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Via email:
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Submission on NWR 2026 Interim Update 1

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the Interim Update for the National Water Reform 2026: Water Services reform directions.

Ekistica is regional and remote Australia's leading advisory and technical consultancy firm, with offices in Alice Springs and Hobart. Our clients include state and national governments, regulatory bodies, intergovernmental agencies, utilities, regional development agencies, community service organisations, large commercial and private investment firms, and end users.

We exist to deliver informed & innovative solutions to the complex challenges of remote area infrastructure development and are ready to help with your advisory, project development, engineering design and project delivery needs.

This submission is based on our experience helping regional and remote utilities, governments, small service providers, and communities find water quality and water supply solutions, improve governance, build and maintain infrastructure and train staff for better outcomes. Many projects cannot be specifically referenced so recommendations and commentary is generalised based on our experience.

Information request 3

Standards and reporting

In the contexts in which we work, there is often no affordability paradigm which impacts community members as water services are already highly subsidised, but safety and acceptability is important. We believe these statements could be strengthened. Without fit for purpose engagement by the water supplier which goes well beyond 'reporting', communities will always be at high risk of perceiving that their water supply is unsafe, thus driving them to alternate water sources and other drinks.

Even the 'safest' water can be perceived as unsafe if a community is not engaged on the supply of that water. This perception can be caused by rumour and hearsay or by aesthetic parameters such

as water temperature, odour, scale, corrosion of fittings, colour or a range of other factors. Community engagement is critical and should be ongoing outside of major projects, which is often the only time it gets funded. Mandating this engagement, as the National Water Grid have done for capital projects, would emphasise that the approach is beneficial to community members as well as to those that service them.

Community capability and partnerships

Two projects completed over last two years have highlighted the desire for peer-to-peer and community-of-practice based learning, and we would encourage this to be included in this category. This is true for highly skilled service providers across utilities and more generalist service providers with a low level of technical understanding. Sharing knowledge and resources on issues such as community engagement, effective technologies, and data management practices is highly desirable. People want to learn from their peers and this has been successful in the training that we have recently delivered for Homelands service providers in the NT.

Infrastructure, governance and data

The increase in capital funding for Indigenous community programs recently has been a significant contributor to water security in this space. For projects under the jurisdiction of utilities, this appears to have been well delivered and the only comment I would make is that surety of ongoing funding would smooth the peaks and troughs of delivery and overall reduce costs and improve project outcomes in these regional/remote areas. This would ensure access to skilled professionals, trades people and supporting staff and businesses) in these smaller areas wouldn't be either ramping up or wildly overbooked, both contexts being difficult to deliver infrastructure in.

Information request 4

Ekistica has recently developed a Basic Best Practice model for water management in Northern Territory Homelands, some of which are supported with funding and some technical services by the NTG through the Municipal and Essential Services grants. This work was enabled by the Territory Water Plan and funding provided through that mechanism. Part of the driver for the work was a recognition that if there were to be mandated water quality requirements the current capacity of those servicing those community would not make meeting those requirements possible.

Further we have completed projects for other agencies where we interviewed and investigated options for capacity building as discussed in this section and further worked with communities and agencies to strengthen their delivery model or improve their water services. The body of work here is significant and we have here given some general commentary on each of the actions or desired outcomes as listed in Information request 4.

Action or Outcome	Commentary
Enable water service providers and/or their customers and consumers to navigate government approval, grant-making and regulatory processes.	Provide context specific supporting resources. Be realistic about engagement with communities before grants are issued. Lack of understanding about grants processes on the ground can lead to disappointment and anger when a grant is slow to materialise or is not provided at all.
Ensure self-determination by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers and consumers.	This is really a long term action. Small consistent actions and engagement over time build a shared understanding of a community's circumstances and of why water quality is important.
Design funding criteria, guidelines, staging and timelines to incentivise innovation, efficiency and customer/consumer-led planning.	Again this is a long-term action. Based on our work, this is also what service providers want but there is a lack of knowledge on how to express their needs, what the most important actions are and how to share this decision making with the community. The basic best practice approach and alignment of guidelines for NT Homelands sets the foundation and pathway for this.
Select technology and infrastructure options that are fit for purpose, place and people, including to ensure financial sustainability and resilience to adverse events.	We have observed numerous inappropriate technologies installed in Homelands which are a waste of time and funding. We have proposed a Living Lab – Central Desert which could incubate new technologies and demonstrate and refine existing technologies. A central facility, supported by a trusted body that can provide expert advice, is required to meet these technological needs. This is relevant to all remote inland contexts from small suppliers to utility level suppliers. More information on this is included in the Remote Water Futures consortium submission.
Build the capacity of regional and remote service providers, and the local community more generally, in water services planning and delivery, including local employment and skills.	This requires governance specific and community specific support. Our engagements with service providers show that training needs to meet them where they are at. Thus we have recently provided training which aligns to their contract requirements and gives them the tools to -build an understanding of WHY water management is important, -build knowledge on what good should look like, -build confidence in engaging contractors, -build confidence in engaging with the communities they manage,

Action or Outcome	Commentary
	-complete sanitary surveys and identify risks themselves, -help them to set priorities for improving the water infrastructure that they manage. The training was successful because it responded to the regulatory context (the guidelines) and to service providers desire to learn from each other as much as from a trainer. The Water Living Lab Central Desert as proposed in the Water Futures Consortium submission has a training component proposed which would be set up to provide context specific training to community members, service providers and utility level operators.
Other changes that were or could be fundamental to successful outcomes (1).	Consistent funding which can be relied on is critical. In remote areas we cannot easily respond to boom and bust cycles of funding as there is not the pool of workers from trades to engineers to engagement specialists to support such a cycle. Ramping up and down programs also causes disengagement from communities. Why should they participate in a new program when the good program from five years ago was disbanded? Funding of operations and maintenance is necessary to support capital investment. The injection of capital investment has been excellent and some areas are well set up to support this but others not. Some capital investments can be supported within existing budgets – for example a replacement water main has an existing budget to maintain it. When it comes to new water treatment infrastructure it is very difficult for existing budgets to cover this. If we want to shift the dial on improving water quality and the benefits that this brings, including saving money in other areas of community service, then providing operational funding is critical.
Other changes that were or could be fundamental to successful outcomes (2).	Delivery across highly decentralised locations need to use models that effectively utilise opportunities of centralised management of programs, including data management, reporting, standardisation of frameworks, and similar, while still maintaining local/regional relationships and presence in delivery.
How could the Australian Government support jurisdictions to facilitate adoption of improved service delivery models?	The proposed Water Living Lab proposes a community of practice to allow remote water suppliers and those they serve to learn from each other. This cross-sectional, multi jurisdictional learning would allow cross pollination of successful (and unsuccessful) initiatives and approaches. Often those engaged with these services are not part of a cohesive group such as the Australian

Action or Outcome	Commentary
	Water Association or Local Government Association so this group would offer support and cross pollination of ideas across a range of stakeholders. These groups would also have the opportunity to pool resources to solve a problem. Large utilities often have funding to solve problems for large populations or the market already offers solutions to these problems. This is not the case in smaller regional and remote areas.
State and territory government actions (1)	Ensure that contracts for service providers are long term enough to support business development and programs such as apprenticeships and certificate level training.
State and territory government actions (2)	Build capacity in government services supporting communities. Provide support from utilities or specialist consultants for non-utility grant applicants to National Water Grid funding applications.

Information request 5

A basic level of service would be helpful in setting a standard for various communities. We believe key risks include:

- Driving away service providers who are risk averse and unable to support this level of service
- Setting unrealistic targets for small communities
- Providing an unrealistic cost burden for utilities at all levels

As per the approach that we have set out with NTG on Basic Best Practice we believe that for small communities that are not utility supported, a continuous improvement approach is suitable. This approach builds capacity in service providers and the agencies that support them over time. More information can be found on the [AHNT website](#).

A frustration that we have seen in many jurisdictions is the impact that poor water quality has on health and housing, but that this impact is not assigned a dollar value and therefore funding to correct these is not granted. There is general agreement that water that is very hard or has poor taste has an impact on health and housing, and there is some research supporting this largely anecdotal claim. As health and taste are often aesthetic values which utilities do not **have** to meet, they are often not included or highly valued in an assessment of preferred approach to water treatment and meaning that water quality improvements from a new treatment plant may address only one or two health parameters and the opportunity to improve other outcomes is lost. Short of changing the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines aesthetic values approach, a nationally recognised dollar figure for the impact of hardness, taste and perhaps temperature would allow recognition of the impact of water on health and housing.

Information request 6

As part of the Water for Homelands project we produced with Water Technologies a Bore Risk Assessment Tool which allows risk assessment and prioritisation of actions for groundwater sources in Homelands in the NT. This tool has only just been launched so it is too early to comment on the

effectiveness of the tool, but the intent is to allow service providers with no particular groundwater skills to assess and address risks associated with a particular community. This low cost, low effort approach avoids the need for expensive and hard to find experts to assess risks and offers an opportunity to reduce risk and protect budgets before small issues become big and expensive problems. The output risk assessment tables also allow their government agency to compare risk across communities for fair funding allocation.

Information request 7

Reporting on drinking water quality is specific to each jurisdiction and governance framework specific and should remain so to ensure data sovereignty.

While work is underway to develop this data collection framework, there should be efforts to develop resources and train people in water sampling. Data should not be accepted that cannot show that its provenance is reliable.

Better technologies for water sampling would help, support in development of these technologies is an aspect to explore for the Water Living Lab.

We hope that offers some insight into our experience. Please feel free to reach out if there is anything you would like more detail on.

Kind regards,

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