

# Safe & Healthy Drinking Water in Indigenous Local Government Areas Program

Presented by Chris Blake, Team Leader, Environmental Health  
Tropical Public Health Services  
QLD Water Forum, Brisbane - August 2025



1

## Presentation Overview



Program  
introduction &  
Background



Methodology &  
Objectives



Intensive  
Support



Program  
outcomes &  
other initiatives



Benefits



Next Steps

2

2

# Program Introduction

- A Queensland Government initiative focused on improving drinking water services in First Nations (FN) Local Governments (LGs).
- Aims to support QLD FN LGs to provide safe and reliable drinking water to their communities and comply with QLD drinking water regulatory framework, ensure public health protection and regulatory compliance.
- Uses co-designed (with FN LGs) delivery framework and program objectives to address operator skills and service delivery gaps
- Shifts from top-down enforcement to collaborative capacity building.



3

3

# Program Background

Timeline:



4

4

# Program Background

Why develop the Program:

- History of non-compliance with regulatory framework.
- High rates of *E.coli* detections being reported
- Protracted incidents and prolonged use of drinking water advisories.
- Repeated water quality failures, despite efforts to resolve drinking water incidents.
- Ongoing maintenance and operational concerns.

Became evident to regulators (QLD Health and Water Supply Regulation – DLGWV) the historically, enforcement-driven regulatory approaches had failed to resolve the root causes of water safety issues and subsequent public health risks in these communities.

5



5

# Program Background

Summary of Program development:

- Indigenous LGs in FNQ agreed to partner with QLD Health & Water Supply Regulation to pilot the program.
- Agreement from CHO, department senior executives to fund the program.
- **Phase 1: Detailed water system assessment**
  - Lead by independent expert (Peter Mosse) and supported by QH and WSR
  - Multiple schemes
  - All elements of infrastructure
  - Operational practices
  - Operator competence
- **Phase 2: Program co-design, development and implementation**
  - Co-designed with select Indigenous LGs
    - Delivery methodology
    - Objectives designed to address common issues identified during assessments
    - Implementation at pilot sites



6

6

# Implementation 3-Step Methodology

## Step 1: Consultation & Partnership

- Consult with LG, operators and community leaders.
- Tailor program to needs of community
- Build relationships and trust
- Enter into a MOU

## Step 2: Intensive Mentoring & Support

- Minimum of 6 months
- Week-on/week-off rotations by dedicated Public Health staff
- In community program delivery – To achieve specific objectives (next slide).
- Local workforce integration / Embedded mentoring and operational support
- Site specific training based on local needs – Hands-on!
- Developed in a culturally appropriate way
- Developing confidence and empowering operators to understand and act



## Step 3: Tailored Ongoing Support

- Tailored to community
- Maintain improvements and relationships
- Continue to help troubleshoot emerging issues

7

7

# Intensive Support Objectives

*“Developed specifically to address common gaps observed during independent expert reviews”*

1. Build genuine partnerships
2. Advocate for improved infrastructure & monitoring
3. Enhance plant operations – SOPs, videos
4. Raise public health awareness
5. Enable competent equipment use
6. Deliver ongoing mentoring
7. Reduce incidents & improve compliance



8

8

# Rollout (Intensive Support)

## Tropical Public Health Services (Cairns)

- Hammond Island (2017)
- Warraber Island (2017)
- Moa Island – Kubin community (2017)
- Moa island – St Pauls community (2017)
- Coconut Island (2017)
- Boigu Island (2018)
- Saibai Island (2018)
- Lockhart River (2018)
- Hope Vale (2018)
- Mabuiag Island (2018)
- Wujal Wujal (2019)
- Yorke Island (2019)
- Ugar Island (2019)
- Mapoon (20-21 COVID delays)
- Mer (20-21 COVID delays)
- Badu Island (2020-21 COVID delays)
- Darnley Island (2021-22 COVID delays)
- Yarrabah (2021-22 COVID delays)
- Dauan Island (2023)
- Torres Shire Council (2023)
- Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Council (2024)
- Napranum Aboriginal Shire Council (2024)
- Aurukun Shire Council (2025)
- Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council (2025)

## Townsville Public Health Unit

- Palm Island (2019)
- Doomadgee (2021)
- Mornington Island (2022)

## Central Queensland Public Health Unit (Rockhampton)

- Woorabinda (2021)

## Darling Downs Public Health Unit (Toowoomba)

- Cherbourg (2019)(ongoing)

## Outstanding LG yet to receive intensive support

- Northern Peninsula Regional Council

9

9

# Program Key Metrics (Past 24 months)

- 26 of 31 Communities (schemes) visited for intensive or ongoing support
- 381 Days of in-community support
- 3,130 Hours of engagement
- Over 100 water operations staff trained and mentored:
  - water operators
  - plumbers
  - essential service managers
- 6 communities assisted to access National Water Grid Funding for major infrastructure upgrades

**TABLE:** Example Corrective Actions Status - Cairns Program team data only (Past 24 months)

Action items, Percent			
BY STATUS . RESPONSIBLE ENTITY			
Responsible entity	Action items	Percent	Status
PHU	28	11.3%	Complete
PHU	7	2.8%	In progress
PHU	5	2.0%	Not yet started
Council	1	0.4%	Complete
Council	47	19.0%	Complete
Council	44	17.7%	In progress
Council	116	46.8%	Not yet started
<b>Total</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

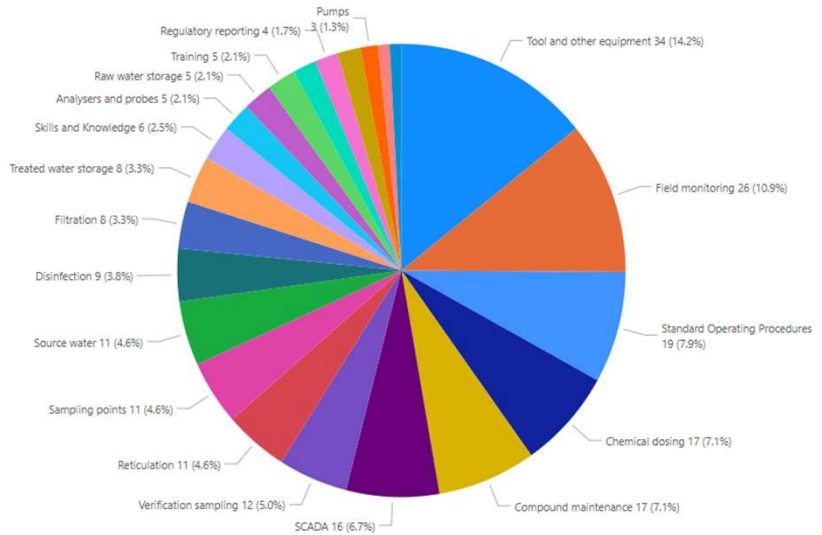
10

10

## Nature of corrective actions (Past 24 months)

### Top 10

1. Tools and equipment
2. Field monitoring
3. SOPs
4. Chemical dosing
5. Compound maintenance
6. SCADA
7. Verification sampling
8. Reticulation
9. Sampling points
10. Water source



11

11

## Other Program Initiatives & Supports

### Certificate III in Water Industry Operations

- Partnered with various RTO for in community delivery.
- 20 Operators undertaking training



12

12

# Other Program Initiatives & Supports

## Annual Symposiums

- 6 symposiums delivered.
- Over 300 people attended the events to date (50:50 ratio of Indigenous LG rep v other)
- Focus on hearing stories from communities
- Networking, technical training, practical activities
- Enables Industry bodies, regulators and state agencies to speak firsthand with operators on the ground.



13

13

# Program Benefits

- Strengthened relationships and communication between Indigenous LGs and QLD Health – Breaks down barriers.
- Improved issue transparency on the ground – enabling better cross-government support
- Faster resolution of incidents and better escalation by operators
- Increased reporting and stronger understanding of public health responsibilities
- Enhanced compliance and funding attraction for critical infrastructure
- Boosted operator confidence, pride, and understanding of their roles
- Greater collaboration and knowledge-sharing across communities
- Elevated visibility of water responsibilities – sometimes resulting in improved resourcing



14

14

## Next Steps

- 2026 anticipate to completed intensive support in all Indigenous LGs
- Conduct a program review to evaluate program
- Undertake a “Program Quality Improvement Exercise” to ensure program remains relevant and effective.

15

15

## Program Publications & Links

### Links (program videos)

Safe water is important

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4TtsS5c7Q4>

Every community needs a water operator

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfTs51WXfAs>

### Publications

- Water Services Association of Australia – CLOSING THE WATER FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES GAP (2022) – see page 276
- [Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap: A review on the management of drinking water suppl](#)
- Water Industry Operations Association – WATER WORKS (2019) – See page 34
- [WaterWorks | May 2019 by Water Industry Operations Association of Australia - Issuu](#)
- Australian New Zealand Journal Public Health – Drinking water delivery in the outer Torres Strait Islands: a case study addressing sustainable water issues in remote Indigenous communities
- [Drinking water delivery in the outer Torres Strait Islands: a case study addressing sustainable water issues in remote Indigenous communities - UQ eSpace](#)

16

16



Thank you

