and Save: How gas is costing households](#) (2022).

⁴⁰ WACOSS, [Understanding Utility Hardship](#) (2022).

⁴¹ AHURI, [Sustainable Indigenous housing in regional and remote Australia](#) (2021).

expensive solution.^{42,43} Additionally, renters, public and private, are unable to install rooftop solar and thus miss out on its financial benefit. Pre-payment customers who do have rooftop solar are unable to use the system during periods of electricity disconnection.⁴⁴

Overcrowding contributes to high energy bills – the more people in the house, the harder air conditioning systems must work to cool the space.⁴⁵ Northern WA households, particularly in remote Aboriginal communities, are more likely to be overcrowded. The Kimberley and Pilbara have the highest rates of homelessness in WA (nine and five times the state average, respectively).⁴⁶ 60% of those experiencing homelessness in these regions are staying in severely overcrowded homes.⁴⁷

High energy costs leave Northern West Australians on low income at high risk of disconnection

WA has the highest rate of disconnection for non-payment compared to all states. Within WA, regional residents experience a much higher rate of disconnection (7.63% in 2022/23) than residents in the South West Interconnected System (0.82% in 2022/23).⁴⁸ An increase in disconnections from 2021/22 to 2022/23 was attributed, by retailers, to increased cost of living.⁴⁹ This aligns with WACOSS's Cost-of-Living Report findings⁵⁰ and what we hear around the state. Essential costs have become unaffordable for many, especially those on low income.

Hardship Utility Grant Scheme (HUGS)

HUGS is a WA Government administered support scheme which, after a customer in financial hardship has adhered to a payment plan for 90 days, offers financial support to pay down outstanding debt. Customers in Northern WA have a higher grant limit, reflecting the higher energy cost incurred. However, HUGS financial support is limited to 85 per cent of outstanding utility debt and capped at an amount much lower than the average debt for applicants. Increasing the grant limit and removing the 85 per cent cap would enable people in utility hardship to get out of debt and access energy.

Pre-payment meter customers experience even higher rates of disconnection and less supports.

Pre-payment meters exist almost exclusively in remote Aboriginal communities. They can appeal to retailers and customers as they prevent customers racking up large debts, allow customers to turn electricity off while they are away from their house for long periods of time, and enable household members to easily contribute money to the electricity top up. However, pre-payment meter customers are excluded from the hardship supports offered to post-payment meter customers, such as payment plans, case management, disconnection

⁴² Kimberley Community Legal Services, [Stuck in the Heat](#) (2022).

⁴³ This is in stark comparison to the Government Regional Officer Housing which has minimum cooling standards.

⁴⁴ Horizon Power, [Prepaid Power](#).

⁴⁵ AHURI, [Sustainable Indigenous housing in regional and remote Australia](#) (2021).

⁴⁶ Shelter WA, [New Report finds housing stress in WA's regions at unprecedented levels](#) (2021).

⁴⁷ Kimberley Community Legal Services, [Stuck in the Heat](#) (2022).

⁴⁸ Economic Regulation Authority, [Annual data report 2022/23 – Energy retailers](#) (2023).

⁴⁹ Economic Regulation Authority, [Annual data report 2022/23 – Energy retailers](#) (2023).

⁵⁰ WACOSS, [2024 Cost of Living Report](#).

moratoriums for family violence victim survivors and the Hardship Utilities Grant Scheme. Further, remote Aboriginal community members are often on the lowest income and face multidimensional disadvantage. While post-payment customers face disconnection ‘as a last resort’⁵¹, pre-payment customers navigate the risk of ‘self-disconnection’ daily.⁵²

Perhaps consequently, pre-payment meter customers experience extremely high rates of disconnection. In 2022/23, there were 49,529 pre-payment meter disconnections and 2,721 disconnections for customers who were disconnected two or more times in a one-month period for longer than two hours.⁵³ Retailers do not differentiate between a voluntary decision not to consume energy, disconnection due to financial hardship or interrupted access to a recharge facility. Regardless, it is clear that this system affords no support to a cohort of customers at high risk of energy insecurity.

Energy insecurity disrupts life and perpetuates disadvantage.

Energy insecurity, via disconnections or adaptive behaviours to reduce energy costs, renders houses inadequate. It impacts the ability to wash, do homework, safely prepare and store food, access communications, engage in community and recreational activities and keep the home to a safe temperature. Not regulating the temperature of the home not only causes discomfort, stress and sleep interruption, it can lead to serious health effects or death as well as higher health care costs. These impacts interrupt education and work and cause mental distress.

Closing the Gap and Other Related Matters

While energy insecurity impacts a range of marginalised groups, Aboriginal people are disproportionately likely to reside in public housing, which as outlined above, is typically substandard. Additionally, remote Aboriginal communities not connected to the main grid face challenges in receiving secure energy supply. Finally, pre-payment meter customers are almost exclusively Aboriginal. As outlined above, these customers do not receive any hardship supports, unlike post-payment customers.

Sunshine Saver

[Sunshine Saver](#) is limited access tariff offered by Horizon Power to select communities. It mimics the financial benefits of rooftop solar for customers who are unable to access rooftop solar. Many residents of Northern WA, particularly people on low incomes and renters, face barriers to accessing rooftop solar. Creative tariff offerings such as Sunshine Saver is an example of energy equity in practice where disadvantaged groups are not excluded from the benefits of renewable energy.

Remote communities not connected to the NWIS present opportunities to conduct small scale energy transition projects and contribute to the broader goals of Closing the Gap. There are several examples of this on foot across Northern Australia, such as Borroloola’s Ngardara Solar Microgrid Project. In collaboration with Original Power, Ngardara Cooperative (a community-

⁵¹ Horizon Power, [I haven’t paid my power bill by the due date. Will I be disconnected?](#)

⁵² Bradley Riley, et al, [Disconnected during disruption: Energy insecurity of Indigenous Australian prepay customers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) (2023).

⁵³ Economic Regulation Authority, [Annual data report 2022/23 – Energy retailers](#) (2023).

While the Economic Regulation Authority has collected this data for some years, this is the first year in which it has been published.

controlled organisation representing the Borroloola community) is designing and building their own grid-controlled utility scale solar microgrid. This will reduce the community's reliance on diesel generators and cut the community's energy costs.⁵⁴ Reflecting the community lead on this project, the community centre was the first building to receive rooftop solar and a battery. This ensured community members had access to a safe space to stay cool. This project as a whole will reduce energy insecurity, and contribute to community development and capacity building.⁵⁵

Actions & Recommendations

As WA's electricity system is publicly owned, there is prime opportunity to ensure electricity supply is truly treated as an essential service, integral to social justice and community wellbeing. Four recommendations to improve energy security in Northern WA include:

1. **Work with state and territories to implement mandatory minimum rental standards⁵⁶ including energy efficiency standards.** Implementing minimum rental standards is a critical action to enable renters to reduce their energy consumption and costs. Unfortunately, states have been reluctant to progress this, oft citing costs to landlords as a barrier. The Federal Government can support the implementation of standards by:
 - Establishing 'one-stop-shops' to assist rental providers to access appropriate information, finance, subsidies and tradespeople.
 - Supporting states and territories to implement mandatory energy performance disclosures at the time of lease, to support implementation of minimum standards and ensure renters know the energy performance of the property before they sign a lease.
 - Providing targeted financial supports for rental providers who require financial assistance to conduct the upgrades (subject to eligibility criteria and conditions that prevent rental providers from increasing the rent as a result of the upgrades or selling the property to capitalise on the upgrades)
 - Encourage states and territories to abolish no cause evictions and implement rent stabilisation measures.
2. **Increase investment in social housing energy upgrades, including rooftop solar where practicable.** Social housing tenants in thermally inefficient houses, face high energy bills or otherwise risk their health. Energy retrofits offer significant financial and health benefits to residents which in turn relieves pressure on other social support systems like hospitals and hardship programs. The Social Housing Energy Performance Initiative demonstrates this is a priority of both governments. Investment is not yet sufficient to comprehensively upgrade WA's social housing stock.⁵⁷
3. **Offer subsidies and supports for low-income homeowners.** This should be subject to eligibility criteria, and may include subsidies, low or no interest finance and free audits/in-home advice.⁵⁸
4. **Invest in efficient electric community infrastructure that offers public cooling spaces.** This would enable people in energy stress to access cool spaces, stay safe and engage in community and cultural activities without always relying on residential cooling systems.

⁵⁴ Ngardara Cooperative, [Ngardara Project](#).

⁵⁵ SwitchedOn Australia, *How First Nations communities are solving long standing energy security problems with renewables* (podcast) (18 March 2024).

⁵⁶ Which must also apply to social housing.

⁵⁷ Make Renting Fair, [Out with the Mould – Setting the Standards for WA Rental Homes](#) (2024).

⁵⁸ Deloitte Access Economics, [Powering progress: Energy upgrades to low-income housing](#) (2024).

Water security

Context

As with electricity, WA's residential water retailer is publicly owned. Water Corporation is a Government Trading Enterprise and is regulated by a number of legislative instruments under the purview of the Minister for Water and Department of Water and Environmental Regulation.

A particularly relevant characteristic of WA's water system is that property owners must hold the billing contract with Water Corporation.⁵⁹ Rental tenants may pay for usage costs via tenant billing directly with Water Corporation if the landlord gives permission, or the landlord or property manager may privately pass on the usage charges. Property owners remain ultimately liable for any unpaid usage charges.⁶⁰ It is unclear how many private renters are paying water costs. The Department of Communities charges public housing tenants for their water usage.

Challenges & Impact

As with food and energy, water insecurity impacts people on low income and already facing other disadvantages. Some of the key challenges relating to water security in Northern WA are detailed below.

Renters are facing financial stress but are excluded from water hardship supports.

Water Corporation offers a range of hardship supports for customers, including programs that offer debt forgiveness. Water customers can also access the Hardship Utility Grant Scheme. Unfortunately, however, tenants who pay for water usage in any capacity are not considered customers and are excluded.

Property owners are ultimately legally liable for all water costs, including usage. However, as the *Residential Tenancies Act 1987* (WA) allows landlords to terminate leases without any grounds, renters risk severe consequences for failing to pay water usage bills.

Water HUGS Pilot

The Department of Communities is conducting a pilot in which eligibility for the Hardship Utility Grant Scheme is extended to public housing tenants in North Perth. While the pilot is underway and outcomes are yet to be published, WACOSS supports eligibility expansion to all renters, including private renters, who pay for water. In addition, greater investigation is needed to understand the extent to which, and circumstances in which, water usage charges are being passed onto tenants. Solutions should then be developed to ensure hardship assistance can be provided directly to tenants, without risking usage costs being imposed on renters who do not currently pay them.

It is currently unknown how many renters are contributing to water bills and through which mechanism. Accordingly, amending the legislation to enable tenants to be legally liable for bills would have unknown consequences and may leave some renters worse off. It is clear however

⁵⁹ *Water Services Act 2012* (WA).

Water Corporation, [Managing your rental property](#).

⁶⁰ Water Corporation, [Managing your rental property](#).

that renters, who have faced significant and repeated rent increases over the past few years are struggling to cover the cost of essential bills.

Access to safe tap water is a significant concern in Northern WA.

A 2021 Auditor-General's report found that drinking water supply was contaminated for almost a quarter of all remote Aboriginal communities in WA.⁶¹ In 2023, the Pintupi people of the Kiwirrkurra community had not had access to safe flowing water for three years. The infrastructure was poorly developed and tap water supply subject to consistent 'do not drink' notices.⁶² Separately, a class action on behalf of public housing tenants in East and West Kimberley, Pilbara, and other regional WA areas alleges tenants have been supplied unsafe tap water, contaminated with nitrates and uranium.⁶³ As a result, some community members must rely on, and pay for, bottled water for cooking and drinking. This is a significant failure of essential service delivery by government. It is critical to point out that many Northern WA residents may be paying water bills, despite it being unsafe to drink or prepare food with.

During consultations in Northern WA, WACOSS was informed of instances where business owners and some local governments purposely cut off or limited access to water points. In Kununurra, community services responded by supplying residents, particularly those sleeping rough, with bottled water however this is an unsustainable solution.

Some Northern communities contend with unplanned, as well as planned, water outages. WACOSS staff hear anecdotal evidence from South Hedland which experiences several outages a year. These are not always resolved quickly and, in some instances, run long enough for supermarkets to run out of bottled water. This raises an issue of equity, as, to our knowledge, wealthier areas of Port Hedland, which host mining operations, do not experience the problem to the same extent.

Water insecurity impacts all aspects of life and has more severe consequences for already disadvantaged communities.

Water is essential to life and the way we want to live. Water insecurity and its consequences disproportionately impact people on low income and other marginalised groups, including Aboriginal communities and perpetuate existing disadvantages. Illness caused by unsafe drinking water or insufficient water not only impacts bodily wellbeing, it interrupts work, education and caring responsibilities. Water insecurity also impacts people's ability to keep their body at a safe temperature. This has flow on consequences to entire families and community development. Similarly, water debt accrual and insecure tenancies causes financial insecurity as well as physical and mental stress.

⁶¹ Office of the Auditor-General, [Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities – follow-up](#) (2021).

⁶² National Indigenous Times, [Pilbara's Kiwirrkurra community endures poor infrastructure and no running water for three years](#) (2023).

⁶³ Slater and Gordon, [Class action filed by Slater and Gordon over housing justice for Aboriginal tenants living in remote Western Australia](#) (2024).

Heat Vulnerability Project

The [WACOSS Heat Vulnerability Project](#), funded by the National Disaster Risk Reduction, mapped regions impacted by high heat against heat-vulnerable populations across WA. The project team developed targeted strategies, actions and resources to enable communities, including government agencies, and those most at risk to better prepare for high-heat related consequences for their health and well-being. The project team works closely with communities in three pilot sites, including Port Hedland to ensure heat interventions meet the communities need. In Port Hedland, the heat adaptation interventions include installing public water fountains, education for kids to keep cool and individual cooling packs. This is a positive example of initiatives that meet community need and address impacts of water insecurity and increasing heat.

Closing the Gap and Other Related Matters

The experience of water outages in areas of South Hedland (where 22.2 per cent of population is Aboriginal⁶⁴ and not in Port Hedland (where 7.3 per cent of population are Aboriginal⁶⁵ is a clear example of poor and unsafe essential service delivery disproportionately impacting Aboriginal people. Similarly, nil access to safe flowing water disproportionately impacts Aboriginal community members in the north.

Actions & Recommendations

Improved water security in Northern WA could be supported by:

- 1. Work with States and Territories to ensure residential water supply is safe and infrastructure reliable.** This may include consistent water testing, water treatment systems and should be conducted in partnership with Aboriginal communities.
- 2. Invest in community-led intervention to address the impacts of the intersection of water insecurity and high heat, including public access to chilled water.** Public cooling spaces and chilled water fountains offer a way for people on low income, particularly sleeping rough, to keep cool and hydrated.

⁶⁴ ABS, [South Hedland](#) (2021).

⁶⁵ ABS, [Port Hedland](#) (2021).

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