

## **Communique – New South Wales Policy Roundtable on Aboriginal Disaster Resilience**

**Australian Hall on Gadigal Country (Sydney), Thursday 27 November 2025**

This Communique follows the NSW Policy Roundtable on Aboriginal Disaster Resilience, held at the Australian Hall, the birthplace of the Aboriginal civil rights movement. Representatives from the emergency management, disaster resilience and Aboriginal community-controlled sectors came together to discuss Aboriginal disaster resilience in NSW. This Communique is informed by these discussions and is directed to all individuals and entities supporting resilience across the emergency management continuum.

Environmental hazards such as fires, floods and heatwaves have always existed in Australia. Aboriginal people thrived in landscapes across the continent, which required long-held and refined skills and knowledge to cope with and respond to these hazards. Colonisation displaced Aboriginal people and with them, the resources now needed to live safely in landscapes that are prone to hazards.

*“The first disaster that ever happened here was colonisation. They took our land, and they never bothered to ask the people who belong there, how they managed that land.”*

Colonial mismanagement of land and water, and the continued marginalisation of Aboriginal people and practices in emergency and land management has produced risks for all people and Australia’s biodiversity. Colonisation has also created social, political and economic pressures that continue to make Aboriginal people particularly vulnerable to contemporary environmental hazards.

In recognition of these challenges, and the urgent need to respond with targeted actions, the NSW Reconstruction Authority, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, and Premier’s Department partnered with National Indigenous Disaster Resilience to deliver this Roundtable. Delegates heard firsthand from impacted communities which fostered dialogue between these communities and emergency services. In doing so, gaps in knowledge, resources and capability emerged for all stakeholders.

There is a shared ambition from government and emergency services to do more to support Aboriginal communities in difficult times. Yet any effort to address gaps will fail without fundamental shifts. Across the presentations and discussions, two structural shifts were identified. These are:

- **Valuing Aboriginal values**, so that planning and responses are also guided by what is important to Aboriginal communities, and
- **Embedding accountability mechanisms** within the structures of government agencies.

Without these two structural shifts, any effort to support Aboriginal communities before, during and after disasters will be unequal, ad-hoc, and risk reproducing inequities. If these structural shifts can be realised, targeted actions can follow. During the Roundtable, delegates identified four priority action areas under which efforts to support building the resilience of Aboriginal groups should be organised.

### **Manage hazards with Indigenous knowledges and expertise**

Delegates acknowledged the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledges and expertise into emergency and land management policies and practices. Yet this must be done in the right way. Delegates called on emergency services to recognise and respect the expertise held by a community, that it is often localised and place-based, and may be based on a different set of values.

*“No one asked us what we know about floods, they still haven’t asked.”*

Relationships must be established that enable trust and honest dialogue so that Aboriginal people are able to share what is necessary and appropriate, with confidence that their knowledge will be respected. One way to do this is upholding Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) in collaborations and partnerships.

### **Resourcing Aboriginal communities and organisations**

At the Roundtable, Aboriginal communities and organisations shared stories of their strength in supporting community members during disasters, even without access to mainstream funding or resources.

*“They planned without us and funded around us.”*

There was a clear call to fund Aboriginal organisations, rather than non-Indigenous organisations, to provide services to Aboriginal people. Delegates called for flexible, long-term, non-competitive funding programs that proactively builds capability within Aboriginal organisations. The call to build the community-controlled sector is a Priority Reform of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, however limited progress has been made in emergency management. Delegates discussed the importance of access to emergency management training and equipment, and in establishing a sustainable community of practice to share knowledge between the sectors. Delegates also called for immediate investment in the physical infrastructure that supports Aboriginal community resilience, in addition to the investments in skills and capability.

### **Prioritise culture, safety and wellbeing in response, relief and recovery**

Aboriginal organisations shared how, guided by culture, they have stepped in to keep community members safe, and advocate for their wellbeing following a major event. Delegates spoke about loneliness when left behind in emergency responses, the psycho-social consequences of ongoing displacement from Country, experiences of racism and discrimination in evacuation centres, and inappropriate temporary housing.

*“We’re still not home. I still want to go home.”*

Delegates called on the government to integrate Aboriginal healing approaches into emergency management policy and practice. In addition to the community-controlled sector, emergency services must be safe places for Aboriginal people to work, and be equipped with the knowledge and skills to lead with culture and deliver trauma-informed services. Creating a place for Aboriginal leadership, culture and healing will not only lead to better outcomes for Aboriginal communities, but all communities disrupted by disasters.

### **Close the governance gap in emergency management arrangements**

The Roundtable provided an opportunity to raise the collective understanding of both emergency management arrangements in NSW, and of the ways in which Aboriginal communities govern and organise.

*“True resilience cannot be built without recognition of the authority and leadership that already sits within Aboriginal communities.”*

Recent efforts to engage Local Aboriginal Land Councils were welcomed, however delegates discussed the need for emergency services to be formally responsible for engaging and integrating the full diversity of Aboriginal organisations and governance structures into emergency management arrangements. Aboriginal delegates also called on emergency services to develop doctrine that respects and upholds Aboriginal community and land governance, and for inter-agency collaboration to improve engagement with Aboriginal communities. There was a clear call to make emergency services accountable for engaging with Aboriginal communities and upholding rights so that Aboriginal communities and organisations have greater involvement in emergency management arrangements and in decisions that impact them most.

### **Next steps**

While there is significant work for emergency services in NSW to better support Aboriginal people to be safe, Aboriginal communities and organisations must also recognise their role in building resilience. Small and targeted investments to plan and be prepared before the next disaster will make a marked difference.

The priority action areas identified at the Roundtable will inform a new approach to working with Aboriginal communities before, during and after disasters. This Communique provides guidance for everyone involved in supporting disaster resilience, and fosters necessary capability for government and Aboriginal communities to work together, so that Aboriginal groups can exercise their right to self-determination.