



**HORIZON 2035**  
First Nations as critical partners

# Acknowledgements

This project received grant funding from the Australian Government.

## Expert Contributors

We also acknowledge the valuable guidance of the expert panel consulted during this report's development:

- **Roanna Edwards**, Partner, Yamagigu (Deloitte)
- **Jonathan Kneebone**, Director, First Nations Clean Energy Network
- **Leslie Delaforce**, Board Member, Aboriginal Business, Trade & Investment Board
- **Florence Drummond**, Executive Director, Development Partner Institute
- **Will Davis**, Managing Director, Pilbara Solar
- **Noah Bedford**, Principal Advisor to the Vice-President (First Nations), Australian National University
- **Eloise Bentley**, Independent Consultant
- **Wayne Quilliam**, Aboriginal Australian photographic artist, curator, and cultural adviser

In addition, over 25 stakeholders were consulted during the development of this report. We thank all stakeholders for their time and insight.

Powering Australia wishes to acknowledge the First Nations of Australia and recognise their enduring connection to Country through culture, people, place and story.

We honour the knowledge systems that have sustained these lands and waters for thousands of generations and recognise the vital role of First Nations leadership and self-determination in shaping a just and sustainable future. As Australia undergoes a significant clean energy and industrial transition, we acknowledge the importance of respectful partnership, cultural integrity, and shared purpose to realise the full opportunity of the Clean Energy Transition.

# Executive summary

**Australia's clean energy transition presents a historic opportunity to enable First Nations leadership and partnership at the centre of a national industrial and economic transformation.**

Recognised in national policy, including the First Nations Clean Energy Strategy, this transition aims to empower First Nations with clean energy, deliver equitable economic benefits, and foster inclusive partnerships.

First Nations business ownership is expanding rapidly in sectors linked to clean-technology, such as manufacturing and mining. Much of the future clean energy infrastructure and critical minerals projects occur on First Nations lands, making free, prior, and informed consent, leadership, and equity essential.

This report identifies three main types of opportunities for First Nations communities: those linked to land and sea access, broader clean-technology manufacturing, and supporting services. Each reflects distinct strengths and entry points, from land-use partnerships to innovation and service delivery.

Achieving this vision requires strong collaboration between government, industry, and First Nations communities, supported by policies and investment that enable equitable participation and sustainable growth.

Enabling First Nations partnership and leadership with equality and self-determination in Australia's energy transition can advance sustainability and reconciliation, as well as generate billions in economic value and tens of thousands of jobs.

# Opportunity landscape

This is the first time in Australian history that First Nations consent and partnership will play a key role in industry transformation. First Nations participation can be structured through co-ownership, equity, employment, and business partnership opportunities.

First Nations business ownership is growing fast, valued at about A\$16 billion and employing nearly 120,000 people as of 2022.<sup>1</sup>

Net zero modelling shows that 43% of the clean energy infrastructure needed by 2060 will be built on First Nations Estate.<sup>2</sup> In addition, 65% of iron ore assets and up to 79% of critical minerals projects are on land covered by native title or similar rights.<sup>3</sup> This underscores the scale and significance of First Nations' role in Australia's clean energy future.

## Realising opportunities will require proactive actions by stakeholders across all sectors

Australia has a narrow but strategic window to establish globally competitive clean-technology industries, with First Nations consent and partnership as a defining enabler. Realising this potential depends on four foundational actions:

-  Demand: to increase opportunities for First Nations business,
-  Supply: to increase First Nations business strengths in clean-tech,
-  Connecting supply and demand: to link industry, First Nations businesses, funding, and
-  Sector wide: to improve the capacity, culture, and supporting environment for First Nations partnerships and business.

Realising the full potential of these opportunities will require deliberate work to progress enabling models such as equity participation, co-ownership, and revenue sharing. Embedding these models are central to unlocking long-term economic empowerment and ensuring First Nations communities become partners, not bystanders, in the transition.

The diverse opportunities across sectors offer pathways to build skills, jobs, and businesses that can help care for Country, and deliver economic self-determination and broader wellbeing. These models remain relatively underexplored in the Australian context, particularly when compared to examples in jurisdictions such as Canada and the United States.

Notes/Sources: 1. University of Melbourne Indigenous Business & Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0 (2024). 2. Net Zero Australia (2023). 3. Forging Futures WWF (2025)

## 1. Demand

Enablers that increase business opportunities for First Nations peoples

- Policies, procurement, and funding practices
- Industry capabilities and processes

## 2. Supply

Enablers that increase First Nations business leadership in clean-tech

- Business supports and finance
- Skills and workforce

## 3. Connecting supply and demand

Enablers that connect industry, First Nations businesses, and funders

- Information flows
- Relationships and networks

## 4. Sector wide

Cross-cutting enablers that provide the environment and conditions for success

- Vision and mindsets
- Sector-wide funding, capabilities, and coordination
- Enabling policies

In 2035, economic value that flows to or stems from First Nations communities and businesses could be **\$3 billion** in 2035, with **17,000** new First Nations jobs linked to the growth opportunities created.



**Between 2016 and 2021, the number of First Nations business owners grew by 54%, outpacing the broader economy.**

## Sector overview

As Australia advances in clean-technology manufacturing, First Nations businesses are emerging as key partners and leaders.

In 2022, there were more than 13,500 active First Nations led businesses and corporations, generating \$16.1 billion in revenue, employing nearly 117,000 people, and paying \$4.2 billion in wages.<sup>4</sup>

Between 2016 and 2021, the number of First Nations business owners grew by 54%, far outpacing the broader economy, with strong growth in manufacturing, construction, professional services, mining, and energy. These are all industries at the core of Australia's clean-technology future.

To realise the full potential of First Nations collaboration structural barriers must be addressed. Existing mechanisms such as Indigenous Land Use Agreements can be slow and imbalanced, and typical benefit-sharing models often fall short of supporting long-term governance, heritage protection, or participation costs.

To move beyond transactional relationships, progressing to new models of co-ownership, equity participation, and enabling finance will be critical for success.

Within this, opportunities span three dimensions: land-linked industries such as green ammonia, green iron, and critical minerals refining; broader manufacturing activities like advanced components, recycling, and electrified transport systems; and supporting services across construction, fabrication, land management, and research.

Together, these areas present pathways for First Nations businesses to lead, partner, and innovate in the clean-technology manufacturing sector, embedding economic empowerment alongside industrial competitiveness.

## Size of the prize: economic value

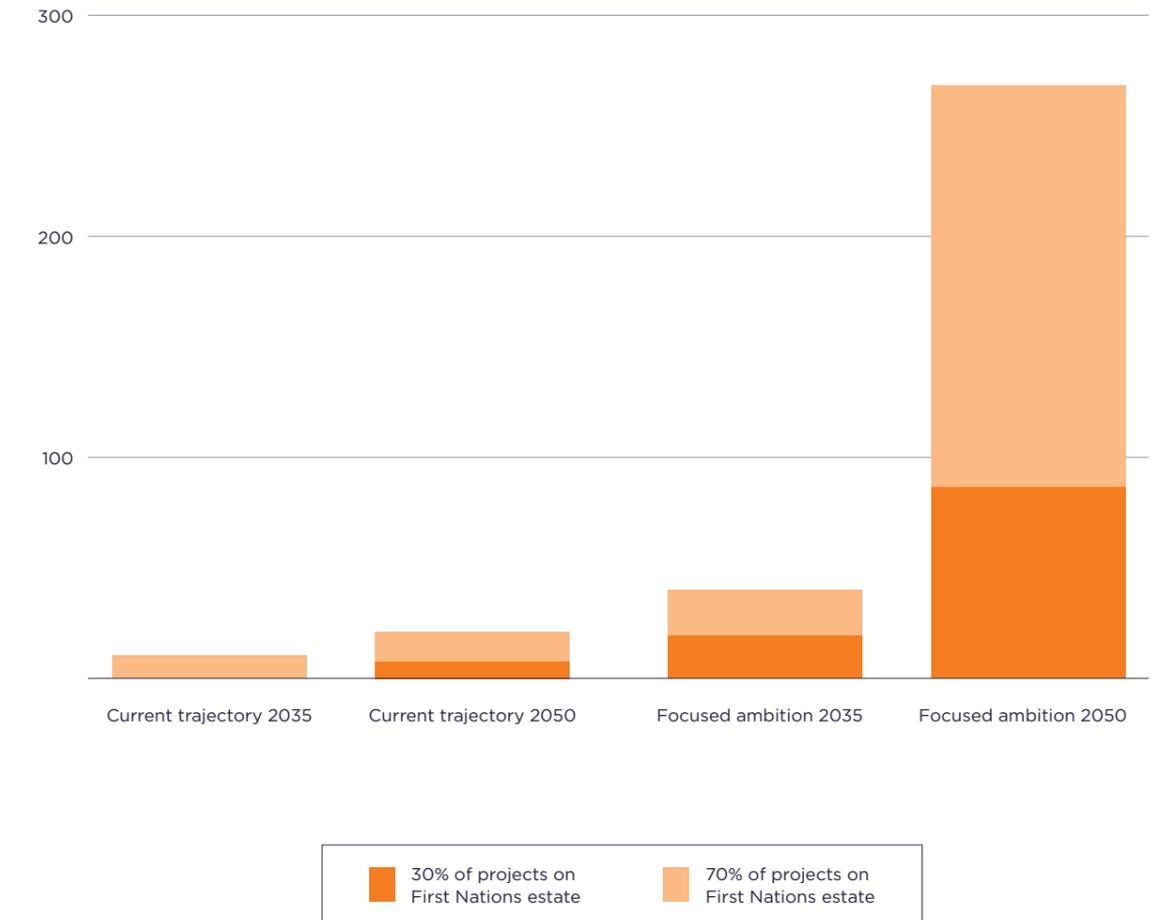
The economic value that can be enabled by First Nations partnerships in the clean-technology manufacturing sector is substantial. Nationally, Gross Value Added (GVA) projections indicate that First Nations partnerships could contribute between \$12 and \$29 billion by 2035, and \$86 to \$201 billion by 2050.<sup>5</sup>

Under the current trajectory, this could generate \$400 million in direct benefits to First Nations communities by 2035, rising to \$1 billion by 2050, while under a more ambitious scenario, the direct benefits could increase much further to around \$3 billion in 2035 and up to \$20 billion by 2050.

Beyond wages and shared revenue streams, the growth of First Nations-owned businesses embedded in the sector creates a pathway to intergenerational wealth and deeper economic self-determination, while reinforcing regional economies with locally based income flows.

**First Nations partnerships and ownership could enable up to 30-70% of sector value.**

GVA enabled by First Nations (\$A billion, 2025)



Notes/Sources: 4. Evans et al (2024)

Notes/Sources: 5. Independent analysis by Cyan Ventures and Deloitte

# Size of the prize: jobs

First Nations partnerships in clean-technology manufacturing have significant potential to drive job creation across Australia. Nationally, between 38,000 and 256,000 jobs could be enabled by 2035, growing to between 82,000 and 530,000 by 2050 as the sector expands.<sup>6</sup>

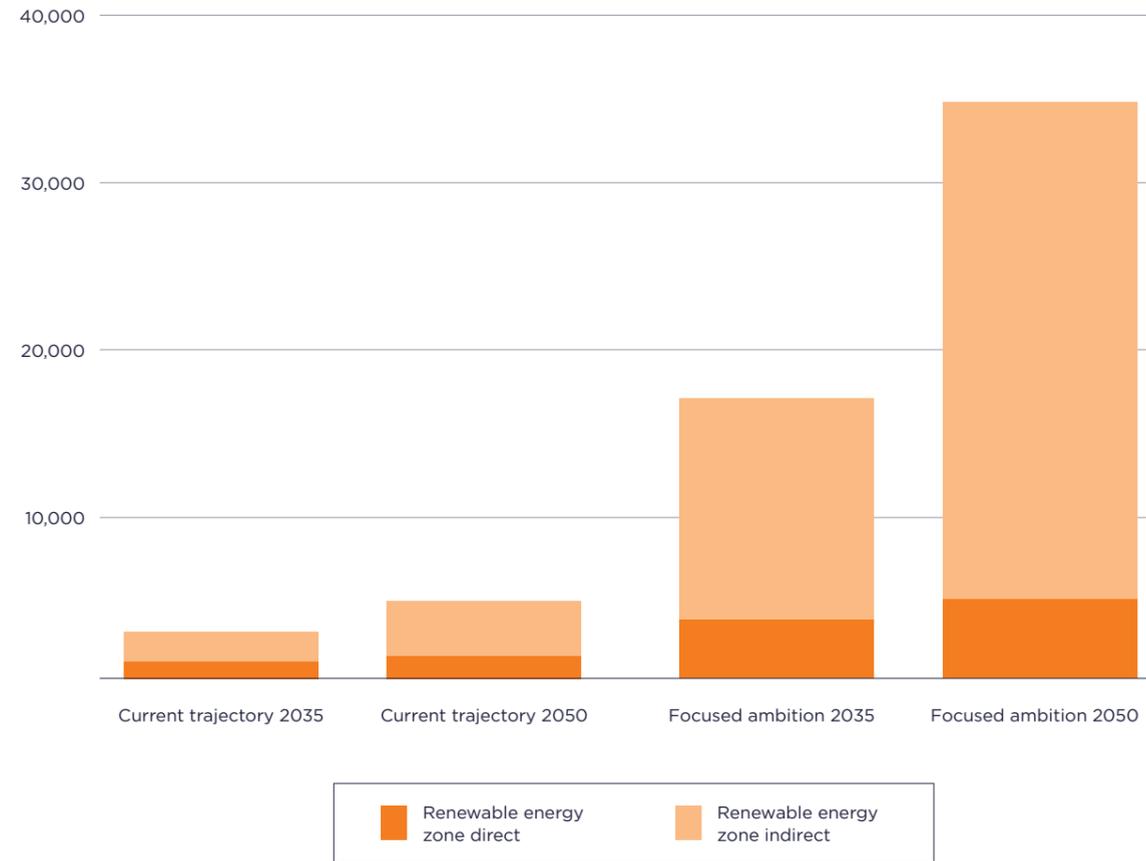
Within this, First Nations communities themselves stand to lead in a significant share of these opportunities. As roles provide choice to extend beyond ancillary and enabling services into other skilled pathways such as technicians, engineers, and automation specialists.

As opportunities are developed on Country, it will be important to ensure that jobs translate directly into long-term workforce participation and capability building within communities, while also strengthening Australia's regional and remote labour markets.

**17,000 First Nations jobs could be supported by 2035, increasing to 35,000 jobs by 2050.**

Notes/Sources: 6. Independent analysis by Cyan Ventures and Deloitte

First Nations direct and in-direct jobs in anchor opportunities and broader ecosystem (000' of FTE)<sup>3</sup>



Notes/Sources: 3. In 'focused ambition' scenario - assumes between 3-5% of GVA linked to benefits sharing and contracted services. 3% used based on Columbia Centre for Sustainable Investment (2018) which reports publicly available information on benefit sharing agreements that have achieved between 0-3% of revenues from their respective projects, and 5% assuming strong best practice agreements and benefits from additional contracted services

# Size of the prize: broader impact

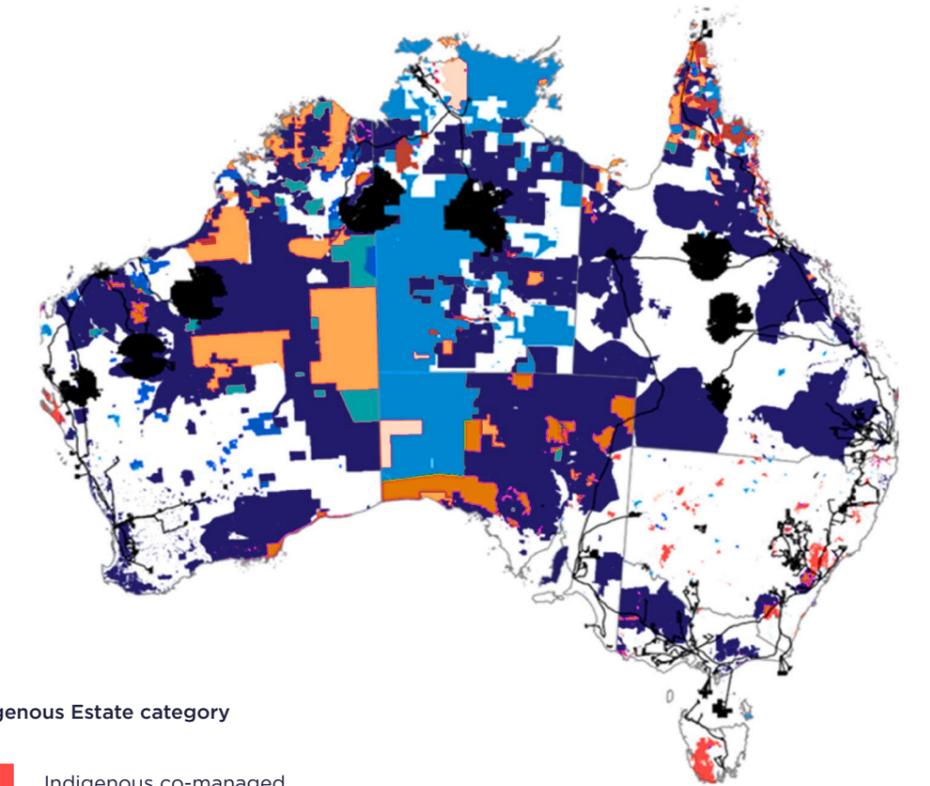
Beyond jobs and revenue, First Nations leadership in the clean-technology manufacturing sector delivers transformative national and community benefits. First Nations leadership and partnerships can accelerate project approvals, strengthen land, heritage, and environmental processes, and reduces investment risk as demonstrated by the Yindjibarndi Renewable Energy project.<sup>7</sup>

Partnerships rooted in Free, Prior and Informed Consent lower financing costs and increase project attractiveness. These type of partnerships also support local development, expand services, and build resilience in remote regions where many First Nations energy workers live.

These combined impacts connect Australia's clean energy transition with deeper social, cultural, and environmental outcomes. They support justice, reconciliation, and long-term resilience for First Nations communities while helping advance national policy priorities such as Closing the Gap.

Notes/Sources: 7. First Nations Clean Energy Network (2025)

Map with modelled 2060 generation and transmission infrastructure required to reach net zero projected to be on First Nations Estate



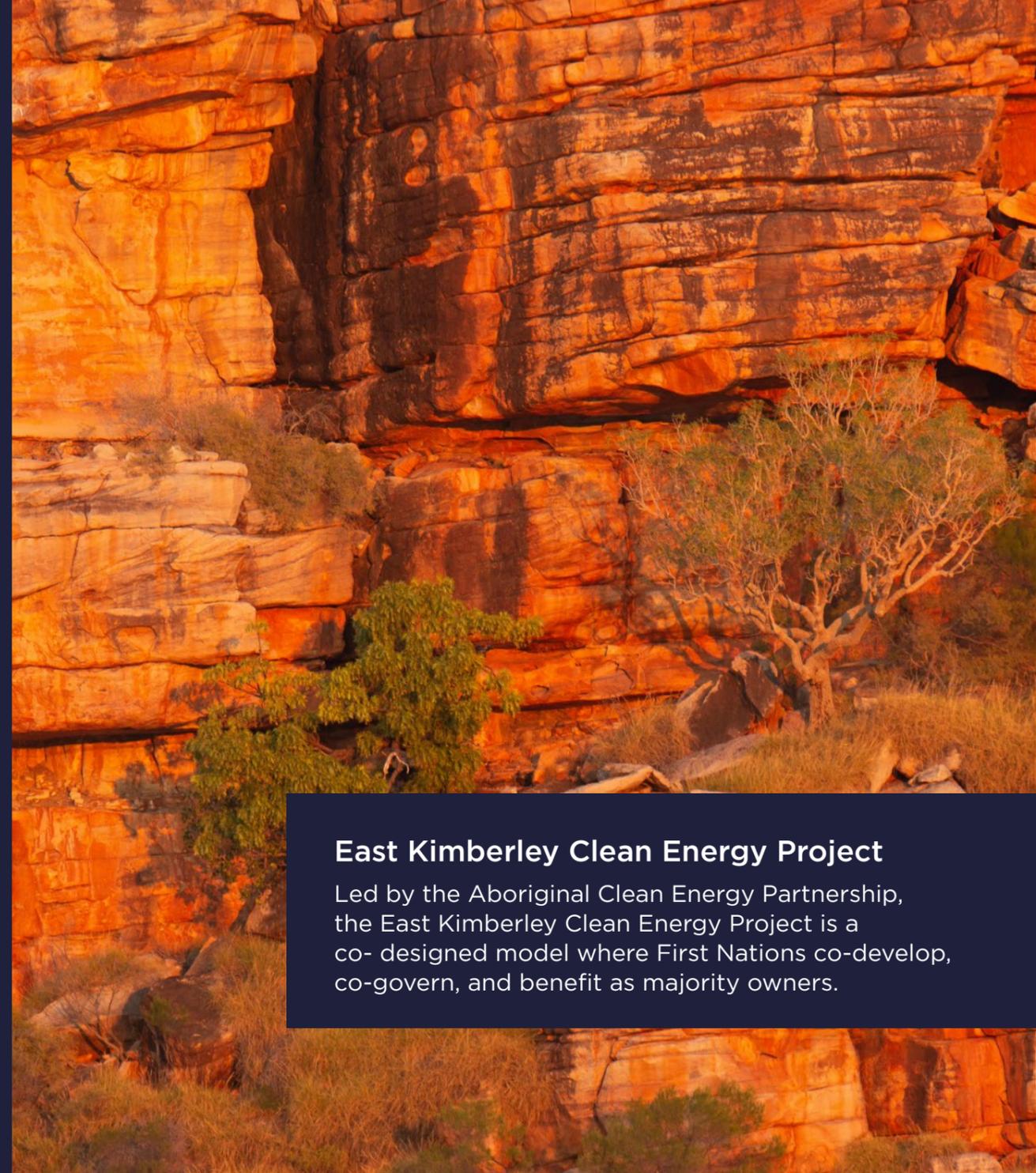
# Opportunities linked to land and sea

Land and sea opportunities are driving First Nations business participation in Australia's clean economy. Key opportunities include:

1. **Green ammonia and green iron**
2. **Biogenic LCLFs and eFuels**
3. **Renewable infrastructure**
4. **Critical minerals refining**
5. **Carbon sequestration.**

These can scale by applying traditional knowledge, local workforces, and environmental stewardship.

Land-use agreements serve as the gateway, allowing communities to act not only as custodians of Country but also as project partners through services, co-ownership, and equity participation. Nearly half of Australia's future clean energy infrastructure and a majority of critical minerals projects intersect with Native Title lands. These opportunities are closely connected to land and sea estates and provide a path to economic growth tied directly to Country and lasting community benefit.



## East Kimberley Clean Energy Project

Led by the Aboriginal Clean Energy Partnership, the East Kimberley Clean Energy Project is a co- designed model where First Nations co-develop, co-govern, and benefit as majority owners.

# Broader clean-tech opportunities

First Nations businesses are expanding beyond traditional land and sea roles into manufacturing and tech sectors. These include wind tower production, prefab components for renewable infrastructure, renewables recycling, and heavy-duty battery-electric vehicle assembly, each rooted in regions with ongoing or planned clean energy projects.

These opportunities represent critical pathways that enable participation in more localised, sustainable and competitive industries. For example, wind tower manufacturing supports local production of turbine components, reducing transport costs and strengthening supply chains.

Renewable recycling opportunities, such as South Australia's Ruwe Recycling project, have the potential not only to recover valuable materials but also to drive regional employment linked to circular economy goals.

Heavy-duty Battery Electric Vehicle (HD BEV) manufacturing builds on existing expertise in mining and transport sectors, providing crucial entry points into decarbonisation efforts in asset-intensive industries.

These pathways integrate skills development, direct employment, and partnerships with technology providers, empowering First Nations businesses to establish leadership and growth in clean-technology manufacturing's emerging and established sectors.

Clean-technology supporting service opportunities across the project lifecycle



Notes/Sources: 1. We define deployment readiness as how ready a clean energy technology is for successful deployment and operation in Australia. This includes whether the technology has been demonstrated at scale domestically, the maturity of local supply chains and workforce capability, and the status of relevant project approvals. Ratings draw on sources such as ARENA, Clean Energy Council, IRENA, case studies (e.g., Yuri, Fortescue DRI, Haru Oni), and workforce readiness reports (e.g., NSW Chief Scientist, 2023). 2. 'Expected date of commercial scale' reflects how soon a technology could scale beyond pilots or early demonstration projects and enter regular industrial use, considering factors like technological maturity, regulatory readiness, workforce capability, and investment pipelines.



# Clean-technology supporting services

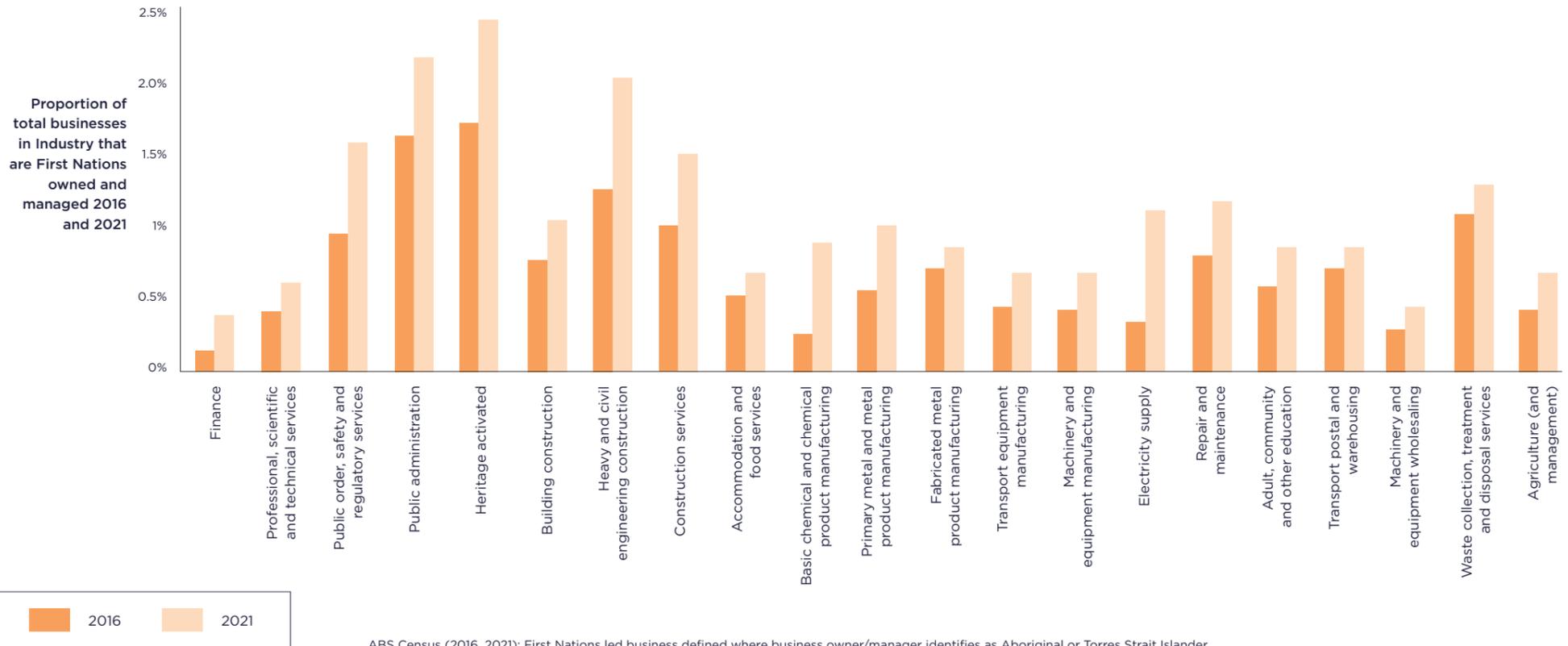
Beyond direct clean-technology manufacturing, First Nations businesses are positioned to engage more deeply in supporting services across project lifecycles and supply chains. These services generally require less capital and operate in regions expanding in clean energy, mining, and infrastructure.

First Nations-led project development links communities with investors while respecting cultural and environmental priorities. Heritage and land management services preserve cultural values and stewardship, especially on Native Title lands.

Construction, operations, and maintenance offer stable jobs in regional and remote areas. These roles blend technical skills with community engagement to build local capacity. Fabrication and assembly provide skilled trades opportunities in equipment supply chains.

Emerging fields like research, design, and optimisation leverage expanding First Nations technical skills to drive innovation and efficiency in clean-tech projects.

First Nations business growth in clean-technology related service industries, 2016 – 2021



ABS Census (2016, 2021); First Nations led business defined where business owner/manager identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

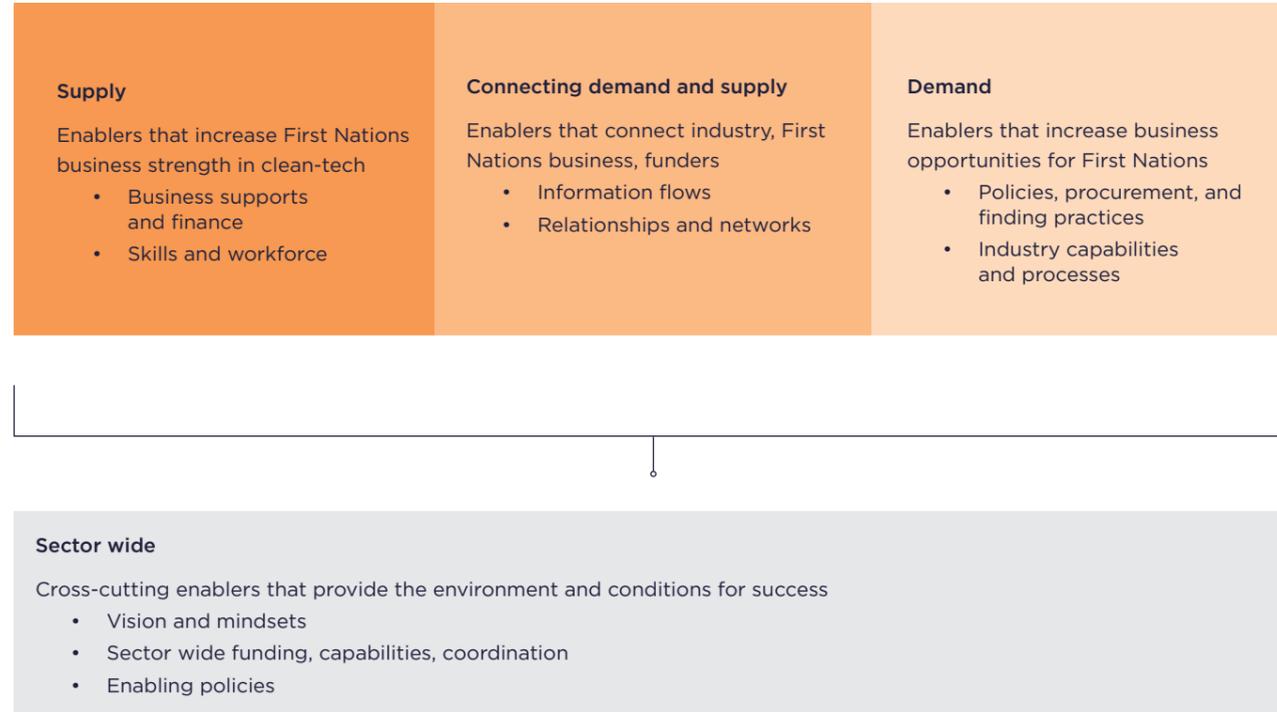
# Making it happen

Unlocking First Nations leadership in clean-technology manufacturing requires focus on four connected areas: demand, supply, connection, and sector support. These collectively move First Nations from occasional involvement to sustained, influential partners in the sector. Strengthening these areas empowers Indigenous communities to help shape Australia's clean energy future with lasting cultural, economic and environmental benefits.

Key actions include expanding opportunities for First Nations businesses (demand), building their capacity (supply), linking industry and communities with funding (connection), and fostering a supportive environment for sustained success (sector support).

This integrated approach ensures First Nations communities are genuine partners in Australia's clean energy transition.

## Interconnected enablers needed to realise opportunities



# Achieving potential for all Australians

Australia's clean energy transition is a historic opportunity to place First Nations leadership at the heart of national industry transformation.

From advanced battery production and critical minerals processing to new materials and industrial innovation, genuine partnerships with First Nations businesses and communities will determine success.

Horizon 2035: First Nations as critical partners outlines how equitable partnerships, co-ownership models, and community-led innovation can deliver enduring benefits for First Nations and all Australians, industry and Country alike.

The opportunity is immense, but it requires early and genuine collaboration. We invite industry leaders, policymakers, investors, and communities to engage with Powering Australia, explore our First Nations report, and partner with us to build a cleaner, stronger, and more inclusive future

For more information and to connect with our team, please contact Powering Australia.





#### Acknowledgement

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