

Submission to the Inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

These observations and opinions are the result of regular visits to some communities in the Barkly region of the NT where Outback Stores has established a presence.

1. Food supply, quality, cost and competition.

There is no doubt that the supply of food has become more reliable and regular in those communities where Outback Stores is operating. The quality and variety of food has also dramatically increased, as has the range of other variety products. I would like to see a range of healthier take away food available from the stores.

While the cost of food items seemed initially to be comparatively cheaper than those of previous community stores, my feeling is that costs are increasing at a greater rate in the communities than in the towns (even in Tennant Creek, where Outback Stores is now managing the local supermarket). But I do not have examples to verify this.

The presence of Outback Stores in communities where it has previously not been deemed "viable" to have a store, has provided community residents with the opportunity to purchase groceries on site, rather than having to walk or drive to the nearest station store, and usually spend much more money for the purchase of much less food. But the fact that people are still able to "book up" at most or all of the station stores, means that these stores are still patronized by many community residents. While this inquiry is not the forum to debate/discuss the insidious nature of "book up" systems, it is relevant here to suggest that while ever the book up system remains in tact for station stores, there will be no even competition between the community store and the station store.

2. Effectiveness of the Outback Stores model, and other private, public and community store models

My understanding of the Outback Stores model is far from comprehensive, but I do know that they are committed to employing local people where possible. Of the 3 stores I visit in the Barkly region, there are local people at the cash register in 2 stores, and stacking shelves in all 3 stores. I am aware that the provision of retail training to Outback Stores employees has yet to take place in many places, and I am hoping that a large proportion of the training will be on site rather than in major urban centres.

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3. Impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities

There is no doubt that the reliable supply of a good range of food items to members of a community has a beneficial impact. If local people are also able to gain employment from the presence of the store, this can have a flow on beneficial effect. Of the various models I have seen in Barkly communities, Outback Stores model offers the best potential for this to happen.

I understand that Outback Stores places an emphasis on the provision of nutritional food items and food security, and how this in turn can benefit the community members. In some communities, other agencies are now able to offer community members ideas on how to prepare/use various food items that would perhaps not otherwise have been considered.

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(20/02/09)