

The 2024 report of the *MJA–Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: Australia emerging as a hotspot for litigation

TO THE EDITOR: In addition to the indicators described in the 2024 *MJA–Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change,¹ we would like to draw attention to an emerging litigation hotspot caused by poor temporal and spatial monitoring of environmental factors in remote First Nations communities. For example, soil health and water quality, despite being intrinsically linked to ecosystem stability, good nutrition, and long term positive public health outcomes,² have not been adequately monitored in remote Australia. Poor environmental conditions present high risks to the health and cultural practices of First Nations people, particularly those residing in remote Australia. There are sparse or non-existent data on many such variables for remote Australia.³ Climate health impact assessments are thus often not disaggregated by remoteness, which means the climate health impacts experienced by remote First Nations communities are under-represented or generalised to be similar to those affecting Australians who live in urban areas.

Without ongoing, ground-level data on environmental variables at geographical scales where climate impacts are likely to be at their peak, we cannot meaningfully track climate and health in Australia. Changes in climatic conditions, particularly warming temperatures, prolonged droughts, and more frequent bushfires, could considerably affect soil health and the quality and quantity of water. Hot weather accelerates microbial activity and enzyme degradation, which leads to decomposition of soil organic matter content and quality of drinking water. Warmer temperatures also attract new pests and diseases. Bushfires release heavy metals, which are known carcinogens.⁴ These heavy metals bind to soil organic matter and can be transported to surface water, resulting in soil and water quality degradation. Poor soil and water quality can also force population migration through their impact on food and water security.

Inequity in data monitoring is thus a growing litigation concern, particularly in the context of First Nations remote residents, who have historically contributed least to climate change. To draw attention to such data gaps, future *MJA–Lancet* Countdown reports could include a section highlighting the need for better temporal and spatial monitoring of climate health indicators.

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