



8 August 2014

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

The history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program

The Wildflower Society of Western Australia (Inc.) is a non-profit community organisation that was established in 1958 for the purpose of encouraging the conservation and preservation of Western Australia's unique flora. The organisation's member base currently stands at over 700 members. The Society is writing to you today to provide comment on the history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program (the Program).

The History of the Program

The Society understands that the National Landcare Program has, for over two decades, produced multiple benefits to the community and the environment. The last major review of the Program revealed around 6,000 Landcare groups across Australia had contributed to the following:

- Millions of trees, shrubs and grasses planted;
- Repair of riparian zones and restored water quality by reducing erosion and fencing out stock from riverbanks;
- Protected remnants of native vegetation;
- Regenerated areas to provide habitat for native wildlife;
- Improved ground cover, grazing methods and soil management; and
- Rehabilitated coastal dunes and recreational areas (Department of Agriculture, 2010).

The Performance of the Program

A report released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that in 2011-2012 farmers revegetated approximately 70 million hectares of land in Australia (National Farmers Federation 2013). The ABS also found that since the Program began, almost one third of Australian agricultural businesses set aside 8.4 million hectares, or an area bigger than Tasmania, on their own properties for conservation – and where natural environments existed, over half of all these businesses protected these areas for conversation purposes (National Farmers Federation 2013).

The social and economic benefits of the National Landcare Program have also been noted, with a review of the Program in 2013 finding the Program contributed to:

- Learning awareness and practice change (through improved knowledge);
- Community health and wellbeing (through mental and physical health benefits);
- Political and social capital (through public participation);
- Economic (through increased financial return); and
- Cultural (promoting connection with land) (GHD 2013).

Effectiveness of the Program

It is evident that funding and education from the Program contributes towards improving environmental outcomes across Australia and inadvertently, provides additional social and economic benefits. Measuring the biophysical outcomes of the National Landcare Program however has proved to be a little more difficult with little evidence available to assess the Program's effectiveness. Comparisons with the state of the environment in Western Australia, serve to provide (although limited) an indication of the Program's past and future effectiveness.

Land Degradation

Although one of the aims of the Program is to improve soil conservation, the number of hectares (ha) of land classed as having 'high potential' for salinisation is expected to continue to rise. Currently, around 5.7 million ha of land is classed as saline with that number expected to rise to 17 million ha by 2050 (DoE 2014). The State of Environment Report from 2010, also concluded that the 'condition of (natural) resources continues to decline (from salinity) despite the best efforts of the community and government' (State National Resource Office 2010). The Society notes that around 450 plant species are endemic to areas that are at high risk of salinisation (George et al 2006) and any increase in salinisation puts these species at risks of further decline. The pressure on these species and soil conservation is expected to be further exacerbated by climate change (Government of Western Australia 2007).

Soil erosion and acidification also pose a significant threat to the viability of farming and the conservation of flora and fauna habitat in Western Australia. About two-thirds of South West agricultural soil is at risk of acidification and subsurface acidification is now recognised as a serious and growing problem. Between 1990 and 2004, use of lime and dolomite as a soil treatment increased nearly 900% (Government of Western Australia 2007).

Between 1996 and 2004, vegetation cover, which provides a protective layer for land, decreased in 64% of monitored bioregions in the South West of Western Australia. Declines in vegetation cover contribute to soil erosion and loss of soil health. It is difficult to estimate the extent and rate of soil erosion in Western Australia given the large area of land potentially affected and the diversity of land uses, however in 2006 it was estimated that 50–60% of Western Australian Wheatbelt farmers were using land management techniques to reduce soil erosion (Government of Western Australia 2007).

Biodiversity

Sadly, Western Australia's threatened fauna species have also continued to decline. The State is globally significant for its biodiversity, of both flora and fauna and contains eight out of 15 of Australia's biodiversity hotspots. There has been a significant decline in WA's biodiversity in past decades and in 2008 there were 601 species listed as threatened and 32 species listed as presumed extinct in WA (Office of the Auditor General 2009). Only a handful of threatened species out of the 601 threatened species were shown to be improving (Office of Auditor General 2009). The Department of Parks and Wildlife (WA) faces significant challenges in conserving so many threatened species given the size of the State and its high

biodiversity.

The decline in Western Australia's biodiversity has been attributed to several factors;

- Widespread loss of native vegetation;
- Habitat fragmentation;
- Land salinisation;
- Feral animals (introduced predators);
- Weeds; and
- Phytophthora Dieback.

The south west of Western Australia is one of Western Australia's biodiversity hotspots and it is noted that the south west is predicted to suffer the most from climate change out of all regions of Western Australia (Garnaut 2011), placing further pressure on Western Australia's biodiversity.

The Future of the Program

It is evident that threatening processes such as salinity, vegetation clearing, soil acidification and erosion will continue to threaten the viability of farming and subsequently the biodiversity of flora and fauna in Western Australia. Although the Program may have halted degradation and prevented further damage, there is little evidence of the Program alleviating these issues, despite the best efforts of the community and government. Nonetheless, without the Program in place, the situation could potentially be much worse and the Society fully supports the continuation of the Program. The Society provides the following recommendations to in regards to improving the effectiveness of the Program.

Recommendations

1. In regards to reducing land degradation, it has come to the attention of the Society that one issue in particular may be holding back the effectiveness of the Program in Western Australia. For some time now, the Society has been liaising with the Department of Lands (WA) on the roll over of approximately 507 pastoral leases, primarily in the Rangelands, which are required to be rolled over by June 2015. These pastoral leases were created almost a century ago and are now severely outdated and in need of urgent renewal. The leases are currently restricted to the running of agricultural practices only – such as cattle or sheep. This means that farmers are prevented from destocking or fencing off area(s) to reduce erosion, salinity or improve ecological linkages. Other potential activities that could be undertaken through diverse lease arrangements include tourism (as a result of conserving remnant native vegetation) and carbon farming.

To date, the State Government has shown no indication of changing the conditions or incentives of leases to be rolled over. Diversifying pastoral leases to include conservation activities, would allow the Program to have greater influence in the Rangelands. Although the diversification of pastoral leases is outside the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth government can help achieve this by keeping up pressure on State Government to diversify lease activities.

2. In regards to the pressures facing biodiversity of south west Western Australia, better allocation of Program funding and prioritisation towards conservation initiatives in the south west, such as control of significant weeds, feral animals and Dieback could halt the decline in biodiversity. Given that the south west of Western Australia is predicted to suffer most from climate change, it makes sense that funding initiatives of the Program should be prioritised and directed towards this area.

3. It is also recommended that funding be allocated to States based on each State's land mass and biodiversity. Western Australia has a significantly greater land mass and biodiversity than other states and it is only right that all areas of State receive access to funding. Implementation of Program activities across a greater scale improves the effectiveness of control programs for significant weeds, Dieback and feral animals.
4. The delivery of environmental outcomes across Australia should be simplified and streamlined by removing funding for programs that provide similar services to Landcare such as the Green Army and the 20 Million Trees Program. Keeping funding of environmental activities within Landcare will reduce administrative costs associated with running other similar programs. These additional cost savings can then be passed on to the delivery of environmental activities through Landcare.

The Society trusts that the recommendations made will be considered. Should you wish to discuss these recommendations with the Society please contact Brian Moyle.

Yours sincerely

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