

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

# **ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS DEMAND ACTION: WALGETT DRINKING WATER HEALTH THREAT**

Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Walgett are calling on the NSW Government to establish an independent, multi-agency taskforce to address the intolerable situation where drinking water supplied to the town and surrounds is bore water that is so high in sodium it poses a threat to community members with existing health conditions.

University of NSW (UNSW) experts and medical researchers from The George Institute for Global Health (TGI) have warned that the content of Walgett's water supply is 15 times higher in sodium than medical practitioners recommend for long-term consumption by people with severe hypertension or renal and heart issues.

A survey of Walgett Aboriginal community members undertaken by UNSW and TGI in partnership with the Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service has found this is having severe negative effects on household expenses and food security, with some people paying up to \$50 a week on bottled water to avoid using water from the tap which in turn impacts on their ability to afford other basic necessities.

The survey used internationally validated tools which showed the levels of water insecurity in Walgett and the nearby villages of Namoi and Gingie are worse than those recorded in the Bangladesh capital city of Dhaka, Guatemala and Beirut in Lebanon.

Virginia Robinson, Secretary of Walgett's Dharriwaa Elders Group said the NSW Government must immediately return the town's reverse osmosis water treatment plant which has been offline since September 2020.

"We need a multi-agency taskforce to improve Walgett's water quality and security comprising local, state and national agencies, drinking water experts and local ACCOs. We are calling for a taskforce led by an independent expert who is endorsed by Walgett Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations," Ms Robinson said.

Walgett's water supply is not fluoridated and Ms Robinson said the Shire Council must be supported to rectify that and improve monitoring of water quality and maintenance of water infrastructure.

"These threats to our public health would not be tolerated in Sydney so why is it acceptable that we have to live with them in Walgett?"

Christine Corby OAM, CEO of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, said the results of the survey were deeply concerning given that blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes were common health issues.

"Unfortunately in our community there is a high incidence of chronic disease. I believe this is going to worsen given the very real risks we know are associated with high sodium intake. I worry about people who have no choice but to drink straight from the tap. And I worry about how many people are not having enough nutritious food to eat and how this will impact on their long-term health."



“We are doing all we can to address the social determinants of health in our community, but we also need governments to do their bit to improve these shocking levels of water and food insecurity and support our local efforts.”

Professor Greg Leslie, Director of the UNSW Global Water Institute, said: “The drinking water in Walgett contains 300 mg/L of sodium during periods when the town’s water treatment plant draws water from the Great Artesian Basin. Long term consumption of drinking water with these levels of sodium will exacerbate chronic health conditions such as hypertension.

The Shire Council urgently needs resources from the state government to upgrade infrastructure and systems to operate and maintain water services for the town and the nearby communities of Namoi Village and Gingie Village.”

Keziah Bennett-Brook, Program Head, Guunu-maana (Heal) Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health at The George Institute said water and food insecurity in Walgett was at unacceptable levels

“The findings from the community survey paint a clear picture of why we need to work in partnership with Aboriginal community members and organisations to bring together local knowledge and leadership with best evidence around what is needed to address the unacceptable levels of food and water insecurity being experienced in Walgett,” Ms Brook said.

### **Walgett, Namoi village, Gingie survey results, February 2023**

A total of 251 participants completed the survey, 97% identified as Aboriginal

- 83% relied on bottled water in at least one month in the past 12 months
- 90% said they were concerned by the “quality, smell, contamination” of water
- 43% experiencing moderate to severe water insecurity
- 42% reported no usable or drinkable water whatsoever in at least one month
- 36% reported going to sleep thirsty in at least one month
- 67% worried about not having enough water
- 54% changed what they ate due to not having enough water

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