



NEWS FEATURE: FOOD PRICES IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

# Remote food rotten and expensive

By Evan Schwarten

NATIONAL

It's not the sort of place where good value reigns. A kilogram of tomatoes can cost you \$9 a kg, a modest box of stock-standard cereal as much as \$7 and even the cheapest dried pasta is six times more expensive than in most Australian cities.

This isn't some trendy supermarket in the ritzier suburbs of London or New York. Welcome to Lockhart River, one of the poorest communities in Australia.

Massive transport costs and paltry buying power mean people in the Cape York township and many of Australia's other Aboriginal and islander communities are paying obscene prices for goods mainstream Australians take for granted.

Moreover, the long distances which need to be conquered for transport companies to reach these communities mean fresh food is often close to its use-by date by the time it arrives.

A nurse working in a remote Northern Territory community recently reported to a parliamentary inquiry her disgust fol-

lowing a visit to her local store. Out of the basket of goods she purchased the cucumber and tomatoes were rotten, the avocado was black inside and the sour cream had gone out date six weeks earlier.

It gives residents, many of whom rely on welfare payments, little choice but to turn to cheap unhealthy products which are less likely to go off - meat pies, chips, soft drinks.

The reliance of fatty and sugary foods has had a devastating impact. Nearly 60 per cent of adult indigenous Australians are overweight, half of whom are classified as obese.

Diabetes and heart disease are prevalent and the average life expectancy is low - about 20 years less than the rest of Australia. Victorian MP Richard Marles, heading a federal parliamentary inquiry into community stores in Aboriginal communities, said the price of food was a major barrier to the Rudd government's policy of "closing the gap" between indigenous

## LOCKHART RIVER FOOD & GROCERY PRICES

ITEM	@ LOCKHART	@ CAIRNS	ITEM	@ LOCKHART	@ CAIRNS
TOMATOES:	\$8.66 /kg	\$2.45 /kg	BANANAS:	\$3.93 /kg	\$1.99 /kg
PASTA SHELLS:	\$4.02 /500g	59c /500g	BAKED BEANS:	\$1.20 /220g	69c /400g
WEETBIX:	\$6.72 /750g	\$2.00 /750g	MILK:	\$2.22 /litre	\$1.19 /litre
POTATOES:	\$5.68 /kg	\$1.97 /kg	DEODORANT:	\$10.39 /100g	\$2.89 /50g



and mainstream Australians.

"It would be one thing if that price difference were occurring in an affluent society, but we are talking about some of the poorest communities in Australia who are least able to afford these prices," he said.

"If you can't provide fresh food to these communities then we can't expect to see

an increase in life-spans and a closing of the gap in health outcomes." Mr Marles is leading a team of MPs through Australia's Indigenous communities before reporting to parliament in September.

He said that while he was disturbed by the quality of some stores - including

a Queensland government-run operation in the Torres Strait suffering a rat infestation - there were some successful store models to draw inspiration from.

Among the options available to the community are improving the buying power of community stores through networking and subsidising

healthy food. However, neither option addresses the underlying problem - the lack of local agriculture and horticulture near most Indigenous communities.

Producing food locally would not only reduce prices but provide employment in parts of the world where jobs are hard to come by. -AAP

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