

Submission to the Senate Inquiry:

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

Geographic Catchment Council (GeoCatch)

07/08/2014



**GeoCatch**  
The Environment - in Our Hands

## Terms of Reference

### **(a) The establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;**

NHT provided significant funding to community, regional and state and national levels of NRM delivery. In WA, the bilateral agreement between the state and federal governments maximised the efficiency of the investment efforts and cooperation, leading to on-ground outcomes and a supported NRM community.

The regional delivery model used under NHT allowed a flexible approach to local delivery. For the South West region (South West Catchments Council and associated sub regions), a model of 'subsidiarity' was used, where NRM was delivered at the lowest level possible for effective outcomes. The result was a 'ground up' approach, with an engaged, active and vibrant local NRM community.

### **(b) The establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program;**

GeoCatch believe that Caring for Our Country (CFOC) has had both positive and negative impacts on NRM. In 2011, GeoCatch received \$1.5 million over two years through the CFOC competitive bids to implement the water quality improvement plan for the Vasse Wonnerup wetlands and Geographe Bay. The funding allowed GeoCatch to make real progress in reducing nutrients leaving the rural and urban catchments. The excellent results from the funding showed the significant progress a local/sub-regional group can achieve to address priority management issues with adequate resourcing.

While GeoCatch was able to make significant progress with CFOC funding, the short funding timeframes (1-3 years) have created challenges where NRM management issues are complex and require long term solutions (10-20 years). This is especially important where a plan (such as a water quality improvement plan) has been developed to address an NRM issue. Short funding timeframes and 'one-off' grants, limit the ability to measure and monitor changes in resource condition or behaviour change.

GeoCatch also received small grant funding through CFOC community action grants, and through devolved grants from our regional group. These grants primarily funded on-ground activities, with coordination and administration costs capped at an unsustainable level. Funding for project coordination has also been capped at a state level in WA, which has resulted in GeoCatch using finite internal funds to deliver projects using qualified NRM professionals. Although a focus on on-ground delivery is justified, effective on-ground outcomes require good governance, technical expertise and professional delivery. In general, community NRM groups rely on state and federal funding to not only achieve on ground outcomes, but to do so using professional staff following best practice procedures. Unfortunately the same outcomes are unlikely to be achieved using volunteers.

### **(c) The outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for Our Country;**

No comment.

### **(d) The implications of the 2014-15 Budget for land care programs, in particular, on contracts, scope, structure, outcomes of programs and long-term impact on natural resource management;**

To date, communication to the community about the proposed National Landcare Program has been minimal. A lack of insight into the proposed program makes planning for NRM delivery and maintaining organisational capacity difficult.

The message that has been relayed, is that funding will be significantly reduced, both to regional NRM groups and to the wider NRM community with little, if any competitive funding.

The combined impact of the loss of any significant funding streams from state and national levels will result either the downsizing or loss of many community NRM organisations in WA.

In light of this uncertainty, we are seeing a loss of intellectual property and skills as staff leave the system and seek job certainty elsewhere.

**(e) The Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs;**

While GeoCatch have initially been supportive of a proposed program model of "local, simple and long-term", the unfolding reality appears to be that no significant funding will reach the local NRM level.

**(f) Analysis of national, state and regional funding priorities for land care programs;**

In recent years under Caring for Our Country, national, state and regional NRM priorities have been set in isolation of one another. Planning, cooperation and collaboration will be essential for effective delivery of landcare/NRM.

A continued narrowing of funding opportunities at all levels, and subsequent increases in competitiveness to access funding has caused significant loss of capacity and reduced NRM outcomes in WA. Previously a diverse range of funding opportunities was available through regional, state and national avenues. Current grant opportunities in WA are small and highly oversubscribed.

GeoCatch's preference is that priorities are set at a regional level based on regional NRM assets. This is not to say that regional and local NRM activities cannot contribute to iconic national priorities (since these are often the same as local priorities), however key local issues have sometimes been overlooked by taking a national approach.

Failing to fund local priorities means that momentum and progress gained in previous years of investment may be lost, rendering previous investment ineffective.

**(g) How the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture have, and can, work together to deliver a seamless land care program;**

GeoCatch's has dealt with the various evolving federal departments throughout our 15 years of project delivery and have been satisfied with the handling of project management. Any problems associated with the two departments working cooperatively have not been felt at our level.

**(h) The role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and**

GeoCatch is supportive of base level funding for regional NRM organisations, however greater flexibility in methods of regional project delivery is needed. For example the ability to subcontract to the most effective and experienced delivery organisation is preferred to creating a duplicate layer of delivery, as has been the case under Caring for Our Country.

GeoCatch believe that regional NRM bodies are well placed to develop and coordinate regional NRM priorities and planning, and to act as the intermediary between grass-roots landcare and the federal government. Sub-regional or local groups have existing and enduring community links and local knowledge making them best placed to deliver on ground outcomes.

Shaping funding arrangements to the existing regional model of delivery is preferred, since further or continual changes to the delivery framework (structure of groups) will undermine the ability for future funding to translate into effective delivery for some years, until organisational capabilities are rebuilt.

GeoCatch does not consider that the resurrection of a more traditional Landcare delivery model is feasible (for example, our region has limited remaining operational LCDs) but more might be achieved through providing long term funding within the existing structure and refocussing existing groups towards desired NRM principles.



**(i) Any other related matters.**

Limited funding at both a state and federal level has led to a gap which in the case of GeoCatch will see it probably being reduced to a committee only without on-ground works in early 2015.

GeoCatch would like to reiterate the following requirements which we believe are essential for successful NRM outcomes:

1. Longer term funding timeframes (greater than five years)
2. Inclusion of local and regional priorities in NRM planning
3. Cooperation between state and federal government NRM planning and investment
4. Funding for good governance, project delivery and administration. Achieving long term NRM outcomes requires science, expertise and professional delivery.
5. Use of the subsidiarity principle for NRM project delivery. Delivering NRM at the lowest possible level to create real change.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.