Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations

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Media Statement

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AI investment without Traditional Owner agreements isn't in Australia's interests

Mandatory agreement-making in emerging economies – like the billion-dollar business of data centres – is Traditional Owners' minimum expectation for AI investment in Australia, says the Victorian statewide body advocating for Traditional Owner groups' rights and interests.

"The prime minister is right that AI is a generational inflection point for Australia, but his speech today fails to recognise the rights and role of Traditional Owners in emerging economies, and it's not good enough," said Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations CEO Kaley Nicholson.

Traditional Owners' Country will provide the land and resources data centres need to operate, and face impacts from their infrastructure and operations – and Traditional Owners have been locked out of economic independence for centuries due to dispossession of land and resources.

Ms Nicholson said if the Federal Government were serious about harnessing AI for Australia's benefit – as articulated in the prime minister's AI in Australia's interests' speech today – it would require agreement-making with Traditional Owners to form part of the required guidelines and principles for AI investment.

"Agreement-making in established industries like mining is par for the course in much of Australia for the offshore billionaires seeking commercial profits from using Country, but our approach to emerging economies is silent, and it's an investment failure," said Ms Nicholson.

The Federation has consistently called for mandatory agreement-making between Traditional Owners and investors in new economies: recognising that wealthy investors aren't motivated to partner with Traditional Owners, but can benefit from the clarity and social license that mandatory agreements provide.

Australia has the world's second-largest pipeline of data centre construction and AI giant Anthropic is considering investing $21.5 billion in Australian-based centres. In March the Federal Government outlined the five expectations such potential projects must align with, but was silent on requirements for partnership with Traditional Owners.

Ms Nicholson said the Federal Government was showing its disregard for Traditional Owners' rights in its pursuit of money, and called on the Government to legislate mandatory agreement-making.

"The Federation calls on the Federal Government to do the right thing: bring the AI giants to the table to invest in Traditional Owner communities, and recognise that no national interest for Australia exists without Traditional Owners' interests."

— ENDS —

About the Federation

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations is the Victorian state-wide body that convenes and advocates for the rights of Traditional Owners while progressing wider social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives. It was established in 2013 by Traditional Owner Corporations – inclusive and representative family group-governed organisations with cultural authority to speak for Country and community – who recognised they could be stronger together in advancing shared interests in policy, economic opportunity and caring for Country.

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