SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

National Water Reform 2026

Focused response to Themes 2–4: governance, regional equity and national coordination

Submitted by: Eric Vanweydeveld, Director, Aquanex Pty Ltd (28 April 2026)
Water sector practitioner specialising in remote, regional and First Nations water services

Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE, 2025). Peter Cullen Trust Fellow (2022). Churchill Fellow (2018). Lead author, *Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap* (Water Services Association of Australia, 2022).

This submission is made in a personal and professional capacity, drawing on over twenty years working in remote and First Nations water service delivery, policy and infrastructure across Australia and the Pacific, including former leadership of water services for remote communities in the Northern Territory at Power and Water Corporation. Aquanex Pty Ltd is acknowledged as professional affiliation.

1. Executive summary

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's National Water Reform 2026 inquiry. This submission addresses Themes 2–4 and draws on over twenty years working in remote and First Nations water service delivery, policy and infrastructure, including the development of the national review Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap (Water Services Association of Australia, 2022) and recent advisory work with state and territory governments in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

Australia's national water reform settings have made measurable progress over the past two decades. The next phase, however, must confront a difficult truth: national averages obscure persistent and structural inequity in remote and First Nations water services. These are not edge cases. They are where the credibility of the reform framework is most clearly tested.

The central proposition of this submission is that National Water Reform 2026 should shift from a primarily price-, asset- and compliance-led reform model to a **service reliability reform approach** — one that asks whether every community can consistently receive water and wastewater services that are safe, reliable, transparent, adequately funded, locally legitimate and operationally sustainable.

This gap is most acute for remote and First Nations communities, including homelands — small kin-connected settlements where Aboriginal people exercise the right to live on Country, and which most jurisdictions exclude from formal water service obligations.

National performance reporting has historically provided limited visibility of smaller service providers. While the Bureau of Meteorology has now introduced a 2024–25 National Performance Report indicator set for water and wastewater service providers with fewer than 10,000 connected

properties, the indicator set remains limited and does not provide full public transparency of drinking water quality results, health-based exceedances, public health advisories or corrective actions. Small, remote and First Nations systems therefore remain largely invisible in national performance reporting.

This is not only a remote water issue. It is a national reform credibility issue. If Australia's water reform framework cannot see, measure and respond to service risks in its most exposed communities, national reporting will continue to overstate performance and understate inequity. Addressing these gaps would strengthen public health protection, improve investment productivity, support Closing the Gap commitments, and provide a more honest basis for national SDG 6 reporting.

To address this, national water reform should:

1. **Establish a nationally consistent minimum level of service** for drinking water and wastewater, applicable to all communities — including those currently below jurisdictional reporting and funding thresholds.
2. **Create a national water quality transparency framework** covering all service providers, regardless of size or jurisdiction.
3. **Strengthen national reporting for small regional, remote and First Nations providers** by expanding the new sub-10,000 connected properties reporting framework to include transparent drinking water quality, public health advisory and corrective action indicators.
4. **Replace short-term grant cycles with rolling four-year investment windows** for remote and First Nations water services.
5. **Fund Stage 0 project formulation** to convert identified needs into well-scoped, evidence-informed, investment-ready proposals.
6. **Embed whole-of-life funding** logic in all infrastructure programs, including O&M, workforce capability, training, critical spares, monitoring, serviceability and asset renewal.
7. **Strengthen First Nations co-governance and enable pathways to community-led water authorities** where communities choose to pursue them.
8. **Adopt a 'consistent outcomes, flexible delivery' approach** so that national standards establish common expectations without imposing a single delivery model.

These reforms are practical, evidence-based and deliverable within existing intergovernmental architecture. They do not require new institutions; they require clearer expectations, longer horizons and genuine accountability for service outcomes.

2. Grounding and basis of this submission

This submission draws on practical experience in remote and First Nations water service delivery, policy and infrastructure across Australia and the Pacific.

The submission is deliberately implementation focused. It is written from the perspective of translating national policy intent into practical service arrangements, investment pathways, prioritisation frameworks and delivery models that can work in remote and culturally complex settings.

It builds directly on the national review *Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap* (Water Services Association of Australia, 2022), which examined the systemic challenges of delivering water services to remote First Nations communities and informed the Australian Government's subsequent commitment of $150 million through the First Nations Water Program. This submission is also informed by recent advisory work with state and territory governments in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, while ensuring that the observations and recommendations in this submission are framed at a national level and do not attribute specific prioritisation approaches to any one jurisdiction.

Northern Territory. Advisory work for the Northern Territory Government on strategic investment prioritisation for remote Aboriginal community water infrastructure — translating public health risk, service performance, delivery constraints and long-term investment needs into practical and defensible decision pathways. The work covers the pathway from project formulation through multi-criteria assessment to the development of investment priorities and a four-year Rolling Infrastructure Program.

Queensland. Advisory work for the Queensland Government on safe drinking water outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a focus on capacity-building, culturally responsive engagement, and practical support to strengthen water quality management and community health protection.

South Australia. Advisory work for the South Australian Government on improving water security in Aboriginal homeland communities — reviewing existing assessments, contributing to the development of minimum levels of service for self-managed communities, and translating broader policy and service obligations into structured frameworks for staged decision-making, prioritisation and future investment. This is complemented by sector-level analysis on Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) capability and sustainability.

Western Australia. Advisory support for the Western Australian Government on drinking water quality and disinfection in Aboriginal communities, including in the Kimberley and homeland contexts. The work focuses on practical public health protection, treatment performance, fit-for-context service approaches, and the interface between water quality monitoring, governance and service improvement decisions in remote and culturally complex settings.

Earlier in my career, this experience also included leadership of water services for remote communities in the Northern Territory at Power and Water Corporation, and Churchill Fellowship research on low-cost innovative water treatment solutions for regional and remote Australia.

The consistent finding across this body of work is straightforward: **national water reform will not succeed for all Australians unless it directly addresses the reliability, transparency and long-term sustainability of small, remote and First Nations water services.**

Theme 2 — Governance, accountability and coordination

3. Fragmentation is the principal governance risk

Water service governance in remote and First Nations contexts remains fragmented across utilities, public health regulators, housing providers, local governments, land councils, infrastructure agencies, and Commonwealth and jurisdictional funders. The practical consequences are well documented:

- no single line of sight on service risk;
- unclear accountability for service outcomes, as distinct from project delivery;
- duplicated, disconnected or competing funding decisions;
- weak linkages between infrastructure delivery and long-term operations; and
- limited visibility of whether communities actually receive safe and reliable water services.

Recent prioritisation work for the Northern Territory Government was developed precisely to address this — to provide a clear pathway from **identified need → defined project → prioritised investment → long-term planning**. A central design principle is that *priority, readiness and sequencing are related but distinct concepts*. Funding decisions too often reward what is easiest to fund rather than what carries the greatest public health or service reliability risk.

4. From project delivery to service outcomes

Reform should re-centre governance on accountability for water service outcomes — water quality, supply continuity, minimum service levels, emergency response, O&M funding, operator capability, community engagement and transparent reporting — rather than only project delivery milestones.

Recommendation: require each jurisdiction, through renewed national water reform commitments and bilateral funding agreements, to establish a service reliability governance framework for small, remote and First Nations water services. This framework should define minimum service expectations, agency roles, public health escalation pathways, investment prioritisation processes, O&M responsibilities, annual public reporting obligations and formal First Nations participation in decision-making.

Theme 3 — Regional, remote and equity considerations

5. Australia lacks a consistent minimum level of service

A fundamental gap in Australia's water reform framework is the absence of a clearly defined and enforceable minimum level of service applicable to all communities. In urban systems, service expectations are visible and regulated. In remote and First Nations contexts, they remain variable, under-defined and often unreported. This produces a structural inequity: access to safe and reliable water depends on where a person lives, not on a nationally agreed baseline.

The 2020 Productivity Commission Inquiry already recommended that states and territories define a 'basic level of service'. Five years on, jurisdictional progress has been uneven, and several jurisdictions still have no defined level of service for self-supplied or homeland communities.

Recent practical work across jurisdictions has highlighted the importance of a **public-health-grounded service adequacy benchmark** — a 'floor', distinct from local Levels of Service 'aspirations'. Reference points may include 24-hour water continuity, minimum storage redundancy and wastewater containment within licence standards. This concept should be elevated to national reform.

The purpose is not to create a rigid national operating model. It is to establish a nationally recognised service floor below which no community should fall, while still allowing jurisdictions to determine how services are delivered in different geographic, cultural and institutional contexts.

A national minimum level of service should not be limited to water quality compliance alone. It should cover:

- safe drinking water quality, aligned to the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines;
- sufficient quantity for health, hygiene and liveability;
- continuity of supply, storage and redundancy;
- emergency supply arrangements;
- wastewater containment and treatment;
- public communication and incident notification; and
- culturally appropriate engagement and reporting.

6. Water quality transparency is a national blind spot

Australia lacks open and consistent national transparency on water quality performance. Many small and remote service providers — including those serving the communities most likely to experience risk — sit outside national reporting frameworks. The communities most exposed to risk are therefore the least visible in national datasets. This is not only a data issue. It is an equity, public health and accountability issue.

As a signatory to the United Nations 2030 Agenda, Australia reports against Sustainable Development Goal 6 — universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all. The World Health Organisation reports that 100% of Australia's population has access to 'at least basic service'. At an aggregate level, this is true. On closer examination, it is not the whole story.

Australia's national water performance reporting has historically had limited visibility of smaller providers. The Bureau of Meteorology has now introduced a 2024–25 National Performance Report indicator set for water and wastewater service providers with fewer than 10,000 connected properties. However, this remains a performance indicator set rather than a comprehensive public water quality transparency framework.

Crucially, **every discrete First Nations community in Australia sits well below this threshold**. The largest discrete First Nations communities have populations of approximately 2,500–3,000 residents (ABS 2021 Census), and most are considerably smaller. As a result, discrete First Nations communities generally sit within the small-provider reporting category. The reform challenge is therefore no longer only whether these providers are counted, but whether national reporting captures the indicators that matter most for public health, transparency and accountability. This is the structural reason why the communities most

exposed to risk are the least visible in national datasets, and why national reform performance can be overstated.

Beyond the data itself, this structural exclusion has a public health dimension. Preventable diseases that arise where essential water and sanitation infrastructure is absent or unreliable — including gastrointestinal illness, scabies, impetigo, trachoma, otitis media, and acute rheumatic fever — function as *diseases of infrastructure failure*. Their persistence in remote First Nations communities reflects systemic service inequity, not isolated clinical or behavioural causes (Vanweydeveld 2026). What is excluded from national reporting is not merely a data gap; it is a population-level public health burden hidden in plain sight.

Without transparent national water quality data:

- communities cannot easily understand the quality of the water they receive;
- governments cannot accurately identify the scale and distribution of risk;
- investment cannot be prioritised consistently across jurisdictions; and
- national reform performance may be overstated.

Recommendation: establish a public national water quality transparency framework covering all service providers, regardless of size. At a minimum, this should report drinking water quality compliance, monitoring gaps, boil-water alerts, do-not-drink notices, public health notifications and corrective action status. Reporting should be accessible to communities, culturally appropriate, and designed to support improvement rather than blame.

7. Remote systems are structurally different

Remote water systems are not simply smaller versions of urban systems. They face high per-capita costs, limited workforce capacity, difficult logistics, vulnerable water sources, climate exposure, low redundancy and fragmented funding pathways. Applying uniform pricing, funding or regulatory models to these contexts risks embedding inequity rather than removing it.

The right approach is **consistent outcomes, flexible delivery**: define the national outcomes every community should receive, while allowing jurisdictions to design delivery models that reflect geography, governance, culture and operational reality.

8. Communities currently below the threshold

Many of the communities most exposed to risk fall below jurisdictional service thresholds. In some jurisdictions, very small settlements and homelands (fewer than 50 people) fall outside formal service obligations or receive only limited support, particularly where they are self-supplied or sit below administrative thresholds for regulated service delivery.

In the Northern Territory, approximately 600 homelands are home to between 6,000 and 8,000 permanent residents and connect to a much larger seasonal population. In Queensland, around 44 discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities — with a combined population of approximately 40,000 — operate within a complex regional service environment. Publicly available audit findings highlight ongoing

challenges in achieving consistent, safe and reliable water service outcomes across regional and remote settings.

Homelands warrant specific national reform attention. They are not incidental small communities. They are deliberate, kin-connected settlements where Aboriginal people exercise the right to live on Country, fulfil cultural responsibilities, and maintain language, knowledge and law — recognised under Australia's commitments to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The homelands movement is one of the most significant expressions of First Nations self-determination in the modern era.

Yet most jurisdictions provide no formal water service obligation to homelands. Drinking water on homelands is overwhelmingly self-supplied — typically from rainwater tanks or unregulated bores — rarely monitored and sits outside the Safe Drinking Water Acts that protect other Australians. The Aboriginal Benefit Account Homelands Project, a ten-year $50 million Northern Territory program supporting essential services on homelands, closed in December 2024 without a confirmed national successor. This is a concrete and current policy gap.

National reform should not assume that homelands are too small or too complex to be considered. A minimum service framework can recognise different service models while still requiring transparent risk assessment, clear accountability, fit-for-purpose support and a pathway for communities to understand and improve the safety and reliability of their water supplies.

The cascading consequences of water service failure are well documented. At Kiwirrkurra, Western Australia, elevated fluoride, nitrate and uranium in the drinking water led to a 'do not drink' notice and the temporary closure of the local dialysis unit, with patients relocated more than 800 kilometres to Alice Springs — separated from family, Country and cultural support networks. This case illustrates how water service failure can cascade into healthcare access disruption and forced displacement, with significant cultural and wellbeing costs that extend well beyond the originating service issue.

Importantly, Kiwirrkurra also demonstrates the value of whole-of-life funding and operational support. As of 5 February 2026, the community advisory was lifted, and the water was confirmed safe to drink. This outcome was achieved through system optimisation of the reverse osmosis plant, including practical treatment adjustments coordinated by Water Corporation. The plant had been installed, but optimisation and ongoing operational funding were not adequately embedded at commissioning. The subsequent improvement demonstrates that infrastructure alone is not enough: safe drinking water outcomes depend on funded optimisation, operations, monitoring, technical support and whole-of-life service planning. This directly reinforces Recommendation 6.

These communities are typically excluded from formal water service obligations, regulatory frameworks and reporting. National reform should explicitly address this gap rather than leave it to jurisdictional discretion. A national minimum level of service must apply not only to discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but also to homelands and self-supplied communities — settings that sit at the cultural heart of First Nations water service equity.

Theme 4 — National consistency and intergovernmental coordination

9. Funding cycles are too short and too reactive

Short-term, ad hoc funding windows drive reactive projects, rushed engagement and incomplete planning. They make it difficult to undertake proper community engagement, complete technical investigations, develop robust business cases, align with housing and health programs, secure approvals, build local workforce capacity, plan for O&M and handover, and package works efficiently across communities.

Remote water projects need time. Logistics, cultural engagement, procurement constraints, land access and workforce limitations all compound long lead times. Funding cycles should reflect that reality, not work against it.

The Australian Government's commitment of $150 million through the First Nations Water Program is a meaningful step in the right direction. Its long-term impact, however, will depend on whether such investment is delivered through a sustained and predictable funding window rather than a single cycle, and whether complementary state and territory funding aligns with the same horizon.

10. Adopt rolling four-year investment windows

Commonwealth, state and territory governments should shift from short-term grant rounds to **rolling four-year investment programs** for remote and First Nations water services, with six-monthly or annual moderation to respond to emerging risks and project readiness.

This model is already emerging in recent practice. Remote water infrastructure planning work has demonstrated the value of rolling investment programs that convert identified needs into continuously updated multi-year programs of work, aligned with budget and infrastructure planning horizons. Equivalent work for the Northern Territory Government mirrors this structure as the operational bridge between prioritisation and delivery.

A four-year horizon enables governments and providers to:

- identify needs early and fund Stage 0 project formulation;
- engage properly with communities and develop evidence-based scopes;
- sequence projects based on priority and readiness;
- align with housing, health and broader infrastructure programs;
- improve procurement and contractor planning;
- build operator readiness before commissioning; and
- reduce stop-start delivery.

It would also strengthen Commonwealth–state coordination by creating a shared, visible investment pipeline rather than disconnected funding rounds. This could be implemented through national funding principles that require jurisdictions to maintain a rolling four-year remote and First Nations water investment pipeline, updated annually and linked to transparent prioritisation, project readiness and service risk.

11. Fund the full life-cycle, not only construction

Long-term service reliability depends on far more than construction. Planning, diagnostics, design, community engagement, operator training, digital monitoring, asset management, O&M transition, governance and reporting are all essential — and routinely underfunded.

Recent remote water service planning work recognises these non-capital enabling activities as legitimate components of service improvement. National reform should require the same.

A useful framing is that safe and reliable water services depend on the balanced interaction of three elements: **capital investment, operational expenditure, and people capability**. In practical terms, this means CAPEX, OPEX and the People, Education, Capacity and Skills (PECS) needed to operate and sustain the service.

National funding frameworks consistently privilege CAPEX, while OPEX and PECS are treated as secondary or discretionary. This imbalance creates fragile systems — advanced treatment assets installed without the sustained operating budgets and workforce capability required to keep them performing reliably. Operator burnout, compliance risk and service failure are often attributed to technical shortcomings, when they are more accurately symptoms of chronic underinvestment in the operational and human foundations of service delivery.

Infrastructure proposals should be required to demonstrate **whole-of-life funding** across all three elements — capital, operations, and the people who operate and sustain the asset — including O&M, operator capability, culturally appropriate workforce development, digital monitoring and handover readiness — *before* approval, not after handover.

12. First Nations leadership and community-controlled delivery

First Nations communities cannot be limited to consultation after decisions are substantially made. National reform should support genuine co-design and co-governance, community-controlled participation, local workforce development (including community water ranger models), culturally appropriate service delivery and Indigenous data sovereignty.

Engagement that is meaningful must also be funded over realistic timeframes. Sector-level analysis on Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in South Australia shows that sustainable funding enables ACCOs to plan strategically, invest in operational excellence and innovate in service delivery. Short-term engagement funding does the opposite — it produces consultation fatigue and limits genuine participation.

If governments expect First Nations organisations and communities to participate meaningfully in water governance, prioritisation, workforce or service delivery, those roles must be properly resourced and recognised as core, not peripheral. This should include resourcing for community participation in data interpretation, service planning, water quality communication, local workforce development and ongoing performance review — not only one-off consultation during project design.

Effective First Nations governance also depends on a clear logic chain: monitoring generates evidence, evidence supports decision-making, and structured decision-making over time builds governance influence and capability. National reform should enable this progression, not interrupt it through fragmented funding or short engagement cycles.

13. An international reference point: the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority

Australia is not the first country to grapple with how to structurally improve First Nations water services. The **Atlantic First Nations Water Authority (AFNWA)** in Canada is the first Indigenous-owned and operated water utility in that country, having assumed full responsibility for drinking water and wastewater services across participating First Nations communities. It is grounded in Indigenous self-determination and the principle of *Two-Eyed Seeing* — integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.

The AFNWA was not a single intervention. It was the result of a deliberate, staged process built on six elements: a formal governance agreement with the Government of Canada; a long-term sustainable funding model with built-in review cycles; phased transition planning across governance, regulation, operations, capital and risk; embedded workforce capability and Indigenous workforce development; integrated asset and operational systems with system-specific guidance for each community; and an interim regulatory framework to fill the gap left by the absence of federal drinking water regulations on First Nations lands.

The AFNWA is not presented here as a model to import. It is offered as evidence that genuine First Nations-led water governance is achievable at scale when sequencing, funding, governance and capability are designed deliberately and supported over time. Australia's reform framework should provide the architecture to enable comparable, locally grounded pathways where Traditional Owner organisations choose to pursue them.

14. Priority reform recommendations

On the basis of the analysis above, this submission recommends that the Productivity Commission consider the following eight reforms. These recommendations are intended to be considered in the context of the renewed National Water Agreement, revised national performance reporting arrangements, Closing the Gap-aligned implementation plans, and Commonwealth–state funding agreements.

Recommendation 1 — National minimum level of service for all communities, including homelands. Establish a nationally agreed minimum level of service for drinking water and wastewater applicable to all communities, including discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, homelands and self-supplied communities currently below jurisdictional thresholds. The standard should cover quality, quantity, continuity, redundancy, emergency response, wastewater containment and transparent reporting.

Recommendation 2 — National water quality transparency framework. Require nationally consistent and publicly accessible water quality reporting for all service providers, regardless of size. Reporting should cover compliance results, monitoring gaps, boil-water alerts and public health notifications, and should be culturally appropriate and accessible.

Recommendation 3 — Strengthen small-provider national reporting. Strengthen the Bureau of Meteorology's new sub-10,000 connected properties reporting framework so that small regional, remote and First Nations service providers are included in nationally consistent reporting on drinking water quality results, health-based exceedances, monitoring gaps, boil-water alerts, do-not-drink notices, public health

notifications and corrective action status. This should support Australia's SDG 6 reporting and provide a more accurate picture of service risk in communities currently least visible in public reporting.

Recommendation 4 — Rolling four-year funding windows. Shift Commonwealth, state and territory funding from short-term grants to rolling four-year investment programs, with six-monthly or annual review points to respond to emerging risks and project readiness.

Recommendation 5 — Dedicated Stage 0 funding. Create dedicated seed funding for project formulation — defining problems, investigating root causes, developing options, engaging communities, and preparing investment-ready proposals.

Recommendation 6 — Whole-of-life funding for capital, operations and people. Require all infrastructure proposals to demonstrate balanced funding across capital investment, operations, and the people, education, capacity and skills (PECS) needed to operate and sustain the asset — including funded O&M, operator capability, culturally appropriate workforce development, maintenance arrangements, digital monitoring and handover readiness — before approval.

Recommendation 7 — First Nations co-governance and pathways to community-led water authorities. Embed formal First Nations participation in governance, prioritisation, data interpretation and service design across all national water reform programs and funding mechanisms. Where Traditional Owner organisations choose to pursue them, national reform settings should also enable and support staged pathways toward First Nations-led water authorities, drawing on international precedents such as the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority in Canada.

Recommendation 8 — Consistent outcomes, flexible delivery. Set national expectations for outcomes and transparency while allowing flexible jurisdictional delivery models suited to local context.

15. Conclusion

Australia's next phase of water reform must confront a simple but uncomfortable truth: **national averages do not tell the full story**. Many Australians receive safe, reliable and well-regulated water services. But too many remote and First Nations communities continue to experience service uncertainty, limited transparency, weak accountability and under-funded long-term operations.

The reform task is not only to build more infrastructure. It is to build a better service system — one with clear minimum service expectations, transparent water quality data, longer and more predictable funding windows, whole-of-life investment, First Nations leadership and stronger intergovernmental coordination, all anchored in service reliability as a core reform objective.

Remote and First Nations communities should not be treated as peripheral to national water reform. **They are central to its credibility**. A reform framework that can deliver safe, reliable and transparent services in Australia's most complex service contexts will be stronger, fairer and more durable for all Australians. National Water Reform 2026 is an opportunity to move from recognising these gaps to building the practical architecture needed to close them.

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