

REMOTE WATER FUTURES CONSORTIUM

10 July 2026

National Water Reform 2026 Inquiry — Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428, Canberra City ACT 2601
Email: waterreform2026@pc.gov.au

Dear Commissioners,

Re: Submission to the National Water Reform 2026 Inquiry — Interim Water Services Reform Directions

We enclose the Remote Water Futures Consortium's (the Consortium) submission responding to the Commission's Interim Reform Directions for the National Water Reform 2026 Inquiry, together with the Consortium's original proposal letter to Government dated 17 March 2026, which sets out the Central Desert Living Lab proposal in full.

About the Remote Water Futures Consortium

The Consortium is a partnership of six lead organisations — Desert Knowledge Australia, Ekistica, the Centre for Appropriate Technology, the Water Services Association of Australia, the Goyder Institute for Water Research, WaterAid, Research Leads from the DCCEEW's National Environmental Science Program's IP1.02 *Water Sensitive and Liveable Communities in Regional and Remote Australia* (Monash, CSIRO, Curtin), together with several supporting collaborators. This consortium holds direct, first-hand experience across regional, remote and First Nations water contexts throughout Australia. Members are bring complementary, non-duplicative capability spanning community engagement, technical delivery, workforce training, utility partnerships, applied research and policy translation. The Consortium already has a detailed, costed proposal before the Australian Government (letter of 17 March 2026, enclosed).

What this submission addresses

The submission responds to the Commission's Interim Reform Directions and to Information Requests 3–8. In summary, it:

- sets out an evidence base (Appendix A) documenting four structural challenges: a fragmented, metropolitan-focused knowledge and tool base; worsening workforce and skills shortages; funding that favours capital over ongoing operations and capability; and a continuing First Nations water security and governance gap;
- proposes the Central Desert Living Lab as a place-based pilot anchor institution built around four functions, technology enablement, networked capacity building, governance and financing support, and fit-for-purpose tools, delivered from the Desert Knowledge Precinct across the NT/SA/WA border region;
- notes the Living Lab is a live, costed program (\$5.0 million over five years) already before Government, offered as a concrete example of the place-based delivery mechanism the interim directions identify as necessary;
- responds directly to Information Requests on community-led service priorities, service delivery models, sustainable funding (basic levels of service and CSO payments), standardised planning and monitoring tools, nationally consistent water quality reporting, and Australian Government investment; and
- makes six recommendations, including establishing the Living Lab as a pilot anchor institution, rebalancing capital/operational funding, nationally consistent drinking water reporting linked to Closing the Gap and SDG 6, a remote water workforce strategy, a national linking platform for existing tools, and capability development to support First Nations water interests.

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The Consortium's central proposition is that lasting improvement requires both system-level reform and place-based delivery capability. National policy change alone will not succeed without locally trusted institutions to coordinate knowledge, funding, governance, technology and community aspirations. This is directly aligned with the four Priority Reform areas of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and is grounded in the evidence of Cromar and Ross (2023), Vanweydeveld (2022), Doble et al. (2023) and the NESP Sustainable Communities and Waste Hub's IP1.02 program, all cited throughout the enclosed submission.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission further with the Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Paul Satur,

On behalf of the Remote Water Futures Consortium