



Keeping remote Indigenous communities safe

Update 1 – 3 April 2020

Context

The minerals industry is privileged to engage and partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, groups and organisations across Australia, including from remote and very remote Indigenous communities.

Specific considerations - remote and very remote Indigenous communities

The [Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations](#) identifies specific considerations to consider in COVID-19 responses. These include highly mobile populations, higher visitor flow to remote communities (including government and non-government service providers, either FIFO or DIDO), an existing higher chronic disease burden and existing social, health and economic inequalities.¹

Developed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander COVID-19 Advisory Group, the plan both adopts the existing response and provides additional operational guidance. It is endorsed by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee.²

National Resources Protocols

The minerals industry has a special responsibility to support remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The [National Resources Sector COVID-19 Protocols](#) provide an industry framework to keep its workforce, families and communities safe. The protocols establish core obligations to be applied in a way that is appropriate for site social, geographic, operational and other characteristics.

It includes specific protocols relating to remote and very remote communities.³ Supporting [guidelines](#) are available to inform company implementation of protocols relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The guidelines are a live document to be updated as the pandemic evolves.

Protocol implementation

To implement the protocols over the past two weeks, mining companies have:

1. Actively collaborated and supported information-sharing

Six meetings to discuss and share member approaches and support industry collaboration have been held since 17 March as part of the MCA-led approach to information-sharing and collaboration. The MCA is engaging with Indigenous organisations and governments to support understanding and collaboration.

2. Developed management plans to comply with various biosecurity, travel and local requirements

Site-specific management plans must meet Commonwealth biosecurity requirements, relevant state and/or Northern Territory requirements and local government, land council and Traditional Owner arrangements.

¹ Department of Health, [Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations](#), Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, March 2020, pp. 7-8.

² *ibid.*, p. 4.

³ Minerals Council of Australia, [Resources sector – National COVID-19 protocols](#), MCA, Canberra, March 2020.

3. Ceased non-critical contact with remote and very remote communities

Companies deferred non-critical contact with remote communities in consultation with Traditional Owners when Australian Government health advice recommended reduced travel to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Engagement via digital channels remains strong, consistent with the industry's commitment to long-term partnerships and transparent and timely communication.

4. Introduced stringent arrangements where workforces are resident near Indigenous communities

Further to stringent biosecurity restrictions, additional precautions are being jointly implemented by Indigenous organisations, governments and industry. For example, on Groote Eylandt South32 GEMCO and the Anindilyakwa Land Council (ALC) established restricted area zones for resident and FIFO employees. Complete separation of FIFO, residential and Indigenous communities is key to workforce and community health and wellbeing. All flights into Groote Eylandt are also temporarily suspended for 14 days to support the ALC in baselining Groote Eylandt as COVID-19 free.

5. Tailored arrangements for workers from remote Indigenous communities

Prior to introduction of new biosecurity restrictions, some mining companies supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to safely return to home remote communities. In consultation with affected employees, many companies have also suspended FIFO/DIDO programs from remote Indigenous communities to reduce community transmission risk.

6. Reduced on-site workforces, relocating employees residentially and changing roster patterns

Various actions have been undertaken to reduce workforce movement. These include sites undertaking only work critical to sustain operations, extending shift patterns to reduce FIFO/DIDO activity and temporarily relocating critical employees to regional towns. All non-essential staff travel has been deferred.

7. Implemented new processes to deliver essential services

New procedures have or are being established to eliminate or reduce face-to-face contact where companies deliver essential services such as power, water and emergency response capability to communities.

8. Supported community-led health preparedness

Community-led and delivered responses are critical to keeping communities safe. Companies have mobilised critical resources where possible to assist health preparedness and meet social needs. For example, BHP and Newcrest are providing support for Western Desert communities to meet increased housing and health needs. The MCA is also assisting to identify potential resources. For example, two Northern Territory mining camps that could be used as central health clinics were identified through MCA networks.

Next steps

The industry will continue to listen to and work with host communities, Indigenous organisations, health officials, regulators and law enforcement to implement and support measures to keep remote communities safe.