



Joint Policy Statement of The Coalition for Healthy Remote Stores on Food Supply to Remote Indigenous Communities During Extreme Weather Events

Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and homelands are experiencing an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events*, causing significant exacerbations in food insecurity. There is currently no national approach to provide the urgent support required to enable remote community stores to maintain minimum stock levels and support community food security during these extreme weather events.

Key Policy Position

1. We advocate for the development of a responsive government funding model be available to remote communities and homelands at times of extreme weather events for the additional costs of utilising alternative freight methods (e.g., air freight, alternative routes) to ensure an uninterrupted supply of essential food and groceries. It is unviable for community stores to cover this unplanned cost.
2. We advocate for government action to prioritise equity in supply when there are shortages in essential food and groceries to supply remote communities and homelands.
3. We recommend that the development of community-specific disaster management and resilience plans ensures community empowerment, self-determination and increased community capacity for extreme weather event resilience, rather than a charity model for food relief.
4. We advocate for funding for improved storage infrastructure for stores not previously impacted by extreme weather.
5. We recommend that community stores play a central role in deciding how essential food and groceries are supplied to the community during periods of extreme weather. Large food relief organisations, such as Foodbank and SecondBite, should only provide support where a community store or local organisation is unable to and with the agreement of the community, to avoid impacting the viability of the store and to ensure the best sustainable solution determined by the community.

Who we are

The Coalition for Healthy Remote Stores is comprised of 14 Aboriginal-led, Aboriginal-community controlled and non-government, retail, health organisations, research institutes and universities. We recognise the critical role that food retail stores have in preventing and managing preventable chronic disease. We call for evidence-informed action to support storeowner and retailer efforts to improve the healthiness of food retail stores in remote Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory. Immediate action is needed to reduce the health inequity experienced and improve health outcomes to support the strong future of communities.

* Defined here as an unprecedented/ unpredictable/ unexpected weather event, which may or may not be declared a natural disaster, that results in disruption of a remote community's usual food supply.

Facts and evidence

1. Nationally, there has been an increase in extreme heat events, heavy rainfall becoming more intense, and sea levels rising, disrupting the remote food distribution network.^{1, 2} In the Northern Territory (NT) alone, noted as having the most remote food retail stores of any state/territory in Australia,³ evidence shows a clear warming trend; a rise in extreme temperatures, heatwaves and bushfires.² From 2020 to 2021, double the number of road closures were reported in the NT due to increased frequency and intensity of rainfall,^{2, 4} with predictions this will become more severe. This changing climate will further impact food supply, food availability and food security in remote communities and homelands.
2. While each state/territory has a Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangement with the Federal Government,⁵ a disaster is not always declared when a community is isolated due to an extreme weather event, or a community can fall outside the declared disaster zone, yet usual food supply is still disrupted due to damage to transport routes.
3. Disruptions in the remote food distribution network incur substantial additional freight costs for community stores to ensure a continued supply during and after extreme weather events. This, in turn, increases food price for these communities and can affect viability of stores, which can lead to less nutritious food purchasing and increased risk and/or exacerbation of food insecurity.⁶⁻⁸
4. Evidence generated by Monash University's partnership with 29 NT remote Aboriginal community stores, highlighted that 68% of these stores experienced food delivery disruptions over the past year, with freight costs identified as a key barrier to implementing and sustaining healthy in-store operations.⁹ These disruptions can place communities into a prolonged state of food stress. During periods of disruption to the food supply, reliance on shelf-stable items is observed, with limited or no fruit and vegetable deliveries, and other healthy food perishables, resulting in poorer-quality diets.¹⁰
5. Many Northern Australian remote communities only have a single land or sea connection, with no access to rail services.⁴ Land access is commonly on an unsealed road, and sea access dependent on ideal conditions. A number of previous national inquiries^{11, 12} have outlined how store owners have attempted to mitigate and prepare for seasonal disruptions, including increasing community store food storage capacity, and relying on limited grants from government to pay for high-cost air freight of fruit and vegetables, and essential grocery items, impacting on stores' profitability. Where stores are not able to cover these additional freight costs, there is a risk that the community will run low on, or out of, food and other essential supplies.
6. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap priority reform 1 (formal partnerships and shared decision-making), which commits to building structures for shared decision-making authority with governments, supports a community development approach to creating disaster management and resilience plans.¹³

Responsibility and Contacts

The Coalition is represented by organisations who work in partnership with Aboriginal leaders and community residents to improve food security and healthy stores.

- Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation: Laura Baddeley Laura.Baddeley@alpa.asn.au 0458441307
- Monash University: Prof Julie Brimblecombe julie.brimblecombe@monash.edu 0447614532
- Menzies School of Health Research: Dr Beau Cubillo beau.cubillo@menzies.edu.au (08) 89595351
- The University of Queensland: A/Prof Megan Ferguson megan.ferguson@uq.edu.au (07) 3365 5546

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