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Message from the Chief Health Officer

I am pleased to present the Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Plan 2008–2013. This Plan provides a strategic framework for improvement in health outcomes by addressing environmental health conditions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In Queensland, the average life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is about 23 years less than that of other Queenslanders. A number of reputable reports link the burden of illness and disease suffered by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to poor environmental health conditions. This is why improving environmental health in these communities is a key priority for Queensland Health.

Queensland Health embraces a holistic approach to health and recognises that there are factors beyond the clinical setting which influence health. These factors include the provision of environmental health infrastructure such as good quality housing, sewerage and waste disposal facilities and safe water and food supply. They also include social and cultural aspects such as education, training and employment. Although many of these factors fall outside the traditional portfolio of Health, Queensland Health is committed to proactively working with other agencies to secure better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Queensland Health is also aware that another key factor for the improvement of health outcomes is the need to empower communities and to tailor health programs and services to the communities’ priorities and needs.

The Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Strategy 2001–2006 was part of Queensland Health’s multi-strategy approach to progressing social and health reforms in Queensland’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Strategy’s multi-level approach introduced an initiative to strengthen and support 34 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in managing environmental health programs. These programs include waste recycling, animal management, mosquito management and school-based food safety education managed by the environmental health workforce from local communities.

This Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Plan 2008-2013 builds on the gains of the previous strategy and identifies six strategic directions which support quality environmental health outcomes for Queensland’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through a whole-of-government coordinated and community focused approach. This comprehensive environmental health model will complement primary health care and provide the foundation to empower and strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to respond to their health needs.

This Plan also aligns with the agenda for the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in addressing health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It will also support the Council of Australian Governments’ priority to achieve health gains for Indigenous Australians. I believe this plan will help provide direction to all stakeholders with a responsibility for environmental health.

I look forward to your continued support.

Dr Jeannette Young
Chief Health Officer
May 2008
Queensland Health acknowledges the importance of building mutual trust and respect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in order to effectively implement and achieve the outcomes envisioned in this Plan.

The following principles, which are consistent with the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health 2003–2013, have been developed to guide Queensland Health’s actions and decisions in the development and delivery of environmental health programs and services.

- **Cultural Respect**: Environmental health programs and services will be developed and delivered with regard and respect for the cultural diversity, rights, values and expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- **A Holistic Approach**: A holistic view of environmental health recognises that the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health status includes attention to physical, mental, emotional, cultural, spiritual and social wellbeing, and community capacity and governance.

- **Working Together**: Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health will only be achieved through partnership and collaboration of all stakeholders.

- **Resource Allocation and Coordination**: Environmental health programs and services will be delivered in a coordinated and integrated way to ensure more efficient and effective use of resources.

- **Transparency and Accountability**: Environmental health programs and services will be delivered with optimal use of resources and consideration of long-term, sustainable action in an open and transparent manner.

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**Vision**

A standard of environmental health that supports the achievement of quality health outcomes for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland.
The health inequalities suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can, in part, be attributed to poor environmental health conditions. Queensland Health has striven for the improvement of environmental health standards in Queensland’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the development, implementation and support of culturally appropriate strategies and programs at a strategic and local community level.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Plan 2008–2013 identifies the key directions and priorities for Queensland Health’s environmental health function for the next five years to consolidate and enhance gains achieved since the last strategy. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health planning activities and the statewide population health strategic planning process. The Plan strongly aligns with other specific state and national plans, strategies and initiatives. These are explained in detail in Appendices 1 and 2 of this Plan.

Figure 1: Relationship of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Plan with the statewide population health strategic planning process and departmental planning activities

- Queensland Health Strategic Plan 2007–2012
- Queensland Statewide Health Services Plan
- Area Health Services Plans
- Queensland Health Population Health Plan 2007–2012
- Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Plan 2008–2013
- Enabling Plans 2007–2012
  - Asset Strategic Plan
  - People Plan
  - Information Management Strategic Plan
  - Funding Plan
- Environmental Health Service Delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People
  - Division of Chief Health Officer
  - Area Population Health Services
Why is environmental health important?

Regardless of location, all people should have access to safe and healthy environments to support their health and wellbeing.

Life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is estimated to be 17–19 years below that of other Australians. In Queensland, the average life expectancy is almost 23 years less than that of other Queenslanders. Evidence published in a number of key reports suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities remain burdened by illness and disease due to poor environmental health conditions at much higher rates than the non-Indigenous population.

The 2005 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report has recommended that environmental health causes of disease need to be proactively identified and addressed so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health status can be advanced.

1. 2005 Social Justice Report
2. The Health of Queenslanders 2006 – Report of the Chief Health Officer Queensland
4. In jurisdictions for which data are available, death rates from diseases associated with poor environmental health were much higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (between 112.7 and 230.4 deaths per 100 000) than for non-Indigenous people (between 25.1 and 39.6 deaths per 100 000). Source: Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2007 Report
What are the challenges?

Queensland’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has a diverse geographical spread. As well as the discrete communities, most of which are located in the far north of the State and in the Torres Strait, there are significant populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in other rural and remote shires. Up to 75% of Queensland’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population reside in urban centres.

For the newly formed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island local governments expected to provide a standard of environmental health comparable to existing local government authorities, there are some distinct difficulties. In particular, due to the nature of the land tenure on communities, these local governments are unable to charge rates on properties and therefore rely on State Government funding to maintain environmental health infrastructure. The remoteness of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has created many challenges to providing environmental health services.

In urban and other regional areas where environmental health services may already be well established there may be different environmental health needs within the Indigenous population than those of the discrete communities. The challenge is identifying these non-discrete communities and their particular environmental health needs, and the most effective way of responding to them.

In all settings there are difficulties in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce and professional services. However, this issue affects remote localities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island local governments to a far greater extent, particularly when critical skills required include being able to engage with community people and understand and respect cultural values together with specific technical skills. Other factors which influence the environmental health workforce include remoteness, availability of training and community understanding and appreciation of the importance of environmental health, all of which present significant challenges for the delivery and sustainability of quality environmental health services.

Another challenge is to improve partnerships across both private and public sector agencies and to have environmental health considerations embedded as a fundamental aspect of a range of services delivered to Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Queensland and Commonwealth government agencies currently share responsibility with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for meeting housing, infrastructure, health services, environmental health and other needs in Queensland. However, past experiences have indicated that lack of effective joint planning and coordination between agencies has resulted in segmentation, duplication and gains which are unsustainable at a systems level.

Many of the challenges relating to environmental health described above require innovative and long-term environmental health interventions and solutions.
What is making a difference?

The previous Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Strategy 2001–2006 has been instrumental in providing a strategic framework to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health outcomes through collaborative multi-agency actions. The implementation and subsequent evaluation of the Strategy has highlighted areas for improvement and opportunities for further collaboration across agencies and communities to improve environmental health conditions. This Strategy laid the foundations to build on existing environmental health programs to bring about better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland.

Queensland Health has concentrated its efforts on increasing the capacity of Aboriginal local governments and Island councils through the establishment of an environmental health workforce. Queensland Health made a successful funding submission in 2005 which enabled the expansion of the environmental health program to include all 34 Aboriginal local governments and Island councils. The resultant Environmental Health Worker Expansion Program has helped to create jobs for local people in their communities supported by culturally relevant environmental health training and career path opportunities.

Through their skills and understanding of environmental health issues, the environmental health workers (EHW) help reduce the risk of disease and physical injury by proactively managing environmental health programs. They oversee regular waste collection, litter and refuse tip management, food safety, water supply monitoring and treatment, surveillance of mosquito habitats and the supervision of domestic sewage disposal. Many EHWs have gained community respect for their efforts in advancing environmental health through leadership and advocacy in promoting sound environmental health practice in communities. This growing, skilled EHW workforce has been pivotal to increasing community awareness of environmental health and its relationship to prevention of illness and injury and the protection and promotion of health and well being.

In 2005 a new collaborative initiative with the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, also saw Queensland Health secure funding to assist Aboriginal local governments and Island councils to implement an animal management program in their communities. All Aboriginal local governments and island councils have since been provided with the opportunity to access funding with the aim of addressing a long-standing problem with domestic and feral animals in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Many of these local governments are now in the process of successfully implementing animal management programs.

The range of factors that influence environmental health conditions and the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health Programs and service delivery arrangements across Queensland is illustrated in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 further highlights cross agency initiatives that impact on environmental health and relevant national policy and planning structures. Accomplishments under the 2001–2006 Strategy are highlighted in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4 highlights the more recent 2007 achievements.

Queensland Health is strongly encouraged by the gains achieved under its recent initiatives and is committed to nurturing and building on the gains of the existing programs. It will also continue to identify new opportunities and seek to implement new initiatives through ongoing consultation, community empowerment and engagement and building of partnerships with all stakeholders.