

Connecting Country Submission to Senate Inquiry into the history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Programme

Preface

We appreciate the opportunity to be able to contribute to this inquiry into the history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Programme (NLP).

Connecting Country is a community operated organization working across the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds in central Victoria. Connecting Country works with a wide range of land managers to improve knowledge of natural resource management and to bring skills and funds to local communities for landscape improvement.

Connecting Country is a community based landscape restoration initiative rather than a Landcare Network. Our membership, including our Committee of Management, are deeply involved in the Landcare Community. We host a Landcare Facilitator for our region in conjunction with a range of other programmes.

Our district has a large and long-standing Landcare community with 30 groups in the area. Some were formed within the first few years of the Landcare movement and others quite recently. The groups in this area undertake a wide variety of projects on private and public land which include education and awareness raising, weed and pest management land, planting of wildlife corridors and shelter belts, developing sustainable soils, landscape amenity improvements, waterway management and endangered species protection amongst others.

‘Support for Landcare’ has recently been identified as one of Connecting Country’s four key activities in our Strategic Plan 2014 – 2024.

This submission is focused on the future of Landcare in our region. As such we will not attempt to address items a, b) or c) of the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference directly.

However it is worth noting that the experience of Connecting Country members and staff with past national Landcare programmes, including Caring for Country, Biodiversity Fund, and the National Heritage Trust, has helped to inform our submission.

Summary

1. Landcare Groups

- There should not be any overall reduction in funding available to Landcare groups.
- Investing in Landcare offers excellent value for money in improving Australia’s Natural Resource Management (NRM) on the ground.



- Landcare groups can identify local priorities and engage their community in ways that result in multiple benefits – better outcomes on the ground, a stronger, healthier community and improved skills and knowledge.

2. Landcare Networks

- Landcare networks are embedded in the community and have the capacity to create and implement high quality 'landscape-scale' projects.
- Landcare networks link groups together on important issues and help link the Landcare community with NRM bodies, local government and government agencies.
- Landcare networks require different grants to individual groups. Their projects are typically larger and can be very sophisticated.

3. Professional Support

- Professional support for Landcare groups is necessary to ensure that Landcare projects are well-planned, aligned with broader NRM strategies and reported on properly.
- The Victorian Government's Local Landcare Facilitator initiative is a good model for professional Landcare support at a local level.

4. Partnering with Natural Resource Management Bodies

- We are supportive of the National Landcare Programme being administered through regional NRM bodies.
- A genuine and fair partnership between Landcare groups, Landcare networks and regional NRM bodies will result in a better, easier-to-manage programme.
- Landcare group projects that do not fall within the priority zones of the Regional Catchment Management Strategy should still be supported by CMAs and the government if they meet the broader objectives of the strategy.

5. Recording Landcare Achievements.

- Information on what is achieved by Landcare groups and networks as part of the National Landcare Program should be properly collected and distributed by the Regional administrator (e.g. a CMA).
- An efficient system for reporting should be implemented from the beginning of the programme. This will be greatly assisted by a partnership approach.



Landcare Groups

We support the government's statement that funding to individual Landcare groups is important and needs to be "simple, local and long-term". We also support the government's commitment to funding local projects that address local priorities.

Without access to funding, Landcare groups will not be able to continue improving land management practices and looking after the natural environment as they do now.

Investment in Landcare groups and their projects improves NRM in the group's area, and also builds community interest in better practices and improves the skills and knowledge of the community.

One of the great strengths of Landcare groups is their ability to get work done on the ground more efficiently, and with more community buy-in, than a government agency or NRM Body such as a Catchment Management Authority (CMA) could achieve. It has been well documented that Landcare groups deliver excellent value – often \$4 to \$5 of value is obtained for every \$1 invested by government in a Landcare project.

An example in our region is Guildford Upper Loddon Landcare group. The group believes that it costs them at least three times less to put a plant in the ground than a government agency. The Landcare group can do this because of its links to the community and local businesses, and the time spent by volunteers in managing the projects.

Landcare group members witness changes to their local area over a long period of time and recognise the need for ongoing maintenance of projects. They want to keep dealing with an issue until it is sorted. Funding that can be implemented over a long period (i.e. more than year) helps them to do this. It would also be helpful if groups didn't have to come up with a 'new project' for each grant, but could apply for funding to continue the maintenance of existing projects until they are properly finished.

Landcare Networks

There are currently 10 Landcare networks in the North Central Catchment region with well over half of the 162 groups in the region part of a network. These networks address NRM problems at a district level. This is an important approach to many issues such as new and emerging weeds, habitat fragmentation, waterway health and pest animals. These issues extend across multiple Landcare group boundaries and can be better addressed through a network.

There are a number of recent examples in our region where Connecting Country and other networks have directly assisted groups to work collaboratively. Two examples:

Clean-up Barkers Creek Project – A project that was funded through the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce and Victorian Gorse Taskforce, and implemented as a collaboration between Harcourt Valley Landcare Group, North Harcourt Sedgwick Landcare Group and Barkers Creek Landcare & Wildlife group with support from Connecting Country. Through the project, 54 landholders



adjacent to the creek committed to implementing voluntary property management plans to control Blackberry, Gorse and other woody weeds on their properties.

Needle Grass: A Community Response – This project was a collaboration between Malmsbury District Landcare Group, Langley Landcare Group, Upper Campaspe Landcare Network, Connecting Country, Mount Alexander Shire Council and Macedon Ranges Shire Council. It involved volunteer mapping of a weed (Texas Needle-grass) which seriously threatens agricultural and public land in the district, yet was not a priority for government agencies. The project was managed by Landcare group volunteers, but Local Landcare Facilitators from the two networks involved developed the partnerships between the Landcare groups and the councils, as well as providing administrative assistance to the project.

As well as assisting groups with their projects, some networks have initiated their own projects. These projects are often developed by highly qualified and experienced local people on a voluntary basis and can be exceptionally rigorous and well planned.

Networks such as Connecting Country draw on community knowledge and expertise to develop sophisticated projects that include scientific monitoring and a long-term vision. In the last 6 years Connecting Country has undertaken two large, multi-year projects aimed at improving NRM at a district or 'landscape level'. These have been funded by both the state and the federal government. A number of smaller project have also been undertaken in conjunction with local Landcare groups.

Yellow Box Woodland Project (2009-2013) – Connecting Country's Yellow Box Woodland project provided excellent value for money and huge on-ground impact. Connecting Country involved all local Landcare groups and over 95 landholders to protect and enhance more than 6000 ha of woodland habitat. It also included a hugely popular community education programme with over 40 educational events and more than 800 participants. A long term biodiversity monitoring plan for the Mount Alexander Region for threatened marsupials (Brush-tailed Phascogale) and woodland birds was also initiated, and which is intended to continue for years to come.

Local Landcare groups were supported through the development of nine community action plans. Many of the groups have since obtained further funding to implement parts or all of these plans.

The project was done in conjunction with the North Central Catchment Management Authority, and was funded through the Federal Government's Caring for our Country initiative and Victorian Government's Natural Resources Investment Programme.

Connecting Landscapes in the Mount Alexander Region (2012 – 2017) - The Connecting Landscapes in the Mount Alexander Region project is funded by the Australian Government and is currently on target to revegetate 400 hectares of greenfield sites, protect and restore 1200 hectares of remnant vegetation and to treat pests and weeds across this 1600 hectares of land. In the course of these activities, we will employ up to 25 people, train them and return them to the work force. We will also run at least 25 community education events and monitor the whole programme via 400 nestboxes, vegetation transects, bird surveys and a MERI plan (Monitoring, Evaluation Reporting & Improvement).



While local Landcare groups are important within the National Landcare Programme, Landcare Networks are also important, particularly for larger scale and longer term projects. The importance of Landcare Networks should be recognized in the Landcare Programme and supported with funding.

Landcare networks are embedded in the community. This makes them more effective than government agencies in engaging the community in NRM projects and fostering long-term commitment to improved practices. Their existence in the community creates a stronger Landcare community and their projects can be sophisticated, strategic and well planned.

Professional Support

In our experience, groups struggle with the administration and 'desk work' that is necessary to ensure Landcare projects are well-planned, aligned with broader NRM strategies and reported on properly. This work is important and needs to be undertaken with support from paid Landcare staff who are trained to have the skills and knowledge necessary for this work.

The Victorian government currently funds 68 Local Landcare Facilitators across the state. Connecting Country employs a Landcare Facilitator on a 0.6FTE basis and this has been enormously positive for Landcare in the district.

Our Local Landcare Facilitator assists groups with funding applications, planning and training. They organise a bi-annual 'Landcare Link-up' event for groups across the Mount Alexander Shire, send out a monthly newsletter and promote Landcare across the Shire. The Landcare Facilitator has worked closely with the North Central CMA's Regional Landcare Facilitator and Regional Landcare Coordinator, especially in assisting with communication between groups and the CMA. The facilitator is also an important link between groups and the local council, which does not employ anybody in a Landcare support role. They also help to link groups in with the landscape-scale projects and priorities that Connecting Country delivers.

The structure of Victoria's Local Landcare Facilitator Initiative is highly effective, with facilitators being employed mostly by Landcare groups and networks, and other community-based natural resource management groups. Employing facilitators within community groups is efficient in terms of government spending and effective in terms of the facilitator's ability to work with the community. It creates links between Landcare group members, Catchment Management Authorities and government.

Whether through the National Landcare Programme or State Government (or both), we believe that community-based Landcare staff are an important investment into the future of Landcare.



Partnering with Natural Resource Management Bodies

We support the use of Natural Resource Management Bodies (in our case the North Central Catchment Management Authority) in the delivery of the NLP.

Connecting Country has worked closely with, and collaborated with, the North Central CMA in the past. While we do not currently have a joint project with them, we continue to liaise regularly, and are involved in each other's activities in other ways.

The best value programme, and one that delivers the on the promise of being 'simple, local and long-term' will be a programme that is developed as a genuine and fair partnership between community Landcare and the various levels of government and government departments (including CMAs). If this is not done it will be difficult to run a programme that delivers the best value on the ground

To ensure Landcare projects are being undertaken in a strategic manner, projects should be aligned with the objectives of the relevant Regional Catchment Management Strategy. This would then complement the larger projects identified by the CMAs as their priority and provide the local communities with the opportunities to work on their own local priorities. These projects are often smaller in size, but are part of a long term strategy for an area.

Over the last 4 years our NRM body, the North Central CMA, has recognised the challenges associated with allocating Landcare funding to geographic priority zones and also having funding which is available to all groups in the catchment. As a response to this challenge, their allocation of Victorian Landcare Grants has focused on group health and group function, as well as projects involving on-ground works. Demonstrated alignment to the North Central Regional Catchment Strategy has been part of the grant application process for Landcare groups, but the funding has not been tied to only supporting groups and projects within geographical catchment priorities. We believe that the North Central CMA's Victorian Landcare Grant programme is a good model for allocating funding to individual groups at a regional level.

Likewise, funding should not be reliant on a group being part of a network, as there are many groups that are not part of a Landcare network.

In our district (the Mount Alexander Shire and immediate surrounds) it is important that Landcare funding is available to groups working across land tenures. The district includes groups that are undertaking sustainable farming projects on private land as well as many groups who work on public and private land for environmental outcomes.

The ability of Landcare to bring together different parts of the community to improve NRM across tenure is one of its strengths and needs to be maintained by funding for work across tenure.



Recording Landcare Achievements

Information on what is achieved by Landcare groups and networks as part of the National Landcare Program should be properly collected and distributed by the Regional administrator (e.g. a CMA).

An efficient system for reporting should be implemented from the beginning of the programme. This will be greatly assisted by adopting a partnership approach.

The Landcare movement needs to be supported by qualified and professional people in government departments who can provide the necessary information at all levels of project management, natural resource management, implementation and monitoring.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss any aspect of this submission further.

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