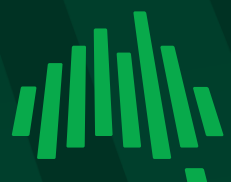


**National
Farmers
Federation**

National Statement on First Nations in Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

December 2025



The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) is the voice of Australian farmers

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities across the breadth and the length of the supply chain.

Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

The NFF represents Australian agriculture on national and foreign policy issues including workplace relations, trade, and natural resource management. Our members complement this work through the delivery of direct 'grass roots' member services as well as state-based policy and commodity-specific interests.

NFF Member Organisations



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12 December 2025

First Nations National Statement Team
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Via email: FirstNationsImplementation@aff.gov.au

RE: National Statement on First Nations in Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

To whom it may concern,

Executive Summary

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (department) to inform further development of the proposed *National Statement on First Nations in Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry* (National Statement).

The NFF's vision for the agriculture industry, to exceed \$100 billion in farm gate output by 2030, is set out in the *2030 Roadmap* which has been supported by successive Australian governments. While the 2030 Roadmap has a headline quantitative farmgate revenue target, it also outlines a range of qualitative targets and outcomes for the advancement of the sector and for the benefit of those within it.

One area identified as a priority is further work with Indigenous leaders to grow opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in agriculture, including within industry leadership. The 2030 Roadmap identifies that the impacts of this work could include reduced disadvantage in Indigenous communities, better representation of Indigenous agriculture, and the attraction of new labour and skills.

The NFF Indigenous Engagement – Principles and Focus Areas Paper (NFF Principles Paper) approved by our Members' Council in November 2022 affirms the NFF view that increased Indigenous collaboration and leadership are in the interests of everyone involved in the Australian agriculture sector, as outlined in sector vision statements such as the 2030 Roadmap.

As stated in our 2024 submission on the development of the National Statement, the NFF is a genuine and willing partner in supporting the advancement of Indigenous peoples in agriculture, fisheries and forestry. We believe a National Statement, properly consulted and framed, can play a part in this advancement.

This response to the Discussion Paper is made in this spirit. We look forward to further engagement with the department as feedback from this round of consultation is assembled and the National Statement is worked up for consideration by federal, state and territory governments.

Greater First Nations representation in the sector

- 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?

First Nations people continue to make important contributions right across the modern Australian agriculture, fisheries and forestry sectors. This includes conventional, mainstream commodities, including meat, grains and fresh produce, but also bushfoods and wild game sectors that draw on millennia of tradition and practice. In all sectors there are examples of First Nations excellence.

We recommend the National Statement builds on these examples and takes a strengths-based approach to promoting First Nations economic self-determination. We also recommend the scope of the National Statement explicitly extend and engage with challenges and opportunity presented in bushfood and wild game sectors. This wider definition accords with guidance from Indigenous producers heard through consultation as part of the Indigenous Agriculture Product Framework project, delivered by the NFF with support from the department and the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC).

Building the next generation of Indigenous leaders

The NFF believes that capacity building, mentoring, and leadership programs are likely to have tangible benefit to the agriculture industry, and to First Nations peoples within it.

We agree with the Discussion Paper's statement that "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."

The NFF supports efforts to utilise and expand existing government, industry, and NGO initiatives to strengthen Indigenous leadership pathways, including within NFF member organisations and the NFF itself. This is in line with the NFF Principles Paper, which states: "The NFF, where appropriate, should work with members to increase engagement by Indigenous representatives in established agricultural advocacy structures, including into leadership roles."

The NFF Principles Paper further states: "NFF members, and the sector more broadly, are already engaged with Indigenous agricultural initiatives and programs, and Indigenous agriculturalists and businesses hold membership to NFF member organisations. The NFF should look to build on this existing foundation to grow such representation, engagement and leadership."

The NFF is refining approaches to engaging First Nations peoples in NFF-led leadership programs including the National Agricultural Leadership Program (NALP) and Diversity in Agriculture Leadership Program (DiALP).

A number of NFF members currently and historically operate programs and partnerships with Indigenous groups, including those aimed at enhancing Indigenous participation in agriculture. These include employment, training, mentoring and business development programs such as the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association Pastoral Real Jobs Program which ran in partnership with the ILSC for 15 years until 2022 and Cotton Australia's support of the Clontarf Foundation. Further detail is provided below.

Enabling shared leadership and sector-wide collaboration

The NFF is comprised of a host of state farming organisations and national commodity councils, to robustly encompass and represent the breadth and length of the Australian agricultural industry.

While the NFF and its members provide pathways for Indigenous representation in industry bodies, alternate models of representation, knowledge-sharing or collaboration for First Nations stakeholders across the sector could be beneficial. In addition to potential benefits highlighted in the Discussion Paper, this could provide avenues for greater collaboration between First Nations and non-First Nations agricultural bodies, businesses, and individuals.

What formats any potential representative bodies or structures may take should be led by First Nations stakeholders.

Creating culturally safe spaces

Creating and maintaining culturally safe spaces is important for government, businesses and industry bodies across the sector – not just as a means to increase the engagement, participation and retention of First Nations peoples, but for all those of diverse cultural backgrounds who contribute to the dynamism and success of Australian agriculture. Australian agriculture values diversity in its many forms, with a non-discriminatory approach that values people for their individual strengths, insights, and capabilities. Census data shows that the number of Indigenous agricultural sector workers increased from 2016 to 2021, with a 58% rise in the number of Indigenous managers. Similarly, there was a rise in the proportion of the agricultural workforce from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and a rise in the number and proportion of women working in agriculture. This reflects an ongoing industry vision to be an employer of choice where individuals, regardless of background, can find opportunities to succeed.

The NFF is guided in its approach to enhancing First Nations involvement in the industry by the NFF Indigenous Engagement - Principles and Focus Areas Paper, and last year facilitated cultural awareness training for staff. Similarly, many NFF members have committed to further strengthening their cultural safety through Reconciliation Action Plans or other mechanisms.

The NFF believes industry and government should continue to pursue measures which enhance cultural safety and promote greater inclusivity in agriculture.

Strengthening skills for sustainable agribusiness growth

The NFF believes it is essential to ensure that First Nations peoples have the necessary skills to build sustainable agribusinesses. This commitment to sustainability is supported by the recognition that over 65,000 years of First Nations knowledge is contained in sustainable land and resource management practised by First Nations Peoples.¹

Within Pillar 4 of the 2030 Roadmap, Action 4.3.3 refers to growing opportunities for First Nations people in agriculture and supporting pathways into leadership roles. Partnerships and co-design and delivery are crucial to building and sustaining the success of First Nations people in agriculture. However, many current and former examples of Indigenous jobs and skills training pathways have battled with a lack of a consistent funding base and short-term funding cycles, amid other challenges. Reliable, long-term funding is necessary for the delivery of effective, sustainable projects, especially in terms of building relationships and trust with First Nations communities.

There are multiple current programmes of co-creation and development of skills and training pathways, including the successful Warrmijala Murrugulayi (Rise Up to Work) program, delivered by Nyamba Buru Yawuru and informed by the culturally holistic Mabu Liyan (good well-being) framework. This delivers a pipeline to supported, ongoing pastoral employment, particularly where graduates are further supported through other projects such as the Aboriginal Pastoral Academy. Elsewhere, the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA) ran the Pastoral Real Jobs Program, funded by the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC, previously the Indigenous Land Corporation) as part of the broader Real Jobs Program, from 2008-2022 until funding was removed. In this period, over 400 young First Nations people participated in the two-year program, which included intensive pre-employment training, job placement and further training which often included formal qualifications, and ongoing support. This program, and many others in which NFF members have engaged, shows that, existing industry bodies should be supported to co-design and co-deliver First Nations skills and training programs where possible.

Additionally, the Ag Trade Apprenticeship Feasibility Report² details an exciting and innovative skills pathway into sustainable and successful careers in agriculture. The feasibility study acknowledges the need for a targeted pathways programme for priority cohorts. In looking at current skills and training pathways and the outstanding success and retention rates of the NFF's Ag CAREERSTART program, there is an opportunity to co-create a sustainable and culturally sensitive skills and training pathway. Six percent of total participants in the AgCAREERSTART program since its first cohort in 2022 have identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. As of December 2, 2025, six of 22 applicants (27%) for the 2026 cohort identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

The NFF believes consideration should be given as to how skills and training pathways, including the above, can help build opportunities for First Nations peoples in agriculture.

¹ Realising the Opportunity, Enhancing and strengthening Indigenous engagement as part of the growth of Australian agriculture, NFF and KPMG, 2023, p8.

² <https://skillsinsight.com.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/SkillsInsight.AgTradeApprenticeship.FeasibilityReport.pdf>

Using the Indigenous Estate for Agricultural Production

- 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?

Untangling Land Tenure Systems

The Discussion Paper recognises that Indigenous enterprises operate under a broad suite of land tenure arrangements and specifically identified “land tenure complexities and systemic inconsistencies” as among the greatest barriers to using the Indigenous Estate for productive purposes. The NFF recognises that land tenure settings influence and permit varying degrees of enterprise development, land-use, and capital investment opportunities. This is a complex matter governed by numerous established statutory frameworks including but not limited to the *Native Title Act 1993*, Indigenous Land-Use Agreements, agreements established under Indigenous Protected Areas, and state and territory legislation, recognising these were established for differing purposes.

The Mabo No. 2 and Wik High Court determinations created substantial uncertainty within the agriculture industry at that time, particularly regarding how land tenure was determined. This uncertainty was resolved through legislation (*Native Title Act 1993* and subsequent amendments) which has embedded clarity of process and established recognised systems for determining Native Title, principally through the National Native Title Tribunal and Federal Court. The conclusion of these processes is a certain arrangement of tenure, underpinned by a range of test cases that inform where, and to what extent, Native Title is predetermined as extinguished (example: on certain perpetual leases). These determinations or precedents cannot be relitigated through a National Statement or any other process.

The NFF also acknowledges the challenges of unlocking the economic potential of the Indigenous Estate in the examples referred to in the Discussion Paper, including the interaction of private land ownership and the Native Title regime. We note that access to private capital can already be achieved through dedicated avenues such as special investment vehicles like the Regional Investment Corporation, government grants, corporate Commonwealth entities, and/or other lender product types. These pathways could be better leveraged and communicated to unlock new opportunities for Indigenous peoples.

It is however prudent that this document does not attempt to re-prosecute established land tenure as that would far exceed the boundaries and purpose of a National Statement. An appropriate approach would be to clarify existing opportunities, strengthen coordination across relevant legal and policy domains, and support agricultural resource and production development in appropriate areas of the Indigenous Estate (consistent with 2030 Roadmap Action 2.4.3). On this point, we note that the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) is currently undertaking a *Review of the Future Acts Regime* and one focus point is to consider how economic outcomes can be further realised under the Act.

The NFF will continue to engage in this ongoing body of work to ensure reforms deliver a sustainable Native Title regime and tangible agricultural, economic, and regional benefits for all communities.

Closing the infrastructure gap

Australian agriculture is heavily reliant on efficient transport networks to access global markets. However, this essential network is under growing strain – characterised by ageing infrastructure, underinvestment and more frequent climate-related disruptions.

As the Australian agriculture sector continues to grow and adapt to changing market conditions, strategic investment in freight infrastructure will be essential to address key infrastructure gaps. Strategic investment is required to target inefficiencies within supply chains or else Australia's competitiveness will be threatened.

Further, the sustained population shift to regional Australia continues to place unprecedented pressure on local infrastructure and services. This ongoing demographic transformation, which accelerated during the pandemic and has continued through recent years, has created significant challenges for regional communities.

Consistent with the NFF Principles Paper, the NFF supports investment in areas of regional development. This may include, but not be limited to regionalisation, connectivity and infrastructure development.

Unlocking data for the Indigenous Estate

Fragmented and incomplete data regarding tenure types within the Indigenous Estate can impede opportunities for collaboration and the use of land for agricultural production and economic development.

As the NFF stated in its submission to the 2025 ALRC review of the Future Acts Regime: "Establishing Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) remains a complex and resource-intensive process for our members. One of the primary challenges is identifying the correct parties with which to negotiate. This complexity is exacerbated by overlapping Native Title claims and inherent intricate governance structures."

The submission additionally stated: "We have found that our members often encounter difficulties in obtaining relevant information about Native Title holders and identifying the appropriate entities for engagement ... We urge the enhancement of publicly accessible databases and the improvement of communication channels to bridge this gap."

Strengthening publicly available data could unlock additional lands and seas for agricultural, fishery and forestry production, promote collaboration, and deliver increased certainty for producers. A national register of tenure types in the Indigenous Estate, including relevant Native Title holders or appropriate entities for engagement, should be considered.

Commercialising and protecting Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property

- 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?

Safeguarding ICIP through ethical use

Government and industry should approach Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections with care and clarity. Indigenous stakeholders have expressed strong support for legislating ICIP as a means to safeguard cultural heritage and ensure fair benefit-sharing. The Federal Government has prioritised ICIP implementation in the arts sector, where misappropriation of cultural expressions has been a longstanding concern. This focus is understandable given the clear cultural harm in that domain and the relative ease of defining rights around artworks and designs.

Applying ICIP protections to agriculture, fisheries and forestry introduces unique and significant complexity. Unlike the arts sector, these industries involve genetic resources, land management practices, and scientific innovation – areas already governed by state and federal laws. Extending new rights to one group very often affects the rights and freedoms of others. For example, ICIP protections over genetic material could limit existing rights of access and use by industry, particularly where biological resources are owned by state governments on behalf of all citizens. This raises questions about how ICIP will interact with current property regimes, research frameworks, and commercial arrangements.

To avoid unintended consequences, government should:

- Undertake detailed legal and economic analysis to understand how ICIP protections may constrain existing rights and obligations.
- Clarify the scope of ICIP in agriculture, particularly its claim on genetics and where it overlaps with state ownership of biological resources and public interest considerations.
- Engage in broad consultation with Indigenous communities, states, industry, and research bodies to design workable models for consent and benefit-sharing.

While ICIP legislation may deliver cultural and economic benefits, its application in agriculture must balance respect for Indigenous knowledge with the need for certainty, fairness, and continued innovation across the sector. For these reasons, the NFF does not support ICIP being endorsed through the National Statement without a more complete and shared understanding of these complexities. Endorsement could signal support for rights that may significantly alter existing legal and commercial arrangements, and this requires careful analysis and transparent discussion of trade-offs.

The Nationally Consistent Approach (NCA) for Access and Utilisation of Australia's Native Genetic and Biochemical Resources, agreed by federal, state and territory governments in 2002, provides a framework for regulating bioprospecting and ensuring benefit-sharing. It sets out principles for permits, consent, and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources, aligning with international standards such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Nagoya Protocol. While implementation has been uneven across jurisdictions, the NCA remains a foundation for harmonising state and territory laws governing access to biological resources.

Consistent implementation of the NCA may offer a practical alternative to introducing new ICIP rights in agriculture. By embedding clear benefit-sharing obligations and cultural protocols within a harmonised bioprospecting regime, governments can recognise Indigenous interests without creating overlapping legal systems that may conflict with state ownership of biological resources. This approach could provide certainty for industry, uphold ethical standards, and meet international obligations, while avoiding the complexity and potential trade-offs associated with extending new statutory ICIP rights into sectors already governed by detailed resource access laws.

There is scope to support respectful and culturally informed sharing of Indigenous Knowledges through practical, non-statutory mechanisms.

One option may be to adapting for agriculture, fisheries and forestry contexts existing ethical frameworks such as the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. This code sets out principles for consent, attribution, and cultural authority in research contexts. Extending its application to agribusiness partnerships would provide a recognised standard for ethical engagement. Similarly, sector-specific codes of practice could be developed for agriculture, fisheries and forestry, setting clear expectations for how Indigenous Knowledges are accessed, applied, and acknowledged.

The Indigenous Agriculture Product Framework (IAPF) project has found strong support among First Nations producers for a verifiable credential enabling their differentiation in market of products with particular characteristics, including Indigenous ownership, production practices consistent with Caring for Country, and access and benefit-sharing with community.

As a market intervention, a credential need not be dependent on ICIP or other legislation. Encouragingly, the IAPF project has found interest and demand for credentialled Indigenous products along agricultural supply chains and end consumers.

Tailored financial and business support for Indigenous agribusinesses

- 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?

Consistent with the NFF Principles Paper, we support efforts related to agricultural, regional economic development and natural resource management in relevant areas of the Indigenous Estate. To this end, we provide in principle support for policies and programs that seek to achieve this aim, and complementary actions to ensure such efforts are accessible and tailored for indigenous Australians in, or seeking to enter, Australian agriculture.

Strengthening access and collaboration in Indigenous and academic research

- 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?

Mechanisms for inclusive RD&E partnerships

The NFF strongly supports Australia's Rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) as world-leading mechanisms for industry-driven research. First Nations producers already contribute to this system through levy payments and participation in industry bodies. The NFF seeks to support research efforts – including relevant information and data gathering – that increase Indigenous engagement and participation in the sector and enhance the agricultural contribution of the Indigenous Estate.

In line with this commitment, the NFF encourages continued collaboration between research institutions, industry, and First Nations communities to strengthen culturally informed data sharing and co-designed research approaches. The Discussion Paper highlights several successful partnership models, such as Indigenous Reference Groups and co-designed projects, that demonstrate the value of inclusive engagement in RD&E. These practices can build trust, respect Indigenous knowledge systems, and drive innovation that benefits all producers.

Data as a driver of innovation and inclusion

Australian farmers rely on digital technologies and data to drive productivity, manage risk, demonstrate sustainability, and respond to evolving market expectations. The NFF's 2030 Roadmap highlights data as a critical enabler of agriculture's growth.

Improved access to data can generate significant opportunities for farm businesses. However, co-existing challenges may prevent farmers from unlocking the full productivity potential of farm data and other relevant information.

For example, unreliable regional connectivity continues to constrain the adoption of AgTech and data-driven decision-making, while digital literacy and skills gaps can reduce farmers' ability to interpret and integrate data effectively. Many businesses also require extension and advisory support to translate new data flows into practical improvements, and the costs of upgrading on-farm systems can place these reforms out of reach. These challenges extend to compliance risks when the regulatory framework assumes and requires internet or satellite service and connectivity, which can further lock out First Nations involvement in agribusiness. In addition, ongoing concerns about privacy, sovereignty, and control of data generated on farm remain critical issues that must be addressed to build trust and ensure equitable outcomes.

Further, the NFF strongly supports robust traceability systems which equally satisfy export requirements, meet consumer demands, and support on-farm decision making.

Improved coordination, accountability and transparency of government action

- 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?

Models and opportunities for alignment

Strengthening accountability through evaluation

The Discussion Paper states: “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.”

A lack of coordination and alignment across government, industry, and community-led programs is not unique to First Nations agriculture, but a common problem facing the entire sector and its specific resources, including land use, biosecurity, and water. Greater access to information about programs could be beneficial to both First Nations and non-First Nations stakeholders, potentially encouraging improved collaboration and partnership opportunities.

In general, the NFF believes that Indigenous engagement efforts “should be underpinned by a spirit of collaboration and proactive, long-term engagement. Wherever required, initiatives and actions should be ‘ground-truthed’ with relevant Indigenous representatives and stakeholders,” as per the Principles Paper.

Further, the Principles Paper identifies a future focus for the NFF and key stakeholders of undertaking periodic stocktakes across all jurisdictions of programs that in some way aim to promote greater First Nations engagement in the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sectors. This area of focus has been identified to ensure learning about effective program design and delivery is captured and shared and that duplication of effort can be avoided.

The NFF would welcome support to undertake period stocktakes from those agencies and bodies typically funding relevant programs as an investment in the impact of future funding.

Conclusion

The NFF thanks the Department's First Nations National Statement Team for the opportunity to make a submission to the National Statement on First Nations in Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. The policy contact for this matter is Mr Richard Shannon, Manager (Social Policy), via email: rshannon@nff.org.au or phone: 0448 860 630.

Yours sincerely,

SU MCCLUSKEY

Interim Chief Executive



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