CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

Central Land Council Submission to the NIAA Post Implementation Review of the Low-Cost Essentials Subsidy Scheme

16 March 2026

Introduction

The Central Land Council (**CLC**) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Post Implementation Review of the Low-Cost Essentials Subsidy Scheme.

CLC is a statutory authority established under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth) (**ALRA**) and is a native title representative body under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) (**NT Act**). One of CLC's statutory functions under the ALRA is to ascertain and express the wishes of Aboriginal people living in CLC region regarding the management of Aboriginal land and appropriate legislation concerning that land. As such, CLC has a longstanding mandate to ascertain, and advocate for the rights, interests, and aspirations of Traditional Owners[1] across 780,000 km^2 of Aboriginal land in the southern half of the Northern Territory. This advocacy and a wider range of social policy priorities including food security.

Background

The Central Land Council has long advocated for more affordable goods in remote community stores. In addition to this submission, we draw your attention to the following submissions provided by the CLC to previous inquiries and strategies:

- Senate Select Committee's Inquiry into the Cost of Living (2024) (Inquiry website, sub. no. 184)
- National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities (CLC website)

The CLC welcomed the introduction of the reduced cost essential items scheme and now the expansion of that scheme to enable stores that not registered in the first round to now apply.

[1] The use of the term 'Traditional Owners' is used to include all types of Aboriginal landowners including traditional Aboriginal owners as defined in ALRA and native title holders as defined in the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth)

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By February 2026, almost all community stores in the CLC were registered with the exception of Kaltukutjara (Docker River), Alpurrurulam and Areyonga. Station stores at Neutral Junction and Stirling Stations. CLC contacted the three community stores and understand the Kaltukatjara and Alpurrurulam store boards are considering registration. Alpurrurulam store made efforts to register prior to making their wet season order in September 2025 but were unable to finalise that in time with some communication issues reported. Areyonga store board decided against registering.

Feedback from CLC Members on implementation of the scheme in the CLC region

At the time of writing the CLC region (Central Australia and the Barkly) has been subject to extreme wet weather with widespread flooding and road closures ongoing since February. The effect of this has been that store trucks can't get through, and some supplementation of supplies has taken place through helicopter and plane deliveries.

As a result, many stores have had fluctuating levels of supply with essential goods the main priority. The essential good list does not include all of the 30 reduced price goods subsidised through the scheme. As such feedback at this early stage is limited.

Seeking direct qualitative feedback in communities has also been difficult for CLC staff. Despite that we are in regular communication with members by phone and we have had the opportunity to seek feedback from our Executive at their meeting in Alice Springs on Thursday 5 March. The Executive are elected members representing each of the CLC's 9 regions.

We also had the opportunity to speak to delegates at their Region 5 meeting in Alice Springs on Thursday 12 March. The nine delegates are from communities West of Alice Springs including Mt Liebig, Haasts Bluff, Papunya and Kintore.

1. General feedback about the scheme overall was positive. Some Executive members were not aware of the scheme but agreed it was important.

2. There was concern raised about the lack of posters and information about the scheme in the stores. Each Executive member was provided with a copy of the Reduced Priced Goods Items and the Maximum Price Guide to take back with them.

3. There was a general perception that the products in the scheme were not clearly identified with stickers or other shelf level signage. I understand that process may be underway now, but the rollout needs to be closely monitored and reported back by stores.

4. Concerns were raised that many more expensive but important goods are not included in the scheme limiting overall savings. This included meat, fruit and veg. The option of extending the scheme to include frozen packaged goods like meat and vegetables was raised.

   Recommendation 1: Outback stores should be subsidised to broaden reduced priced items to include frozen meat and vegetables over time. This will require additional investment for in transport with freezer capacity and monitoring of store capacity for greater storage of frozen goods.

5. Concern was also raised that any savings made though the scheme may be offset by price rises triggered by higher fuel costs. There was a general awareness that the Middle East crisis is triggering fuel price hikes which will translate into freight cost increases with a flow on effects in stores. As the reduced-price items are calibrated against prices in Woolies and Coles then there will be likely price increases for essential items in the scheme as well as all other goods not included in the 30 products resulting in a limited if any real savings at the register. With no increase to most people's income on the horizon and significant other price rises of essential goods (diesel currently up to $4 per litre at remote bowsers) there will be no net savings if essential goods in the scheme also go up in price in the near future.

   Recommendation 2: The price of 30 the essential goods in the scheme should be frozen at current prices for at least the four-year period of the scheme then reviewed. The current plan to calibrate prices with urban supermarkets on a monthly basis threatens to undermine the benefits of the scheme in this period of global uncertainty and resulting significant spikes in oil prices.

6. Feedback from some stores (Laramba, Yuelamu) was that the reduced-price items sell out quickly and are not re-stocked fast enough. For the scheme to generate real savings it is critical that the reduced-price goods are in good supply. This situation may even out in the CLC region once supply systems return to normal after the floods.

Other general comments and recommendations

7. Sales of the 30 items (especially food items) in the scheme need to be closely monitored by Outback Stores and reported to NIAA. Products that don't sell well should be replaced with other suitable, nutritious and more popular goods.

   Recommendation 3: That NIAA implement regular monitoring of reduced price-item food product sales. That any unpopular brands or types of food are replaced with other suitable items when turnover is low.

8. It is concerning that of the 113 stores signed up under the first tranche of funding just 13 of those are independent stores. Independent stores make up close to half of the remote stores nationally and the sign-up numbers should reflect this. CLC is aware that there can be a level of distrust about Outback Stores wanting to eventually take over community run stores. There may also be issues with the ability community run stores comply with the codes as a requirement of the scheme.

   Recommendation 4: The CLC urges NIAA to work closely with community stores to make sure they are well supported to join the scheme whilst retaining their independence. This is particularly important in the NT where the Federal Intervention saw the decimation of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in remote communities. A situation that remains today.

9. The escalating rates of anaemia amongst babies and young children in remote Aboriginal communities is of great concern. If not addressed anaemia can negatively impact children's cognitive development and learning.

Recommendation 5: The CLC recommends NIAA require that products such as 'weet-biscuits' listed under the current scheme must be an iron-fortified brand as some cheaper brands are not. In addition, we recommend the inclusion of more iron-rich weaning foods including Farex type baby cereal and pureed vegetables to ensure these iron rich foods are affordable for families.