



Queensland Health

First Nations

Environmental Health Strategy 2024-29



Queensland
Government

Queensland First Nations
Environmental Health Strategy 2024-29

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Making Tracks cover artwork by Gilimba:

The pathways leading both in and out of this central motif represent people travelling from different professions, different communities and different country, and the importance of everyone contributing equally to this journey. A journey of change and growth for a brighter, healthier, and happier future for all First Nations people.

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Recognition statement

The Department of Health respectfully acknowledges the Traditional and Cultural Custodians of the lands, waters and seas across Queensland and pay our respects to Elders past, present. We value the culture, traditions and contributions First Nations people have made to our communities and recognise our collective responsibility as government, communities and individuals to ensure equitable recognition and advancement of First Nations people in Queensland.

For better life outcomes to be achieved, we recognise First Nations people must have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services affecting First Nations peoples. We value and thank all First Nations people who have contributed to the development of Queensland’s First Nations Environmental Health Strategy 2024-29.

Queensland Health recognises the rights of First Nations peoples are central to health and wellbeing. Consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), these include:

- The right to practice culture
- The right to self-determination
- The right to make decisions on matters that affect lives and communities.

First Nations people also have the right to culturally safe and responsive healthcare, free of racism and inequity.

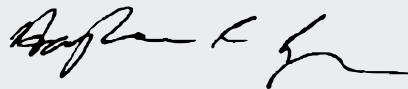
The term First Nations people or First Nations mentioned throughout this strategy refers to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia and their cultures and these terms may be used interchangeably.

Forewords

Key environmental and social determinants of health extend beyond access to sustainable culturally capable, clinically safe and responsive health services.

Haylene Grogan

Chief First Nations Health Officer



First Nations people as Traditional Owners of the land and seas for many thousands of years understand the intricate connections between our health, culture and our environments. Key environmental and social determinants of health extend beyond access to sustainable culturally capable, clinically safe and responsive health services.

Queensland Health is dedicated to working with First Nations Queenslanders to improve health and wellbeing outcomes. Across Queensland in our discrete communities, we are facing unique challenges related to environmental health. These challenges range from access to safe and healthy drinking water, recreational water and sanitation to the impacts of climate change on our traditional lands and natural resources.

Regrettably, First Nations people are disproportionately affected by the diseases associated with environmental health conditions. These include infectious diseases such as skin infections, respiratory infections, acute rheumatic fever, gastrointestinal illnesses and chronic illnesses such as trachoma and rheumatic heart disease.

In this context, we proudly present the *First Nations Environmental Health Strategy 2024-29*. Building upon previous iterations (2001-06, 2008-2013 and 2019-2022 plans), this strategy marks a departure from previous plans and recognises First Nations people must have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services which impact First Nations people.

To achieve this goal, we need to engage in meaningful partnerships and collaborations to leverage resources, expertise and support to develop and implement effective environmental health initiatives to meet the unique needs of our communities.

We remain closely aligned with the larger policy frameworks such as Queensland Health's *HEALTHQ32 First Nations First Strategy 2032, Making Tracks towards closing the gap in health outcomes for Indigenous Queenslanders by 2033* and the *Rheumatic Heart Disease End Game Strategy*, which steer our actions and reinforce our commitment to achieving positive environmental health outcomes alongside our government partners and community stakeholders.

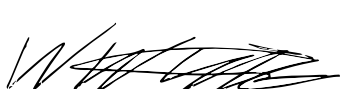
To achieve sustained improvement in environmental health outcomes, the strategy places an increased emphasis on strengthening the First Nations environmental health workforce. Under the redesigned program, defined career pathways and training opportunities will be implemented for community-based environmental health and animal management workers with additional resources developed to assist program delivery.

Together, we are building a united path towards a healthier, more resilient future by prioritising environmental health in First Nations communities across Queensland.

Nick Steele

Deputy Director General

Queensland Public Health and Scientific Services



The Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health program continues to make great strides in supporting environmental health within our discrete First Nations communities. I am inspired by the commitment and vision of the First Nations leaders and environmental health workforce delivering environmental health services across Queensland. The *First Nations Environmental Health Strategy 2024-29* embodies our commitment to prioritising community empowerment, sustainable health practices and equitable service delivery, which is a crucial step towards achieving the Local Thriving Communities (LTC) reform agenda.

The strategy demonstrates the importance of collaboration and inclusivity, as it is grounded in the collective voices and goals of First Nations leaders from across Queensland. By incorporating their perspectives, the strategy aims to empower local communities to take a more active role in decision-making, raise awareness about environmental health and develop a skilled workforce to drive positive change to improve environmental health outcomes for their communities.

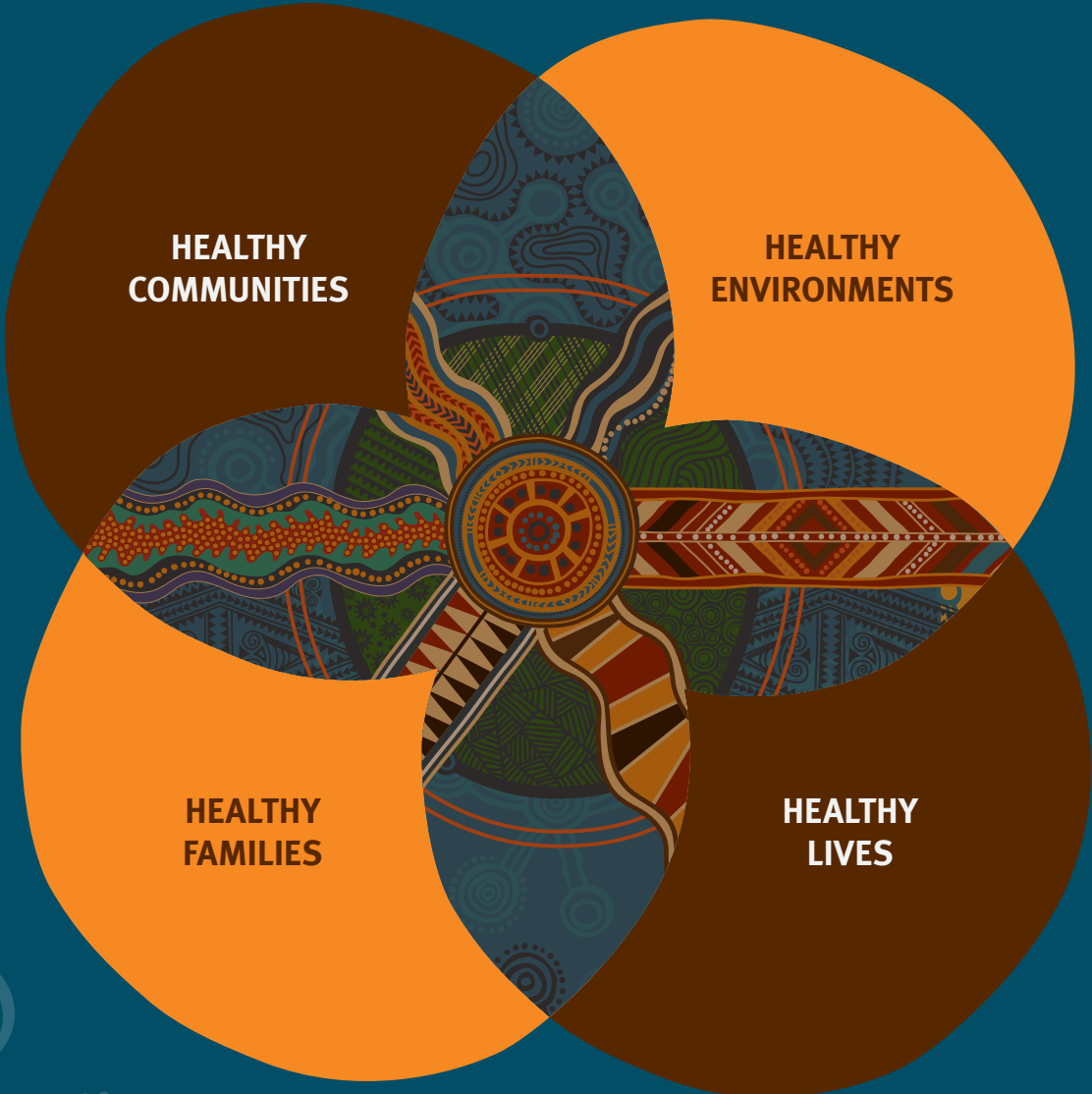
This approach emphasises building on the existing resilience and efforts of local governments and communities. It aims to create an environment where communities can thrive and safeguard their health and wellbeing and provide services which are strengthened by their unique culture and local knowledge.

Environmental health remains an ongoing concern for First Nations people and this strategy continues to take steps towards sustainable practices and fostering partnerships that empower communities to safeguard their health and wellbeing for generations to come.

I extend my sincere gratitude and acknowledge the tireless efforts and dedication of stakeholders, teams and individuals who have contributed to the program. Together, we are building a united path towards a healthier, more resilient future by prioritising environmental health in First Nations communities across Queensland.

Vision

Healthy and safe environments
for First Nations people



Introduction

The strategy outlines a commitment to empower communities, develop the workforce, advocate for change and strengthen partnerships to improve environmental health conditions and infrastructure in First Nations discrete communities over the next 5 years.

The strategy strongly aligns with the *HEALTHQ32 First Nations First Strategy 2032* reform principles:



First Nations First

Leadership from First Nations peoples across all areas of program design and delivery with a commitment to cultural safety and collaborative engagement.



Strengthening the workforce

Supporting a responsive, skilled and valued workforce through education and recognition of First Nations environmental health workers.



Public policy

Delivering quality advice to government to drive an agile, future-focused health policy agenda.



.....

“For us to be a 21st century world class environmental health leader, we need to provide 21st century programs and services by walking together with our First Nations mob and communities.”

.....

Kevin Toby, First Nations Environmental Health Program Principal Program Officer

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Our approach

By empowering First Nations communities to take ownership of their health and wellness, significant improvements can be made to the environmental health and wellbeing of community members while addressing key social determinants of health. This can be achieved through a range of community-led environmental health initiatives that prioritise cultural input and traditional practices.

Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health program operates across 34 discrete communities in 16 local governments and is focused on building environmental health capacity across participating communities. The program aims to address community-specific environmental health challenges in First Nations communities by employing a local environmental health workforce, supported by Queensland Health public health units. This prioritises a culturally appropriate and responsive approach to enhance overall wellbeing by tackling unique environmental health risks faced by communities.

The program has undergone significant changes since its inception in 2001, shifting towards a more holistic approach to delivery. The integration of other Queensland Health initiatives, such as the Safe and Healthy Drinking Water program and the Healthy Housing program, strengthens overall program delivery. By actively engaging with communities, this integration enables a comprehensive approach that enhances sustainable improvements in essential services that support environmental health infrastructure. This supports positive environmental health initiatives and improves health outcomes.

The strategy acknowledges the dynamic nature of community priorities is crucial in a place-based and co-designed delivery model, especially in the face of external factors like natural disasters and disease outbreaks. This approach acknowledges every community is unique, and a one-size-fits-all approach to environmental health planning and delivery can be ineffective. By adopting a co-designed approach, policy, programs and service delivery are better aligned to address the community's unique environmental health challenges.

This is achieved through incorporating traditional knowledge, experience, skills and values, to ensure the plans are more effective, culturally relevant, and sustainable, rather than imposed solutions that may not be appropriate for individual communities.

.....

“Caring for country is part of environmental health and we need to honour the ways our mob do this and understand it’s vital to value both First Nations and western ways of creating a healthy environment.”

.....

Kevin Toby, First Nations Environmental Health Program Principal Program Officer



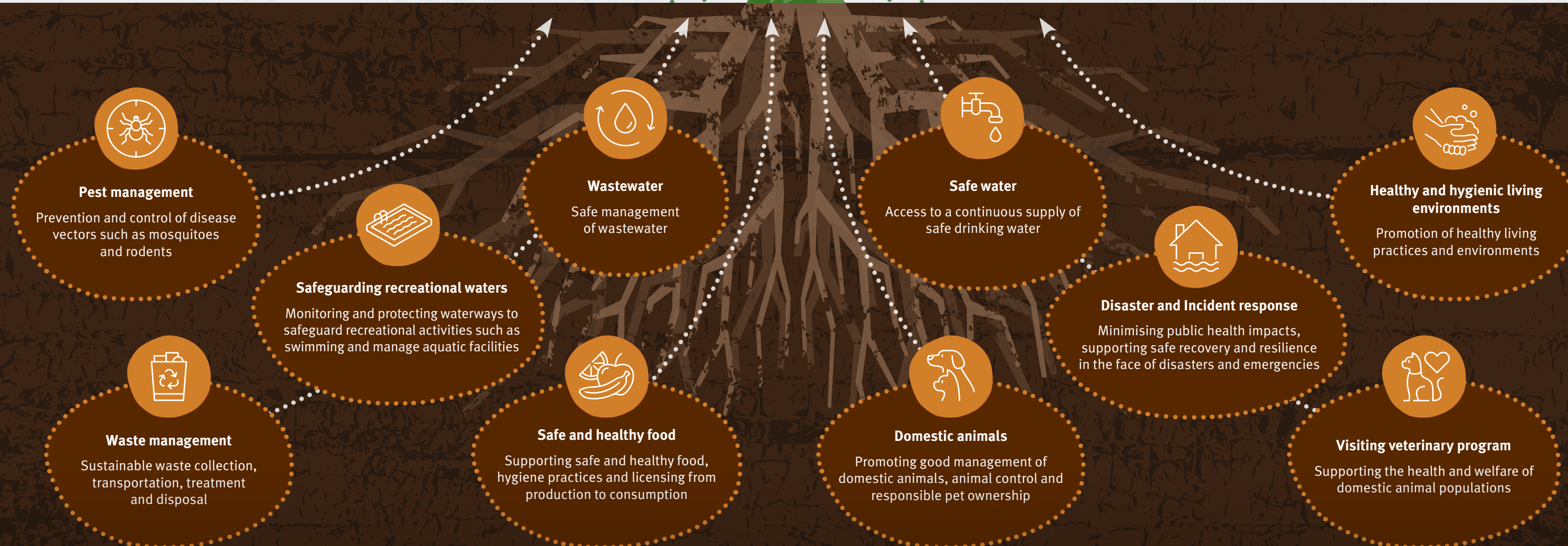
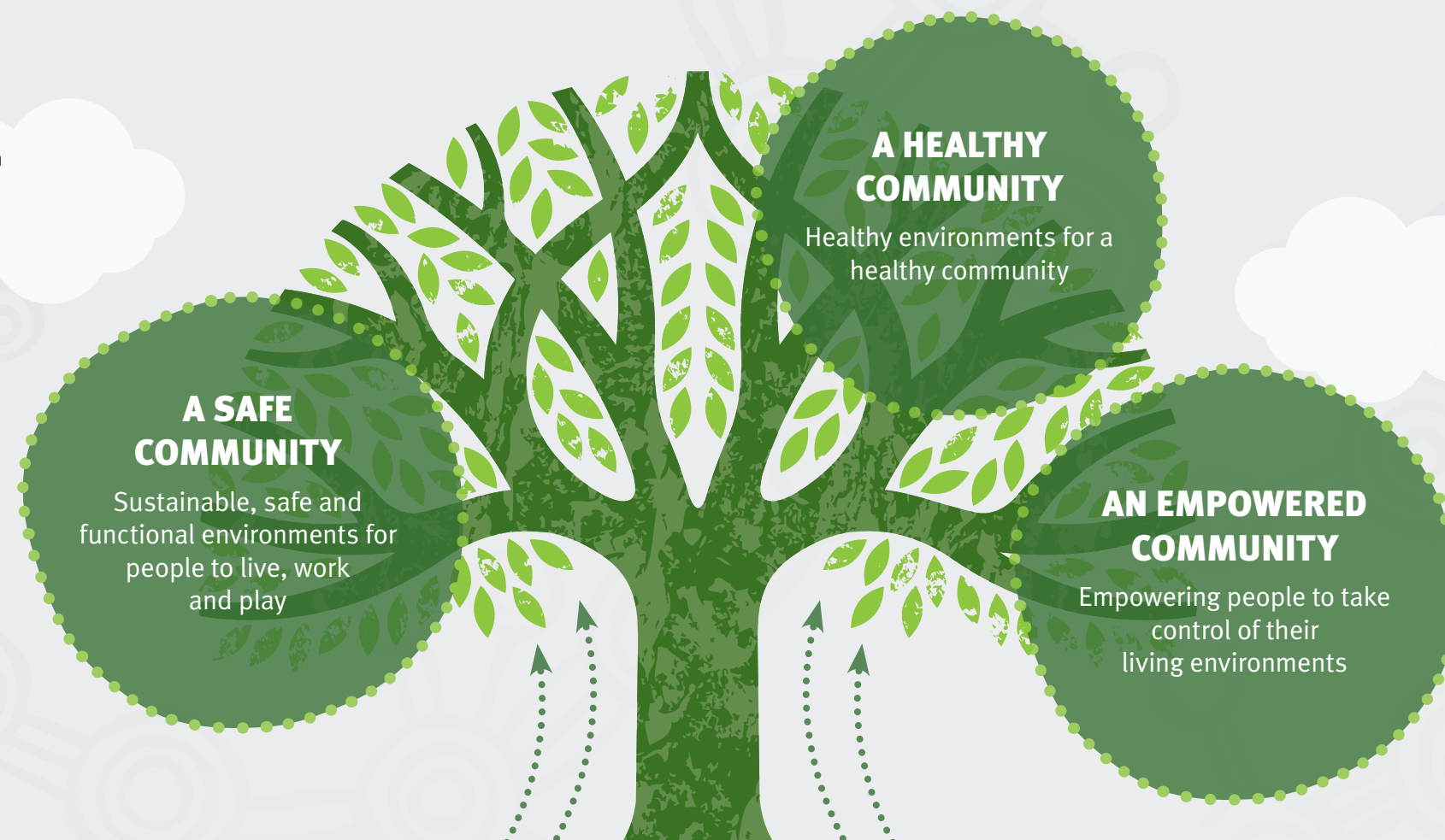
Policy context

The strategy is a dynamic and evidence-based framework grounded in First Nations national, state, and local government policies and initiatives, with a focus on meeting the unique environmental health needs of First Nations communities.



Thriving communities

Environmental health is a key foundation for the overall health and wellbeing of a thriving community.



The strategy

By providing a framework for capacity building initiatives, the strategy aims to equip local governments and communities with the necessary skills, resources and knowledge to maintain and improve environmental health.

The strategy prioritises working collaboratively with stakeholders to sustainably improve essential environmental health services (pest management, waste management, water and sanitation, food, domestic animals, disaster and incident response, living environments, recreational waters and visiting veterinary programs).

Reflection and learning

Queensland Health’s commitment to reconciliation and cultural sensitivity recognises the value of First Nations perspectives in shaping environmental health outcomes. By incorporating First Nations voices, knowledge and lived experiences, the strategy strives to be more culturally relevant, effective and responsive, ultimately leading to better health outcomes for First Nations communities.

While acknowledging the valuable groundwork laid by the 2019-22 plan and preceding efforts, the strategy builds on past successes by leveraging the foundational work of the past while adapting to the distinctive needs and circumstances of each community, specifically:

- Working across government agencies to embed environmental health in critical environmental health infrastructure projects as a foundation for improved health outcomes, for example, the Safe and Healthy Drinking Water program, *Ending Rheumatic Heart Disease: Queensland First Nations Strategy 2021-2024* and Queensland Department of Housing’s *Our Place: A First Nations Housing and Homeless Action Plan 2024-27*.

- Improving skills and knowledge so the community-based environmental health workforce directly interacts with primary health care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Organisations (ATSI CCHOs) to manage environmental health risks as an integral part of overall healthcare.
- Continued mentorship, training and positive role modelling within the community local government workforce to enhance workforce confidence and knowledge to reinforce recruitment and retention efforts.
- Ongoing facilitation of networking opportunities and peer support within the workforce, including the continuation of face-to-face workshops annually to strengthen engagement and collaboration.

This has ensured a more targeted and effective program delivery to incorporate local context, ultimately yielding better health outcomes for First Nations communities.

Moving forward

In 2023, the realignment of priorities and underpinning principles for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health program marked a significant milestone in the development of the strategy. Bringing together stakeholders which included local and state government agencies ensured a more contemporary and effective approach to align with best practices and policies.

Key elements of the strategy are:

- First Nations leadership across the program:** Sets the direction and embeds culture through First Nations leadership.
- Community empowerment and decision making:** The Local Thriving Communities reform framework gives greater decision-making authority to First Nations discrete communities to develop place-based environmental health plans through meaningful engagement, with consideration of cultural safety and equity.
- Community awareness of the importance of environmental health:** Empowers communities to facilitate, encourage, value and build the delivery of environmental health service initiatives through trust and engagement.
- Workforce growth:** Supports attraction and retention of staff by investing in workforce growth and development.

- Integrated service delivery:** Acknowledges public health is influenced by a broad range of factors beyond the healthcare system. Therefore, integrated policies and interventions across various sectors, such as education, employment and housing, can significantly improve health outcomes.

As the program embraces new perspectives and opportunities, it is essential to prioritise communication and transparency, stakeholder engagement and continuous improvement to ensure the delivery model remains effective, responsive and aligned with the program’s goals and objectives.

The environmental health needs and aspirations relating to the health of the community and the living environment inform service delivery, which is holistic, accessible, empowering and culturally safe. The strategy aims to ensure approaches remain dynamic and responsive to the evolving needs of communities as outlined in their place-based, co-designed community plans.

Strategic priorities areas

1

Empowered communities

First Nations leadership informs community environmental health priorities

2

Strengthened workforce

Skilled and valued workforce improving community environmental health outcomes

3

Integrated service delivery

Integration of policy and service delivery across government to enhance environmental health outcomes

4

Environmental health infrastructure

Infrastructure which supports environmental health



Priority area 1:
Empowered communities

First Nations leadership informs community environmental health priorities.

Since colonisation, policies and programs affecting First Nations people have been created and delivered without the necessary lived experience to generate effective solutions.

The *HEALTHQ32 First Nations First Strategy 2032* emphasises empowering First Nations leadership at all levels of government. Through empowerment and knowledge building with First Nations communities, this priority aims to advance health equity, self-determination and reconciliation within the broader framework of integrated environmental health service delivery.

Quality health outcomes can be achieved by supporting healthy environments through a place-based, co-design process that respects local culture, cultural safety and equity, with environmental health plans reflecting community needs.

Through engagement with local government, communities, community leaders, elders and stakeholders and focusing on cultural responsiveness, plans will incorporate local cultural perspectives, traditional knowledge and values. This respects community ways of knowing, supported by community specific environmental health data.

The community based environmental health workforce will be pivotal in promoting community engagement, understanding of environmental health and its links to health outcomes. This will be achieved through prioritising enablers and desired achievements for education and resource provision to support ownership of environmental health issues.

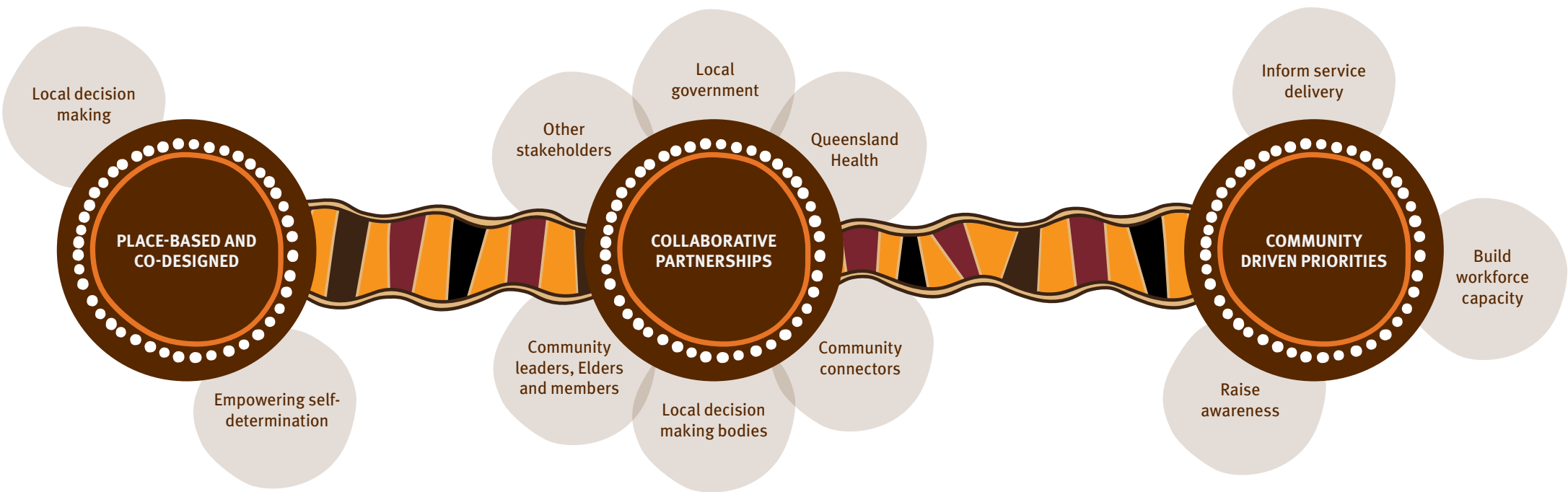
This collaborative approach will foster trust and empower the community with a sense of ownership, ensuring environmental health initiatives are effective, sustainable and responsive to the unique needs of each community.



Key objectives

- Build stronger relationships through consultation and engagement with communities to meet their specific cultural, health and wellbeing needs.
- Incorporate unique cultural insights and First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing into place-based environmental health plans to foster trust in communities for effective and sustainable environmental health initiatives.
- Empower the environmental health workforce to establish and monitor environmental health initiatives which are informed by community insights and built on trust to ensure transparency, accountability and cultural sensitivity.
- Adopt a dynamic approach which is agile and responsive to mitigate evolving environmental health challenges and embrace opportunities to ensure plans remain relevant and effective.

For communities, with communities, by communities





Priority area 2: Strengthened workforce

Skilled and valued workforce improving community environmental health outcomes.

Continuing to grow and support the workforce is vital in the attraction, building, retention and succession planning of a culturally capable, safe, responsive, skilled and sustainable workforce. A strong focus is placed on providing opportunities for accredited education with transferable skill sets. This supports individuals seeking higher education and facilitates career pathways which are critical for the recruitment and retention of the workforce.

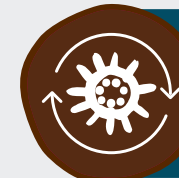
Embracing a culture of continuous investment in training, skills and mentoring of the workforce is crucial to enhancing staff skills and knowledge for professional development opportunities (workshops, courses and higher qualifications). This will contribute to improved staff engagement and job satisfaction, leading to higher retention rates.

This work is underpinned by targeted advocacy for fair and equitable working conditions in line with skills, qualifications, knowledge and organisational contributions to build a workforce, which is valued and can thrive.

Through holding annual networking workshops, the workforce will foster a sense of collaboration enabling them to build relationships, share knowledge and ideas, and gain valuable insights from others' experiences. This will lead to a more engaged and motivated workforce, better equipped to deliver positive outcomes.

Key objectives

- Enhance capacity-building and workforce participation, and support sustainable employment and career pathways in First Nations communities.
- Establish partnerships with accredited service providers for sustainable delivery of environmental health training.
- Advocate for improved equity of employment conditions across the workforce to increase retention rates and enhance the attractiveness of roles.
- Futureproof the workforce by seeking opportunities to invest in training, retraining and upskilling to reduce the impact on workforce changes.



Priority area 3: Integrated service delivery

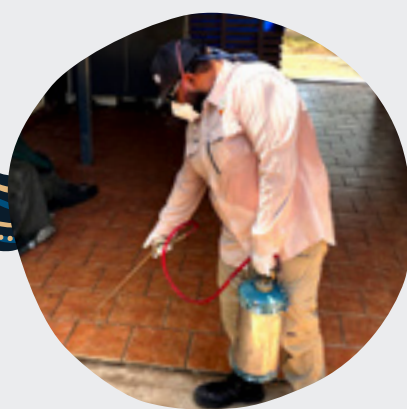
Integration of policy and service delivery across government to enhance environmental health outcomes.

Government sector policies and programs can significantly influence health and health inequities. A Health in All Policy (HiAP) approach acknowledges the broader social determinants of health such as housing, education, safe water supply, sanitation, environment, transport, economic development and service access. Embracing First Nations leadership will empower First Nations people in shaping policies and services, dismantling silos between sectors, and promoting integrated approaches to tackling environmental health issues directly impacting community wellbeing.

Integrated service delivery relies on strong partnerships to optimise resources and streamline coordination among government agencies, healthcare providers, community organisations, and stakeholders. These collaborative partnerships foster resource sharing, expertise, and information sharing, promoting a more cohesive and synchronised approach to service delivery, leading to better outcomes and improved overall wellbeing.

Key objectives

- Embed principles of environmental health and the social determinants of health into planning and delivery of services that reflect the cultural values and preferences of communities.
- Seek opportunities to partner with stakeholders and service providers to articulate policy which advocates for broader environmental health improvements to address systemic inequalities and promote sustainable solutions.
- Establish collaborative partnerships and referral pathways between primary health care providers and the local workforce, to share knowledge, resources, and expertise to rapidly identify and respond to environmental health challenges and opportunities.
- Promote inter-agency collaboration to support effective stewardship of resources.





Priority area 4: Environmental health infrastructure

Infrastructure which supports environmental health.

Strong and sustained investment in environmental health infrastructure is needed to meet the specific needs and environmental health risk factors experienced by First Nations communities. By adopting a holistic approach, the program recognises the interconnectedness of environmental health with the social determinants of health, including safe and functional housing, access to clean drinking water, effective sewage systems and sustainable waste management. This lays the foundation for sustainable environmental health outcomes.

Data-driven insights, environmental health assessments and community input inform the design, implementation and adaptation of environmental health infrastructure initiatives. This approach enables local governments to tailor their environmental health infrastructure to their unique needs and priorities, allowing for more effective and responsive solutions to capacity building and long-term sustainability.

Fit for place and fit for purpose infrastructure are essential for creating healthy and sustainable communities. Future high-tech infrastructure needs to be affordable, durable and easy to maintain and operate, to assist First Nations people to live, work and thrive.

Key objectives

- Advocate for continued investment in suitable environmental health infrastructure and ongoing maintenance programs.
- Advocate for fit for place, fit for purpose environmental health infrastructure.
- Integrate environmental health considerations in the planning, implementation and evaluation of environmental health infrastructure to mitigate negative health impacts and promote sustainability.
- Strengthen partnerships with stakeholders to leverage resources, expertise and support for environmental health infrastructure initiatives.



Environmental health stakeholders

Partners	 Waste management	 Disaster and incident response	 Wastewater	 Safe water	 Pest management	 Safeguarding recreational waters	 Training and education	 Safe and healthy food	 Domestic animals	 Healthy and hygienic living environments	 Visiting veterinary program
Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC)		●							●		●
Australian Defence Force		●									
Community-led health organisations		●								●	
Department of Agriculture and Fisheries		●			●				●		●
Department of Environment, Science and Innovation	●	●	●			●	●				
Department of Health	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Department of Housing, Local Government, Planning and Public Works	●	●	●	●	●					●	
Department of Regional Development, Manufacturing and Water		●	●	●		●					
First Nations local governments	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Hospital and Health Service Public Health Units	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Local Government Association of Queensland							●		●		●
Local veterinary services									●		●
Marine Rescue Queensland		●									
Non-government agencies		●								●	
Queensland Fire Department		●									
Queensland Police Service		●									
Queensland Recovery Agency		●									
Registered Training Organisations							●				
Rural Fire Service Queensland		●									
State Emergency Service		●									
TAFE Queensland							●				
Universities							●				

Monitoring and reporting

The strategy serves as the framework for advancing the future program direction identified by stakeholders during 2023. Recognising the fundamental role of implementation pathways in achieving success, a continued emphasis on consultative and collaborative approaches, characteristic of the strategy's development, will continue throughout its implementation and review phases.

Supported by an operational plan, the strategy's execution will be guided by Public Health Units within Hospital and Health Services, in close partnership with the Health Protection and Regulation Branch, alongside ongoing active engagement with First Nations local governments and stakeholders. These collaborative efforts will leverage established governance structures and review mechanisms to ensure effective coordination and alignment with strategic priority areas.

To track progress and ensure accountability, monitoring and reporting will occur annually throughout the strategy's lifespan. Reporting against this strategy will integrate with the existing reporting framework of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health program and the operational plan.

“Creating positive transformation and healthy environments for families in communities requires patience. We need to prioritise trust-building and we need to foster relationships at the pace of each community.”

Kevin Toby, First Nations Environmental Health Program
Principal Program Officer

Appendix 1: First Nations discrete and remote communities

