



Australian Government  
Department of Agriculture,  
Fisheries and Forestry

# National Statement on First Nations in Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry: discussion paper

November 2025



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### Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the continuous connection of First Nations Traditional Owners and Custodians to the lands, seas and waters of Australia. We recognise their care for and cultivation of Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and recognise their knowledge and contribution to the productivity, innovation and sustainability of Australia's agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries.

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# Introduction

In March 2024, the Agriculture Ministers' Meeting agreed to develop a National Statement on First Nations in Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (National Statement) to drive greater First Nations economic inclusion in the sector. Ministers also agreed the National Statement would be driven by the principles of self-determination and be an ambitious commitment, advancing First Nations perspectives, experiences and interests (AMM 2024). A taskforce of Commonwealth, state and territory representatives was established to lead this work.

The National Statement will provide a whole-of-government position for First Nations economic inclusion in the sector, and guide coordinated action and investment across Commonwealth, state and territory governments. This work will align with government initiatives, including the Australian Government's productivity and First Nations economic empowerment agendas, Feeding Australia: A National Food Security Strategy, and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement). It will also support industry's goal of becoming a \$100 billion industry by 2030. In 2023-24, Indigenous-owned agribusinesses contributed \$1.4 billion to the Australian economy, underscoring the significance of First Nations participation in the sector, and the opportunity for further growth (DAFF, ILSC and NFF 2024). Increasing First Nations involvement can grow the entire sector by bringing more Country into production, boosting profitability and competition, and diversifying systems and value chains. Indigenous Knowledges offer distinct advantages for innovation, sustainability, and product differentiation in global markets.

Initial consultations undertaken in 2024 focused on speaking with First Nations stakeholders. This discussion paper builds on that feedback, outlining key priority areas for further discussion. Its purpose is to gather broader stakeholder views on opportunities and barriers affecting the participation of First Nations peoples and businesses across the sector. Feedback received will help shape a National Statement that supports First Nations economic self-determination in agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

## Context

First Nations peoples are the original custodians of Australia, having cared for land, sea, and water systems for millennia. First Nations cultivation of crops and other agricultural practices is documented in both Indigenous histories and in the records of early explorers (Pascoe 2018). First Nations agricultural practices were embedded within complex economic and trade networks, sustained by Indigenous knowledge systems and holistic, sustainable land and sea management. As First Nations participation in commercial agriculture grows, agribusinesses are increasingly integrating land management practices and acknowledging the historical contributions of First Nations workers in conventional agricultural pursuits.

Across Australia, First Nations peoples are successfully managing commercial agriculture, fisheries and forestry enterprises. These businesses span the sector and include cattle and sheep operations, fisheries and aquaculture, crop farming, viticulture, forestry plantations and niche markets such as bushfoods. First Nations participation goes beyond primary production and includes businesses throughout the sector's supply and value chains, including [abattoirs](#) and [processors](#).

First Nations agribusinesses employ diverse production models. Some follow conventional agricultural, fisheries and forestry approaches, while others integrate Indigenous knowledges and practices into their operations. This might include branding that reflects Indigenous design and storytelling, the use of traditional harvesting techniques, or ecological management practices such as cultural burning regimes. These enterprises operate under a range of tenures, from freehold to non-exclusive native title; and under a range of business structures, from sole traders to trusts.

Indigenous-owned agribusinesses are forecast to contribute \$2.14 billion to the Australian economy by 2030, with steady annual growth of 10% since 2012 (DAFF, ILSC & NFF 2024). This growth reflects the significant economic potential of First Nations agribusinesses across the sector.

The agricultural sector is often a major economic driver in regional and remote communities, but employment and economic benefits for regional and remote First Nations communities remain limited (Yamagigu Consulting forthcoming). For example, 2021 data show that of the 239,093 people employed in the agricultural sector, 81% (193,665) lived in regional areas. However, only 1.8% (4,303) of those working in the sector identified as Indigenous, despite data showing that 59% of First Nations peoples are based in regional and remote Australia (ABS 2023).

Efforts are underway locally, nationally and internationally to advance First Nations peoples' economic self-determination, equity and inclusion. This aligns with the Australian Government's broader growth and productivity agenda to make Australia's economy more resilient, building more partnerships and diversifying trade. It also aligns with the government's broader First Nations economic empowerment agenda to develop effective policy solutions that advance the economic opportunities for First Nations communities and businesses.

The National Statement will consider linkages to other initiatives across government, including the:

- [First Nations Economic Partnership](#)
- [Priority Reforms under the National Agreement](#)
- [Legislative reform to the \*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005\* \(Cth\) to enhance Indigenous Business Australia's ability to leverage capital](#)
- [National Statement on First Nations Trade and Investment](#) and the work of the [First Nations Trade and Investment Advisory Group](#)
- [National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities](#)
- [Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data](#)
- [First Nations Clean Energy Strategy](#).

Achieving real, economically meaningful outcomes for First Nations peoples in agriculture, fisheries and forestry requires existing and emerging strategies and whole-of-government priorities to be aligned. Governments need to connect and work with industry to strengthen what is already in place, and build a shared, forward-looking approach to make lasting change. The National Statement aims to support this with a unified approach to collaborative action across governments to advance First Nations economic participation in agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

# What we have heard

Consultations undertaken to date have brought together perspectives from First Nations peoples, industry and government to better understand the barriers, opportunities and shared priorities for First Nations economic inclusion in agriculture, fisheries and forestry. In 2024, the department consulted with over 350 stakeholders. This included 160 First Nations peoples and 90 First Nations organisations representing First Nations-led enterprises with existing agriculture, fisheries and forestry operations, or aspirations to be involved in these industries. Consultation included:

- in-person and virtual consultations with First Nations stakeholders
- site visits to First Nations agriculture, fisheries and forestry enterprises
- virtual consultations with industry across each state and territory, and government agencies.

This consultation process prioritised the voices of First Nations peoples to develop an understanding of the barriers and opportunities for First Nations peoples across the sector. First Nations peoples consistently expressed aspirations for economic inclusion that is place-based, self-determined and driven by cultural, economic, social and environmental outcomes. First Nations stakeholders are seeking a statement that acknowledges the past and enables First Nations peoples, industry and governments to walk together toward a shared and successful future. Key themes identified by First Nations stakeholders and reinforced by industry and government participants are outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 Key themes identified by stakeholders**



Industry stakeholders acknowledged the significant opportunity that increasing First Nations participation presents for the sector. They consistently highlighted that welcoming new entrants, supporting the growth of existing First Nations enterprises, and fostering inclusive partnerships would benefit First Nations communities and the broader sector. They further noted the potential to strengthen supply chains, unlock new markets, deliver greater value to customers, and develop innovative products and business models.

# 1 Greater First Nations representation in the sector

First Nations participation in leadership roles and in trade delegations across agriculture, fisheries and forestry is underrepresented. During consultations, First Nations stakeholders expressed a clear desire to be more involved—not just as participants but as leaders helping shape the future of the sector. When First Nations peoples have a seat at the decision-making table, the whole sector benefits—from stronger relationships to more sustainable outcomes.

First Nations stakeholders identified three key areas for greater inclusion:

- increasing involvement of First Nations peoples in leadership roles across all parts of the sector.
- improving cultural understanding across workplaces and institutions to create environments where First Nations peoples feel respected and able to contribute.
- strengthening education and training pathways to support the next generation of Indigenous workers, business owners, exporters, and leaders in the sector.

Some initiatives are already underway through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The First Nations Trade and Ministerial Council Unit is helping embed First Nations interests and perspectives across the Government's trade and investment activities. A pilot [First Nations Trade and Investment Advisory Group](#) has also been established to provide advice on unlocking trade and economic opportunities for First Nations businesses. These initiatives demonstrate practical ways to support greater inclusion of First Nations leaders, voices and workers across the sector.

## Building the next generation of Indigenous leaders

First Nations stakeholders highlighted the importance of creating culturally responsive pathways that attract and support First Nations peoples to pursue careers and leadership roles across agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Involving more First Nations peoples in leadership roles would help grow the sector, promote social equity and inspire future leaders. This includes on boards, in peak bodies, trade and export delegations, and executive positions.

Existing programs provide useful models to consider for future action and investment:

- [Frontline Voices](#) – an initiative of Farmers for Climate Action, invests in Australian farmers and land managers to develop advocacy skills to influence change, with strong encouragement for First Nations participation.
- [Northern Australia People Capacity and Response Network \(NAPCaRN\)](#) – offers a First Nations agricultural/environmental board placement program.
- Australian Rural Leadership Foundation's Milparanga [Established](#) and [Emerging](#) Leadership programs – foster emerging and established First Nations leadership.

These initiatives demonstrate how targeted support can build skills, networks and leadership capability among First Nations peoples.

Governments, larger corporate farms and agribusinesses have a role to play in developing programs that support retention of Indigenous employees and invest in education and training tailored to First Nations learners (Gilbert et al forthcoming). Some government strategies already support this approach. For example, the National Fisheries Plan includes a key initiative to develop and embed pathways for greater involvement of Indigenous communities in the fishing, aquaculture and seafood sectors (Australian Government 2022).

## Enabling shared leadership and sector-wide collaboration

First Nations stakeholders expressed the need for collective representation of their interests across the sector. The ability to share knowledges, advocate for priorities, and actively participate in decision-making in the sector were identified as key outcomes. A First Nations peak body and other representative structures such as knowledge hubs, regional or industry alliances, and market forums were suggested as ways to achieve these outcomes.

These aspirations align with:

- Priority Reform 1 of the National Agreement, which promotes shared decision-making between governments and First Nations peoples.
- The recommendation calling for the Government to work with the bush foods and fibre industry to establish a sustainable peak industry body (Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2024).
- The outcomes of the 2024 Australian Sea Country Conference, which supports a national body to inform First Nations Sea Country interests across Australia (FRDC 2025).

Importantly, First Nations leadership brings more than representation. It brings a different perspective with Indigenous Knowledges, community networks, and innovation that can strengthen the sector.

## Creating culturally safe spaces

Improving the cultural capability of government, industry bodies and workplaces is essential to enabling First Nations representation, leadership, and engagement across agriculture, fisheries and forestry. More effort is needed to address cultural awareness and safety across the sector, and build an inclusive environment for First Nations perspectives to be heard and respected – both within workplaces and through broader engagement.

Some industry bodies have First Nations engagement frameworks and policies. For example, AgForce's Indigenous engagement policy outlines its approach to working with First Nations communities (AgForce 2023). However, workplace culture and limited cultural awareness continue to drive high attrition rates of First Nations peoples in the agricultural sector (Gilbert et al forthcoming). Organisations should consider how they could improve First Nations representation and leadership. This includes implementing strategies such as Reconciliation Action Plans, First Nations employment and engagement strategies, and other approaches that build cultural capability and create culturally safe workplaces for First Nations peoples across the sector. Improved cultural safety not only supports First Nations participation, it also strengthens the sector by fostering more inclusive, respectful, and productive workplaces, enhancing retention, collaboration, and innovation.

## Strengthening skills for sustainable agribusiness growth

First Nations stakeholders raised the need to attract employees and managers with business and technical experience as well as cultural understanding, to ensure long-term sustainability of First Nations agribusinesses.

Census data shows that although First Nations peoples are entering the agricultural industry at a younger age than non-Indigenous workers, many are leaving the sector early and not progressing into longer-term careers (Gilbert et al forthcoming). Data also shows that fewer than 5 First Nations students graduate from agriculture-related university courses annually (Yamagigu Consulting forthcoming).

These trends highlight the importance of culturally aligned training and employment pathways to support the attraction and retention of First Nations peoples in the sector. The Yamagigu Consulting report 'Understanding First Nations engagement with Australia's agricultural workforce', proposes ideas such as co-designed tertiary programs, culturally safe institutions, and long-term investment in First Nations agricultural career pathways as potential solutions (Yamagigu Consulting forthcoming).

The [garinga djimbayang grant program](#) in Victoria also provides an example of how Indigenous knowledges can be embedded into agriculture-specific training.

### Discussion questions

- 1) How can government and industry support greater inclusion of First Nations leadership, perspectives, and workers across agriculture, fisheries and forestry?
- 2) What types of mentoring, training, or knowledge-sharing programs would best support First Nations people's capacity for long-term employment in agriculture, fisheries and forestry?

## 2 Using the Indigenous Estate for agricultural production

First Nations stakeholders identified barriers to using the Indigenous Estate for agricultural production as one of the most significant factors impacting their participation in the sector. This included:

- land tenure complexities and systemic inconsistencies across Australia
- underdeveloped infrastructure driving up operational costs and reducing competitiveness
- lack of data about the Indigenous Estate to support strategic planning and investment.

The Indigenous Estate is comprised of lands in which First Nations peoples and communities have a legal interest through ownership, shared management, and/or other special rights. This includes interests or rights under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth), state and territory land rights legislation, acquisitions through the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, and agreements through Indigenous Protected Areas, and Indigenous Land Use Agreements.

The Indigenous Estate covers about 70% of Australia's landmass (ABARES 2024). However, these barriers to its use mean that many aspiring Indigenous producers are unable to conduct viable agricultural activity or see consistent financial returns and other benefits flow to First Nations communities. Unlocking the economic potential of the Indigenous Estate offers a major opportunity to expand agricultural production, improve land and water utilisation, and drive innovation and sustainability across the sector.

### Untangling land tenure systems

Land tenure in Australia is governed by multiple layers of legislation, with overlapping and sometimes competing rights or interests. Frameworks vary across states and territories, resulting in complex arrangements that are challenging for all stakeholders. Navigating these arrangements can hinder First Nations communities that want to use the Indigenous Estate for economic benefit. Stakeholders consistently called for greater clarity on how land tenure systems interact, and how they can be used to support economic outcomes.

The *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) (Native Title Act) was not established for the purpose of creating economic value for First Nations peoples. However, there is growing interest in enabling and supporting the economic use of the Indigenous Estate. For example, the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) is reviewing the future acts regime in the Native Title Act to develop recommendations for how it can be improved and modernised. The review's terms of reference include considering the contribution of the native title system and the future acts regime to economic outcomes for First Nations people, businesses and communities.

## Closing the infrastructure gap

First Nations stakeholders in regional and remote communities identified infrastructure shortfalls as a barrier to accessing and using the Indigenous Estate for agricultural production. Key issues raised included unreliable road access, limited bulk handling facilities, high freight and fuel costs, and patchy digital connectivity. Many also raised concerns about the reliability of utilities such as power and water – factors that directly affect operational viability of agricultural enterprises in these areas.

For First Nations peoples, relocation to more agriculturally favourable areas is rarely a viable option due to deep cultural connections to Country. Place-based investment in regional and remote infrastructure is critical to bringing more of the Indigenous Estate into agricultural production.

## Unlocking data for the Indigenous Estate

Reliable data is critical for effective land use planning, investment, and policy development. Yet for the Indigenous Estate, information remains fragmented or absent, presenting another barrier to bringing land into agricultural production.

Beyond native title determinations, there is no centralised register or custodian of a national dataset covering tenure types within the Indigenous Estate. Jurisdictional inconsistencies in data licensing, custodianship and formatting across Commonwealth, state and territory systems further complicate access. These disparities create a patchwork of information that is difficult to navigate, undermining transparency, coordination, and strategic planning. This data gap can slow economic development and make it harder for First Nations communities to participate fully in land-and sea-based industries.

Improved monitoring and access to Indigenous data will benefit agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries as a whole by enabling better-informed decisions, unlocking underutilised assets, and supporting more targeted and effective investment across diverse landscapes.

### Discussion questions

- 3) How could existing legislative structures or policy frameworks be strengthened to better enable First Nations peoples to use the Indigenous Estate for agricultural production? Could partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders help to overcome structural barriers to the commercial use of land and sea?

### 3 Commercialising and protecting Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property

First Nations stakeholders expressed interest in applying Indigenous knowledges, cultural practices, and data to drive innovation, enterprise development and sustainability across agriculture, fisheries and forestry. This includes land and water management, genetic resources, food systems, and cultural techniques that support new products and sustainable practices. When used responsibly and under First Nations leadership, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) contributes to cultural preservation in addition to economic opportunity and sector-wide innovation.

First Nations communities emphasised that their aspirations extend beyond protection of Indigenous Knowledges, including goals for generating economic value, creating jobs, and building intergenerational wealth through the responsible commercialisation of ICIP. Supporting ICIP protection and commercialisation will have broad benefits as it enables the development of differentiated, high-value products, strengthening of environmental social governance and sustainability credentials, and fostering of innovation rooted in deep cultural and ecological knowledge.

#### **Safeguarding ICIP through ethical use**

Safeguarding ICIP brings a range of benefits to the agriculture sector. Ethical use of ICIP is not solely about preventing misuse. It also enables respectful collaboration, fostering innovation, and ensuring that First Nations communities share in the economic benefits derived from their cultural contributions. When protections are clear and upheld, ICIP becomes a strategic asset – one that can differentiate products in the marketplace, attract investment, and support sustainable practices rooted in thousands of years of ecological stewardship.

Stakeholders have called for stronger protections that ensure First Nations peoples retain agency over how their knowledges are accessed, applied, and commercialised. In the agriculture sector this is particularly relevant where Indigenous Knowledges underpin new products, technologies, and land management practices.

Initiatives like the [Future Drought Fund's Strengthening Drought Resilience on Country](#) program offer a practical model of how ICIP principles can be applied. The program supports First Nations-led organisations to co-design local projects that integrate Indigenous practices with modern farming and climate strategies. Examples of Indigenous practices included in these projects are fire management, water care, and seasonal knowledges. The program protects ICIP by ensuring that First Nations peoples keep ownership and control of their cultural practices and knowledges.

Initiatives such as the Indigenous Agricultural Product Framework (IAPF) would also provide opportunities for First Nations businesses to benefit from their unique place in the market. The IAPF is intended to define Indigenous agricultural products, promote authenticity and traceability, and establish mechanisms for benefit-sharing and recognition—laying the groundwork for ethical and inclusive innovation in Australian agriculture (NFF 2025).

Internationally, the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge requires certain disclosures in patent applications involving Indigenous knowledges. This ensures that when Indigenous plant varieties, farming techniques, or ecological insights are used in developing commercial products, their origins are acknowledged and protected.

Safeguarding the ethical use of ICIP enables First Nations communities to lead innovation on their own terms. It also strengthens trust between partners and ensures that Australia's agricultural future is built on principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared prosperity.

**Discussion questions**

- 4) What could government and industry do to support the ethical use and protection of ICIP around bushfoods or land management practices? Are there existing frameworks or practices that could support this?
- 5) What mechanisms or practices can support the respectful and culturally informed sharing of Indigenous Knowledges to strengthen partnerships in agribusiness and promote inclusive, two-way learning?

## 4 Tailored financial and business support for Indigenous agribusinesses

While some First Nations agribusinesses are thriving thanks to local leadership and investment in community outcomes, others face persistent barriers to accessing the finance, technical skills and business acumen needed to establish or expand their businesses. First Nations stakeholders highlighted the need for financial products, business support, and technical expertise that reflect Indigenous governance structures – such as communal land ownership, collective decision-making, and long-term cultural responsibilities.

Specific challenges identified in fisheries included limited access to commercial fishing licenses and quotas, high equipment costs, and a lack of culturally responsive technical training. Challenges in agriculture and forestry generally related to accessing mortgageable land and technical expertise. These barriers reduce opportunities for First Nations participation and enterprise growth.

### Rethinking capital for First Nations agribusinesses

Capital investment is essential to growing the agriculture sector and boosting productivity. It helps attract new market entrants and expand existing businesses, including Indigenous-led ventures. However, mainstream financial systems are often based on individual ownership, and collateral-based lending, which does not align with the reality of many First Nations agribusinesses.

Access to finance can be difficult for some First Nations agribusinesses. This is because of limited access to private land, and the way in which lending institutions treat land that is subject to collective First Nations legal rights or interests. In almost all cases, First Nations communal landholders cannot use their land rights and interests as collateral for finance in the same way as most other Australian landholders (ANU 2025b). First Nations land held by a trust (such as through a Prescribed Body Corporate) usually cannot be sold or mortgaged because it is protected for the benefit of the community. Compounding these challenges, First Nations people often have less access to family or intergenerational wealth, and fewer private assets that mainstream financial institutions will accept as securities (First Australians Capital 2021).

Many First Nations agribusinesses are therefore accessing capital through other means, such as corporate Commonwealth entities like Indigenous Business Australia (IBA), special investment vehicles such as the Regional Investment Corporation, grants, First Nations lenders or through First Nations specific products in mainstream institutions.

IBA provides access to capital to support First Nations businesses through various financial products. Recent amendments to its operating legislation, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005* (Cth), will enable IBA to reach new sources of capital to pursue investment opportunities aimed at driving First Nations economic empowerment (PM&C 2025). IBA's corporate plan highlights agriculture as one of its six priority sectors for investment, ensuring First Nations people benefit from emerging opportunities in the sector (IBA 2025).

Philanthropic funding can play a role in developing innovative financial models to better align with First Nations governance, land tenure, and cultural priorities, such as the [Mother Earth Loan](#). Proposed by the Waluwin Foundation with assistance from the Australian National University, it

draws inspiration from the HECS-style repayment system, with payments linked to land productivity and capacity. While still in development, it illustrates the potential for culturally aligned finance to enable sustainable First Nations agribusinesses. Improving First Nations access to capital will benefit the sector by unlocking new sources of growth, increasing market participation, and enabling investment in underutilised land and innovative business models.

## Building First Nations capability for sustainable agribusiness

First Nations stakeholders consistently raised the need for better access to culturally appropriate business and technical support. This support is critical for building business acumen and enabling First Nations peoples to establish or scale agribusiness operations. This includes assistance with agribusiness management, accessing technical and agronomic services, and advice tailored to production goals and cultural values. Currently, only two Commonwealth agencies provide this support – IBA and the ILSC:

- IBA offers a range of business advisory services tailored to First Nations businesses, including assistance with business planning, financial management, and strategic growth. While not specific to agribusiness, this approach could be adapted to support agriculture-related ventures.
- ILSC plays a more targeted role in agribusiness, offering support through its Our Country Our Future and the Future Industries Grant programs.

## Partnering for shared prosperity

Many First Nations agribusinesses are forming successful partnerships with non-Indigenous partners to unlock investment, enhance capability, and create culturally grounded business models. Industry stakeholders highlighted that when structured appropriately, these partnerships foster mutual benefit by strengthening supply chains, improving sustainability, and growing regional economies.

Some industry stakeholders shared that they struggle to identify appropriate First Nations representatives or lack confidence in navigating engagement processes, leading to missed opportunities. These challenges are well known, having been raised in the ALRC's Review of the future acts regime and the Northern Territory Government's 2025 Economic Strategy *Rebuilding the Economy*.

Partnership, joint venture and cooperative models between First Nations peoples, communities, industry and non-Indigenous stakeholders hold potential for unlocking greater productivity and sustainable growth across the sector. The National Farmers' Federation [2030 Roadmap](#) recognises this, identifying partnerships with First Nations landholders under a sustainable native title regime as a key action to improve productivity and landscape health, and to create lasting arrangements with landholders.

### Discussion questions

- 6) What practical steps can be taken to remove structural barriers to agri-finance? Could existing First Nations financial institutions be more effectively leveraged to support Indigenous agribusiness growth and participation in the sector?

## 5 Strengthening access and collaboration in Indigenous and academic research

Greater First Nations leadership and participation in research, development and extension (RD&E) is essential to driving innovation, improving productivity, and advancing sustainability across agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Improved two-way sharing of knowledge and expertise would also foster more inclusive innovation, strengthen research relevance, and accelerate the adoption of sustainable practices across diverse production systems.

Existing partnerships with universities and research institutions, particularly in the bushfoods and northern beef industries, demonstrate the value of integrating First Nations knowledges into RD&E. These collaborations have produced culturally grounded, technologically sound innovations that benefit First Nations communities and the broader sector.

Consultation with First Nations stakeholders revealed persistent barriers to culturally appropriate and responsive participation in RD&E. These include:

- the absence of formal protections for ICIP, which can lead to Indigenous Knowledges being used without consent or recognition (see [chapter 3](#))
- limited access to culturally appropriate, targeted RD&E support that reflects Indigenous governance and priorities.

These challenges have constrained the ability of First Nations stakeholders to lead and shape RD&E in the sector. Stakeholders consistently highlighted the opportunity for co-designed and co-led RD&E initiatives that sit at the intersection of Indigenous Knowledges, cultural land and sea management, and sustainability – ensuring that innovation is grounded in cultural authority and decision-making.

### Mechanisms for inclusive RD&E partnerships

While some institutions have made progress, current approaches to First Nations engagement in RD&E remain fragmented. First Nations stakeholders highlighted successful partnerships with the University of Queensland on multiple bushfoods and ICIP initiatives, and with Meat and Livestock Australia on northern beef capacity and productivity initiatives. However, experiences across other research projects were reported to vary greatly, particularly in relation to ICIP protections. These experiences highlight that gaps remain to ensuring consistent and effective First Nations participation in the RD&E system.

RDCs are at varying stages of building capability for engagement with First Nations peoples. First Nations levy-payers are keen to see RD&E initiatives that support Indigenous-led innovation and priorities. The Fisheries Research and Development Corporation's Indigenous Reference Group is an example of how governance structures can help embed First Nations voices in priority setting and research delivery (FRDC 2024).

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics sets clear standards for research and is supported by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee. The Australian National University follows the AIATSIS Code of Ethics and provides further guidance on ICIP and Indigenous-led leadership to support First Nations research initiatives (ANU 2025a).

These standards offer pathways to embed First Nations leadership, cultural governance, and ethical collaboration in RD&E. By building on existing models and addressing structural gaps, institutions can move beyond intention toward sustained, inclusive impact. Strengthening these partnerships will ensure that First Nations peoples are not only participants in research, but co-creators of innovation, and long-term sector resilience.

## Data as a driver of innovation and inclusion

Culturally informed data management would support inclusive research and enterprise development. For First Nations communities, data is not just a technical asset—it is a cultural and strategic resource that supports the protection of ICIP, builds trust, and facilitates benefit-sharing. Stakeholders consistently identified the lack of reliable, enterprise-specific, and regional data as a barrier to innovation, investment, and informed decision-making across agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

Better access to market trends, consumer preferences, pricing data and performance insights—particularly for First Nations-branded or produced goods—can:

- improve market visibility and competitiveness
- support commercial success and enterprise growth
- safeguard Indigenous Knowledges embedded in agricultural production.

These aspirations align with broader sector priorities, where data and digital capability are recognised as essential to agribusiness success and innovation (NFF 2018). They also reinforce the importance of culturally responsive RD&E systems that integrate Indigenous Knowledges and governance into data collection, analysis, and use.

Better data access supports Priority Reform 4 of the National Agreement by enabling shared information, empowering communities to make evidence-based decisions and strengthening accountability. It also enhances the ability of First Nations researchers and agribusinesses to participate in co-designed research, monitor outcomes, and shape future innovation.

Initiatives such as the Export Readiness Pilot for First Nations Agriculture are working to address these data gaps by using traceability systems to meet export requirements and consumer demands. First Nations stakeholders in Queensland are exploring blockchain applications to strengthen product verification, protect Indigenous Knowledges embedded in agricultural goods, and improve transparency across supply chains. By integrating these data tools into RD&E and enterprise development, First Nations producers can enhance market access while safeguarding cultural integrity.

### Discussion questions

- 7) What mechanisms could support greater First Nations leadership and participation in RD&E, and what risks or challenges should be considered?
- 8) What practices can enable culturally informed data sharing between research institutions to strengthen two-way learning and drive inclusive change in RD&E?

## 6 Improved coordination, accountability and transparency of government action

First Nations stakeholders consistently called for better coordination between governments, industry and First Nations communities to better facilitate shared economic success across the sector.

Stakeholders commented that current policy and program approaches are often fragmented, siloed, and delivered across various levels of government through separate funding streams, and with inconsistent objectives. This results in duplication, confusion, and reduced impact for First Nations communities and businesses. To move beyond this, stakeholders advocated for a whole-of-government, cross-jurisdictional approach underpinned by long-term strategic investment.

Embedding Priority Reform 3 of the National Agreement – transforming government organisations to improve accountability and strengthen decision-making – is key to enabling stronger coordination. This reform supports a shift in how governments work with First Nations peoples, ensuring decisions are made in partnership, reflect shared goals, and elevate good practice.

Improved coordination, accountability, and transparency across levels of government will benefit the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector by reducing duplication, improving policy coherence, and enabling more efficient and targeted investment that delivers stronger outcomes for all stakeholders.

### Models and opportunities for alignment

Examples of actions that could be adapted to strengthen coordinated government action for improved collaboration in agriculture, fisheries and forestry include:

- **Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs** – support farmers and communities to prepare for drought by connecting farmers to regional experts, innovations and new practices. Knowledge Brokers at each Hub use their networks to boost collaboration and learning across Hubs.
- **Policy partnerships under the National Agreement** – have advanced integrated and culturally informed policy solutions in critical reform areas across jurisdictions. There is opportunity to build on this progress through further alignment between Policy Partnerships and Place-based Partnerships for a coordinated system of shared decision-making (Coalition of Peaks 2025).

Opportunities for aligning with outcomes from the Treasurer’s recent Economic Reform Roundtable, such as better regulation and harmonisation across jurisdictions would also help drive innovation, productivity and competition across the sector, including for First Nations participants.

### Strengthening accountability through evaluation

Throughout consultation on the National Statement, stakeholders called for greater accountability in assessing government efforts, requiring evaluations to move beyond compliance and value-for-money assessments to focus on practical impact.

The Productivity Commission’s review of the National Agreement, and its [Indigenous Evaluation Strategy](#), emphasise the need to centre First Nations people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges for improved outcomes (Productivity Commission 2024). The Queensland Productivity Commission

also notes the importance of community involvement in monitoring and evaluation, including the design of indicators of progress that are important to them (Queensland Productivity Commission 2017). The Australian Centre for Evaluation is working to embed high-quality evaluation practices across the Australian Public Service, but gaps remain.

The Closing the Gap Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review further highlights that First Nations communities often feel over-monitored, while governments are not subject to comparable levels of transparency or accountability (Coalition of Peaks 2025).

While there are a range of evaluation measures across government, there is no consistent mechanism across state, territory and federal governments for measuring the impact on First Nations peoples of policies and programs in agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Addressing this gap is critical to ensuring that ineffective policies are not perpetuated and commitments translate into tangible, community-defined outcomes.

**Discussion questions**

- 9) How can coordinated sharing of information about government, industry and community-led programs be improved across the agriculture sector? Which methods or models exist that could be improved or adopted?
- 10) Have gaps in information about government-funded programs or policies impacted opportunities for First Nations agribusinesses to form partnerships with other stakeholders?

# Have your Say

## How to provide feedback

We want your feedback on opportunities and barriers affecting the participation of First Nations peoples and businesses across the sector. Your feedback will help shape a National Statement that supports Indigenous economic inclusion in the sector. All submissions must be received by 5pm (AEDT) on Friday 12 December 2025. There are two ways you can provide feedback:

- Upload a submission (submissions of more than three pages must include a summary of key points).
- Submit a response to the discussion questions via the survey form.

To provide your feedback go to [haveyoursay.agriculture.gov.au/national-statement-first-nations](https://haveyoursay.agriculture.gov.au/national-statement-first-nations).

## Summary of questions

### Discussion questions

- 1) How can government and industry support greater inclusion of First Nations leadership, perspectives, and workers across agriculture, fisheries and forestry?
- 2) What types of mentoring, training, or knowledge-sharing programs would best support First Nations people's capacity for long-term employment in agriculture, fisheries and forestry?
- 3) How could existing legislative structures or policy frameworks be strengthened to better enable First Nations peoples to use the Indigenous Estate for agricultural production? Could partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders help to overcome structural barriers to the commercial use of land and sea?
- 4) What could government and industry do to support the ethical use and protection of ICIP around bushfoods or land management practices? Are there existing frameworks or practices that could support this?
- 5) What mechanisms or practices can support the respectful and culturally informed sharing of Indigenous Knowledges to strengthen partnerships in agribusiness and promote inclusive, two-way learning?
- 6) What practical steps can be taken to remove structural barriers to agri-finance? Could existing First Nations financial institutions be more effectively leveraged to support Indigenous agribusiness growth and participation in the sector?
- 7) What mechanisms could support greater First Nations leadership and participation in RD&E, and what risks or challenges should be considered?
- 8) What practices can enable culturally informed data sharing between research institutions to strengthen two-way learning and drive inclusive change in RD&E?
- 9) How can coordinated sharing of information about government, industry and community-led programs be improved across the agriculture sector? Which methods or models exist that could be improved or adopted?
- 10) Have gaps in information about government-funded programs or policies impacted opportunities for First Nations agribusinesses to form partnerships with other stakeholders?

# Glossary

| Term                                                  | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Country                                               | Refers to the term often used by First Nations peoples to describe the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected. The term contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity.                                                         |
| Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property or ICIP | Refers to cultural heritage belonging to First Nations peoples. Cultural heritage comprises all objects, sites and knowledges, the nature or use of which has been transmitted or continues to be transmitted from generation to generation, and which is regarded as pertaining to a particular First Nations group or their territory. |
| Indigenous Estate                                     | Areas of land over which First Nations peoples and communities have ownership, management or co-management, and other special legal rights.                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Indigenous Knowledges                                 | Refers to knowledge, know-how, skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural and spiritual identity.                                                                                                                             |
| Intellectual Property or IP                           | Refers to those Australian laws protecting creations of the mind, including copyright, trademarks, patents, design laws as well as confidential information.                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Place-based                                           | Place-based partnerships or initiatives are those based in a specific region by agreement from those areas.                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

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