

## Senate Estimates – February 2024

### Opening Statement by Torres Strait Regional Authority CEO Ms Vonda Malone

- Au Esoau, Koeyma Eso, and thank you for the opportunity to appear at this Estimates hearing on behalf of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA).
- I begin by acknowledging and paying my respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri Traditional Owners and their elders past, present and emerging.
- I would also like to acknowledge the Chair of the Torres Strait Regional Authority, Mr Napau Pedro Stephen AM, who is here with us today.

#### *About the TSRA*

- The TSRA remains a model for Indigenous-led local leadership, decision-making, and self-determination in understanding and meeting the needs of our people.
- We are committed to working closely with Torres Strait communities to ensure we continue to deliver meaningful outcomes for our region.
- The TSRA administers programs across a broad range of areas, including culture, arts and heritage; economic development; environmental management; fisheries; governance and leadership; community health and safety; and regional infrastructure.
- This broad and diverse set of responsibilities is an immense privilege to administer, but also a significant responsibility for TSRA as a small agency delivering across the vast and complex Torres Strait Region and Northern Peninsula Area.
- The guidance of our elected Board members ensures that the TSRA's strategic direction aligns with the aspirations of the communities that we serve.

#### *The Region and its Challenges*

- The TSRA is situated in one of the most remote, vulnerable, and hard to reach regions of Australia, where 83 per cent of our residents are in the highest quintile for socio-economic disadvantage and living costs are up to 40 per cent higher than for urban areas.
- Very high freight costs and the high cost of fuel contributes to the high cost of living.

- The cost of freight alone adds more than 14 per cent to the cost to supply food and other household items to our communities.
- The lack of competition on freight routes and for air transport makes affordable service delivery even more difficult.

### *TSRA Activities*

- The TSRA undertakes a broad range of activities to help our communities.
- Continuing to invest in a strong and sustainable economic base for the region remains a key priority for the TSRA.
- Our Fisheries program is a key example of the TSRA's efforts to balance support for economic development with the importance of ecological sustainability – drawing insights from both Western and traditional ecological knowledge.
- Last year, the Bech-de-mer fisheries officially re-opened after 20 years of closure, signalling both a significant economic boost to traditional fishers and the sustainable replenishment of this highly prized fishery.
- In close consultation with the traditional inhabitant boat license holders, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, and the Protected Zone Joint Authority, the TSRA plays a crucial role in negotiating the sustainable balance between commercial and subsistence fishing catch allowances, and the sustainable management of fish stocks.

### *TSRA 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and Regional Impact*

- As we approach our 30th anniversary, the TSRA is evaluating its impact in the region.
- In 2023, our Major Infrastructure Program reached a milestone – 25 years of delivering major environmental health infrastructure projects such as flushing toilets and water and sanitation services. Over \$300 million in Commonwealth and State funds have been invested so far.
- Another achievement is the expansion of the TSRA Ranger program, which is funded through the National Indigenous Australians Agency.
- This is the largest program of its kind in Australia and is at the forefront of environmental management in the Torres Strait, caring for land and sea Country.

- The TSRA Ranger Program now includes 51 rangers working in ongoing APS roles across 13 islands in the Torres Strait. It boasts the largest ever number of female rangers, who make up 35% of this group.
- This year also marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gab Titui Cultural Centre, a contemporary art gallery promoting Torres Strait Island culture and art and a keeping place for cultural and historical artefacts.

### *Conclusion*

- As we acknowledge the TSRA's accomplishments over the past 30 years, we will refocus on the future needs of our region, striving to empower Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people living within the region.
- We look forward to working with our key partners and Traditional Owners to continue to support the economic, environmental and cultural empowerment of First Nations peoples within the Torres Strait.
- I thank members of the Senate Committee for their time today, and for their interest in the important work undertaken by the TSRA.