

## Media Release **No.474**

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### **CLIMATE CHANGE AND POSSIBLE RELOCATION OF ISLAND COMMUNITIES IN THE TORRES STRAIT**

The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) believes the relocation of communities from low lying islands to escape sea level rises will not be a necessity for many decades to come.

The TSRA Chairperson, John ‘Toshie’ Kris, was commenting on a Climate Commission report on climate change impacts in the Torres Strait which predicts sea level rises in the region will be double the international average. Mr Kris said “people commenting on the impacts of climate change in the region should familiarise themselves with the Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy (2010 – 2013). This Strategy was prepared in consultation with qualified climate change scientists and the Traditional Owners of those communities affected by the change. A key principle of the Plan is that *‘relocation is a last resort.’*”

Mr Kris said it was already well known that low lying communities in the Torres Strait faced an uncertain future because of climate change and rising sea levels. This is well documented in the Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy.

“Some communities are already facing the impacts of annual tidal flooding and seawalls are urgently needed to protect them and the significant investments made by State and Commonwealth governments in infrastructure.”

“While the sea level is expected to continue to rise for many years, it is important for people to appreciate that relocation is not something communities in our region will need to seriously consider for a number of decades.”

“The comprehensive Torres Strait Extreme Water Level study commissioned by the TSRA to model sea level and storm impacts on Torres Strait communities concludes that relocation will be a consideration for some communities as sea levels approach 800 mm above current levels.

“When sea levels eventually get to between 500 mm and one meter higher than they are now, they will impact many coastal cities, towns and communities across Australia, not just in the Torres Strait.

“The difference for our low-lying communities is that there is no option for people to retreat away from the sea, but it is highly unlikely the sea will reach these levels until closer to the end of this century.”

Mr Kris said seawall construction was an urgent short-to medium term priority for the region and would form part of a broader adaptation process to assist communities to plan for the longer-term impacts of climate change.

“The Commonwealth government recognises this urgency as demonstrated by their commitment on 4 June 2012 to contribute up to \$12.0 million dollars towards priority coastal works in the Torres Strait. The TSRA has called upon the Queensland Government to match this funding.

“Torres Strait communities play a strategic role in the protection of the Australian mainland through customs and immigration services. The Torres Strait lies on Australia’s border with Papua New Guinea and acts as a key quarantine zone and a buffer for monitoring the movement of pests and diseases into Australia.

“Torres Strait island culture is also unique in Australia’s rich Indigenous cultural heritage and this culture is inextricably linked to the islands communities call home.”

Mr Kris said it was important to remember that communities had options for dealing with sea level rise and that long term planning was already taking place to help affected communities make the right choices well before climate change impacts became too severe.

**ENDS**

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