

Statement by Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service and Dharriwaa Elders Group regarding evidence provided to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities.
12 August 2020.



Above: The Namoi River at Walgett was allowed to dry for months in 2018 and 2019 – causing a food and water security crisis. The community conducted a funeral in March 2019 (see blue coffin). Below: Walgett's only supermarket burnt to the ground 5 June 2019, bringing another food security crisis which was compounded by 2020 Covid19 food distribution shortages. Photos Dharriwaa Elders Group.



The CEO of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (“WAMS”), Christine Corby OAM, and Project Manager of Walgett’s Dharriwaa Elders Group (“DEG”) Wendy Spencer, gave evidence to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities 13 August 2020.

Their opening statement explained how three recent emergencies brought Walgett’s food insecurity into focus.

“Our rivers were dried up for a long period. We couldn’t rely on a feed of fish any more. The WAMS Community Garden could no longer be watered, and the foods that have always supplemented WAMS clients who have a chronic disease, were no longer available. The salty bore water our drinking water was switched to, was unpalatable to drink, and we had to rely on donations of bottled water, or buying water. Then our only supermarket burnt down. Then, a few months down the track, Corona virus panic buying in the cities caused food and grocery shortages in regional and remote NSW towns. The Covid19 closure of the school canteens reduced food supplies even further. “

“WAMS and DEG are long-standing Walgett Aboriginal organisations and we are always proactively reaching out to government agencies. But when a crisis occurs we still can’t find the right mechanisms in government to address these crises with holistic responses”.

“We ask both the Commonwealth and State departments whom work in health, housing and the social sector, address the role that nutrition plays in health and wellbeing in communities like ours as well as communicate better and more regularly with existing Aboriginal organisations.

- Rivers that we rely on for food, drinking and watering, need to be better managed.
- Support community-led local nutrition interventions and promotions, including regular free food programs in the schools and community, local food growing initiatives, training for local people in food growing, in manufacturing, distribution, nutrition.
- Subsidise retailers to ensure that prices are equivalent across the country, that stock supplies are ensured and that pricing standards are regulated.
- Regulate food industry for good nutrition.
- Resource local government to actively plan for food and water security during climate change.
- Ensure that all agencies – health, education, justice, employment, industry, environment, transport, and infrastructure incorporate supports for food and nutrition priorities.

These are all national issues that are compounded by remoteness that we believe can be achieved.

We are developing Community-led local solutions for local food, interventions with retailers, emergency preparedness. We can show what the term “community-led” actually means – so we ask that you set up a way for our services to be working more closely with Commonwealth agencies because we need the Commonwealth to bring about the changes required to improve food security in remote Aboriginal communities like ours.”

Christine Corby said “The hearing gave us an opportunity to discuss issues that we hadn’t expanded in our short submission including;

- the expense of bottled water compared to sugary soft drinks

- our long advocacy for the introduction of fluoridation to Walgett's town water supply
- the fact that Gingie Village is not connected to the town water supply
- whether the Commonwealth is contributing towards Walgett school nutrition programs
- our long term plans for water resilience for the WAMS Community Garden
- daily school meals
- community food programs
- our vision for providing more highly nutritious local food".

Wendy Spencer "I welcomed the opportunity to explain how Dharriwaa Elders Group's Yuwaya Ngarrali partnership with the University of NSW provided us with the expert advice and facts about what was happening to us which gave us the courage to think – hang on – this isn't fair – we have a right to good drinking water and nutritious food, and it is possible for local, state and federal governments to prioritise wellbeing and provide more support to Walgett ACCOs' work for food and water security. So I ask the Committee to do what we can't - as a little Aboriginal community organisation in Walgett – regulate the food systems better to prioritise public health".

Walgett's Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations ("ACCOs") call for the Commonwealth Government to establish a National Food and Nutrition Strategy that will ensure all Australians have access to the nutrition they need for wellbeing.

"We ask that the Commonwealth supports the already substantial food security efforts of Walgett Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as we work towards improving our community's food security and reducing our disproportionate burden of chronic disease. A productive local food economy and improved national food system that prioritises public health will additionally provide our town with more local jobs, particularly for Walgett's disabled and long-term unemployed who have not achieved education outcomes equipping them to work in other industries".

"Overarching the Strategy is our requirement for improved river and groundwater management".

This call was made in a joint submission made by the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service ("WAMS") and Dharriwaa Elders Group ("DEG") to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities 15 July 2020. The submission can be found by selecting and downloading #98 from

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Foodpricing/Submissions.

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