

Policy Briefing – Senate Inquiry into National Landcare Program

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Context for the Inquiry

- Achieving sustainable landscapes across Australia is critical to progressing the economic future of the nation's industries, the social fabric of its communities and a secure environment. The National Landcare Program is the Australian Government's lighthouse policy initiative and most significant investment in achieving such outcomes.

My Background in this Field and Recent Studies

- An agricultural scientist and **natural resource governance specialist** with interests in landscape-scale and place-based approaches to securing natural resource outcomes.
- Ex-CSIRO lead on the Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning Project, leading to **major design influence on the "Blue Book" foundations for NAP and NHT2.**
- **General Manager of Strategic Policy in the Qld Department of Natural Resources and Mines**, establishing Queensland's Regional NRM Framework, Queensland Water and Land Carers and Co-Chair of the NAP and NHT II Joint Steering Committee.
- Ex-CEO of Terrain NRM and now **Chair of Regional Development Australia FNQ&TS;**
- **Professor in Tropical Regional Development** with a research program focussed in **national NRM governance framework**, landscape-scale greenhouse gas abatement and governance reform in the Great Barrier Reef and northern Australia.

Key Experiential and Research Findings of Relevance to the Inquiry

- Since 2007 and under CFoC, the governance of the community based management of Australian landscapes has **shifted from a stable, long term, bilateral, engaged and evidence-based framework** to a **centralised, short-term grants program** incurring massive transaction costs for regional and local organisations.
- **Notable exceptions to this trend can be seen on the Reef Rescue Program and the Indigenous Protection Areas Programs.** Both of these programs shared design principles in common with the pre-2007 NRM framework that they replaced.
- **We have shifted from an increasingly tractable national challenge to one where major systemic natural resource problems are likely to persist**, including increasing pressure on the functionality of the Landcare and community-based NRM sector.
- **Increased centralism and short termism in national decision making has weakened the place-based collaborative networks required to solve complex NRM problems.** It has also

disengaged state-governments and other investors and neglected regulatory reform. The role of science in decision making has also been fragmented, frustrating follow up effort and monitoring and focussing more on outputs vs outcomes.

- **We have a policy choice** between having a nationally significant framework to secure long term outcomes versus a short term national framework for allocating grants.

Key Reforms Required

- A **reinvigorated national NRM framework (including policy and strategy)** for progressing landscape scale outcomes informed by national environmental accounts.
- A truly **cross-governmental, bilateral and bipartisan** approach to design and delivery.
- A reinvigoration of the **regional NRM governance and planning framework**, requiring the strengthening of the governance system in regions (including the voluntary sector, significant grass roots engagement, science based targets and durable shared investment).
- **Retention of Australian Government-funded national, state and major cross regional investment** programs linking national, state and regional priorities.
- Cohesive **integration of opportunities emerging through the nation's direct action strategies and Carbon Farming Initiative** with the national NRM framework.

Securing Reform

Finding a pathway to secure these reforms should not be rushed and could be scoped/agreed during the balance of this term of Government without radically disturbing the current system. The focus on reforms, however, will need to be on securing strategic, place-based NRM outcomes across the nation versus a singular focus on community-based NRM. I would suggest the following steps and processes to enable reforms to achieve strategic long term outcomes:

- **A joint taskforce established** between the Federal Environment, Agriculture and Regional Development Ministers and pooling strategic policy staff across the agencies;
- **Establishment of a structured engagement framework** of national peaks for meaningful engagement during the course of the reform process;
- **Re-engagement of natural resource Ministers across the States and Territories** and a strong focus on bipartisanship with Federal opposition parties; and
- **Development of a clear green paper**, culminating in a reform-oriented white paper prior to the commencement of the next term of government and National Landcare Program.