

Meeting with: Senate Estimates Appearance

Time and Date: Friday, 17 February 2023

Venue: Parliament House

Meeting purpose: Torres Strait Regional Authority Opening Statement

Appropriate SES to come forward to support response:

- Ms Vonda Malone, Chief Executive Officer, Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA).

Key Talking Points:

- Au Esoau, Koeyma Eso, thank-you for the opportunity to join you on behalf of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA).
- I begin by acknowledging and paying my respects to the Ngunnwal and Ngambri traditional owners and their elders, past, present and emerging.
- I also would like to put forward an apology from the Torres Strait Regional Authority Chair and pass his regards to respective Senators.
- The Torres Strait Islanders journey towards local governance and self-determination dates back some 85 years ago with the First Island Councillors Conference on Masig Island.
- Today, we continue to build upon the work and advocacy of our elders who have gone before us.
- We carry the voices and aspirations of island communities from the Torres Strait – Zenadth Kes – to Canberra.
- The TSRA is the peak Commonwealth statutory body established under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989 (Cth)* and subsequently the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005 (Cth)* and has been the Voice and representation of Torres Strait Island and Aboriginal people for the past 29 years.
- The TSRA model has been a mechanism for local leadership, decision-making, self-determination, empowerment and meeting aspirations of our people since it was established on 1 July 1994.
- For nearly three decades, we have – and will continue–to represent the interests of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people living in the Torres Strait and the communities of Bamaga and Seisia in the Northern Peninsula Area of Far North Queensland.
- Our islands are scattered over a geographic area of 48,000 square kilometres from the tip of Cape York and north towards the borders of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.



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- These islands, reefs and coral cays reflect not only our pristine environment – but keep our culture, identity and wellbeing strong.
- Our communities are unique and diverse – so too are our needs and aspirations.
- As one of the most remote Australian Public Service (APS) agency and the lead Commonwealth entity in the Torres Strait, we support programs and deliver services across the region under the direction of an Indigenous elected representative board – elected every four years.
- The TSRA Board consists of 20 elected members who are Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal people.
- Our Board is required under the Act to convene at least four meetings each year.
- Many Board Members hold Portfolio responsibilities, supported by Assistant Portfolio Members to ensure experiences and knowledge can be shared with the next generation of TSRA leaders.
- Working together – with and for our people – is our strength.
- Our workforce of 137 staff consists of 85% Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people.
- Our staff work throughout the Torres Strait including up to 50 rangers based on the outer islands with 65 per cent of staff located on Thursday Island.
- The TSRA formulate and implement programs for Torres Strait Islanders, and Aboriginal persons, living in the region:
 1. Monitor the effectiveness of programs for Torres Strait Islanders, and Aboriginal persons, living in the Torres Strait area conducted by all other bodies.
 2. Develop policy proposals to meet national, State and regional needs and priorities of Torres Strait Islanders, and Aboriginal persons, living in the Torres Strait area including programs conducted by other bodies.
 3. Our ongoing role is to ensure that the culture and rights of our region, are reflected across all levels of government.
- The TSRA will continue to deliver its other programs for our people in the region – as it is mandated to do and aligned with Close the Gap targets – supporting economic development; regional infrastructure; fisheries; culture, art and heritage; environmental management; governance and leadership; and healthy and safe communities – programs and initiatives.
- TSRA welcomes the Australian Government's appetite for a second review of the second Closing the Gap Report.
- In our region, we are driving a new way of working with Traditional Owners and communities to boost climate resilience and adaptation.
- Just last month (January), we partnered with the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water to co-host a roundtable with regional and government representatives on Waibene (Thursday Island).
- The meeting reaffirmed our shared commitment to progress a federally funded Torres Strait Climate Centre of Excellence.

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- The TSRA has also enabled Native Title recognition over the majority of our land and sea country in the Torres Strait region.
- After 26 years of serving Traditional Owners in the region, the TSRA ceased being the Native Title Representative Body on 30 June 2022.
- I acknowledge past leaders and staff for their contributions to Native Title in the region over the years.
- A transition plan was initiated in partnership with the National Indigenous Australians Agency to transfer Native Title services to Gur A Baradharaw Kod Torres Strait Sea and Land Council (GBK).
- GBK is a 100 per cent Indigenous-controlled not-for-profit body, now responsible for the delivery of Native Title legal and support services to Native Title claimants, Native Title holders and prescribed bodies corporates.
- This transfer of Native Title responsibilities is a step towards reconciliation and self-determination.
- The remote islands of the Torres Strait is situated 804km from our nearest city of Cairns and 2991km from our State's capital city of Brisbane.
- In many cases there is only one provider delivering essential services in the region. This includes - one shipping company for the delivery of essential goods and services, one airline company operating service flights to some sections of the region, one major food retail company and fuel and energy provider and one ferry operator that services the Thursday Island area.
- This challenges local people's everyday quality of life and consumer choices, impacts government's service delivery particularly implementation of essential to life infrastructure across the region and business growth and access.
- The Torres Strait has been actively advocating at the Federal level for the region to be afforded freight subsidisation as per the Tasmanian Equalisation Scheme. This has been through direct deputations including and the Enquiry into Food Prices and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities (2020) and Enquiry into Seaswift Shipping (2015).
- Next year is TSRA's 30th Anniversary – an opportunity to reflect on the advocacy of those before us, build upon our achievements and embrace the many opportunities ahead. With an agenda for continuous improvement we strive to be best placed and fit-for-purpose to address our regions current needs and be the enabler to continue to empower our people, in our decision, in our culture, for our future.
- I thank my colleagues for their ongoing commitment and professional support and we look forward to working with key stakeholders and Traditional Owners to advance our peoples economic and social opportunities.

Au Esoau, Koeyma Eso, thank you

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