

# Senate Estimates – June 2024

## Opening Statement by

### **Torres Strait Regional Authority Chair Napau Pedro Stephen AM**

- Au Esoau, Koeyma Eso, and thank you for the opportunity to appear at this Estimates hearing on behalf of the Torres Strait Regional Authority or TSRA.
- I join you today from Waiben – also known as Thursday Island – the traditional homelands of the Kaurareg Aboriginal people.
- I acknowledge and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.
- I also acknowledge the Chair of the Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee and all Ministers and Senators present here today.
- The Torres Strait Regional Authority is one of the most remote Australian Public Service agencies and the lead Commonwealth agency in the Torres Strait for Indigenous Affairs.
- TSRA is led by an elected Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal Board, along with majority First Nations workforce.
- We deliver services across 17 inhabited islands and the communities of Bamaga and Seisia in the Northern Peninsula Area of mainland Australia.
- Our islands are scattered from the tip of Cape York in Far North Queensland, north towards the borders of Papua New Guinea.
- TSRA's aim is to improve the lifestyle and wellbeing of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people living in the region through development planning, coordination, sustainable resource management and preservation and promotion of Indigenous culture.
- We remain focused on our important work to close the gap for our people.
- In a few short weeks, TSRA will celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 1 July.
- While we take this opportunity to reflect, we also look to the future.
- Our new 5-year Torres Strait Development Plan 2023-28 sets a refreshed course for the TSRA.
- It is guided by the aspirations of our communities towards true self-determination, economic opportunities and regional governance.

- An emerging challenge for the TSRA is the decline of our Indigenous-led commercial fishing industry – including tropical rock lobster.
- It is one of the largest and most valuable industries in our region.
- The loss of markets in China due to trade restrictions, and extremely high operating costs because of fuel and freight prices, are a serious concern.
- It is crippling local industry and impacting livelihoods for our fishers and families.
- Boats are no longer going out because our people cannot afford the fuel bill or freight to get their product to market down south.
- Larger, non-Indigenous operators are also driving market prices down.
- We cannot compete with their big boats in our waters, despite our status as traditional inhabitants.
- Our local fishers offer some of the best seafood in Australia and the world – yet receive some of the lowest income in the food chain.
- TSRA has just been in Canberra talking with various Ministers about these issues, to have our voices heard at the highest levels and get support to address trade barriers, markets, and operating costs.
- High freight costs are not just impacting our fishers, they impact everyone, every day.
- This is why we are advocating to agencies, including the Queensland Government and NIAA through the Remote Food Security Working Group, for more help.
- A commitment to match the Queensland Government's remote freight subsidy would be a great start!
- Despite the challenges, our region is rich in opportunity and strong in culture.
- Our unique environment and geographic location places us right on the border of Australia's nearest foreign neighbour – Papua New Guinea.
- Our people hold a wealth of traditional knowledge in land and sea management.
- We have managed the region's natural resources for thousands of years and engaged in trade for just as long.
- We also understand what our changing climate means.

- On the frontline for generations, we can share our experiences not just in Australia but across the world and with other First Nations communities.
- Just recently, TSRA hosted a delegation of First Nations leaders from Taiwan for discussions on First Nations-led policies, practices and positive outcomes.
- The delegation was impressed with our work, including coastal and natural marine resource management by our programs and local rangers.
- We are both island communities divided by ocean, but connected in our advocacy for recognition of our status as First Nations people.
- Our region is open for dialogue, opportunity and partnerships.
- We must thrive not only as part of this state and nation, but on a global level.
- I thank members of the Senate Committee for their time today, and for their interest in the important work by the TSRA.