

30<sup>th</sup> July 99

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Ian Dundas  
Secretary  
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ian

**Re: Submission to inquiry into catchment management**

The Border Rivers Catchment Management Association (BRCMA) would like to submit information with regards to each of the dot points noted in the terms of reference, but before doing this the Association would like to raise a point of concern. In the second paragraph of the terms of reference it identifies the trigger to this review was based on water quality and river health. While this is an important part of catchment management it is not the only pertinent issue and definitely not the sole reason for the formation of this committee.

Hydrological catchments, while having direct linkages to the rivers, have large proportions of individuals who live well clear of any river system. The rivers are merely a result of the catchment. In promoting catchment management this association has attempted to focus on whole of catchment health and included issues regarding land and vegetation management as well as river management. In this way improvements in water quality and river health are just one result of improved catchment management rather than the trigger for catchment management.

• **The development of catchment management in Australia**

The BRCMA formed in Queensland in 1991 as Queensland's entry requirement to the Murray Darling Basin. This committee developed as one of the four catchment management committees in the Queensland Murray Darling Basin and as such only included the Queensland side of the Border Rivers catchment. Very early in the process this was seen as an oversight and efforts to form a whole of catchment committee covering NSW and QLD were instigated. Discussions between community members from BRCMA and the North West Catchment Management Committee (NWCMA) continued in a stop start manner as their efforts were thwarted by changes of government.

The current situation with the cross border initiative is very positive. An interim committee (the Border Rivers Interim Catchment Committee, BRICC) has been established. BRICC will also be making a submission to this inquiry and I direct you to that submission for further information.

The BRCMA has developed greatly to establish a very practical community/government partnership. The completion of the strategic plan "Our plan for the Border Rivers Catchment" has provided an important framework for the Department of Natural Resources to align their business plan. This has been a major achievement for the committee and the ongoing evolution of this plan is the cornerstone of catchment management in this region

- **The value of a catchment approach to the management of the environment**

The BRCMA understand that a hydrological catchment is not the only geographical framework to manage the environment, but clearly it is the most practical. Water is a powerful medium that has the capacity to shape our environment. It is a vital element to all life, being one of the key determining factors to the biogeographical range of species and communities. It is also a very efficient transporter of material both in soluble and suspended form. The catchment boundary provides a partial natural barrier and an ideal framework for management of natural resources and the environment.

- **Best practice methods for preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation in catchments, and achieving environmental sustainability**

The important point arising from this dot point is that best practice methods are evolutionary in their own right. What was once deemed to be best practice has, with improved understanding, changed dramatically in recent times. This evolution must continue if environmental sustainability is to be achieved. The BRCMA has highlighted within its strategic plan the need for ongoing research to provide this improved understanding and leaves the documentation of information on actual methodology to those research scientists that are best placed to do it.

The BRCMA would also like to note that environmental sustainability will not be achieved without economic and social sustainability. It is apparent that when landholders are financially strained and communities are under pressure then the environmental stresses are greatest. Equally, when the community is thriving both economically and socially then more interest and awareness is placed on ecological management.

It therefore becomes clear that best practice must focus not only on techniques that prevent, halt and reverse environmental degradation but also best practice for improving our ability to undertake this work through economic and social management.

- **The role of different levels of government, the private sector and the community in the management of catchment areas**

The BRCMA is comprised of representatives from local government, state agencies, industry groups, interest groups and the community. The balance of membership of this committee ensures that it is a community organisation with no single powerbase directing views or issues. This committee views its ability to have discussions with the government agencies from the beginning on where resources are allocated and to have important input into the agencies yearly business plans as a key role. This allows the committee to efficiently and effectively interface, coordinate and provide for strategic planning of natural resource management.

It is the role of the duly elected governments, at all levels, to listen to the advice of this committee and make appropriate decisions. The government has the responsibility to implement and manage the outcomes from those decisions; it is not the responsibility of a catchment committee.

The private sector is an important component of catchment management. Clearly they are inextricably linked to natural resources, as is any other enterprise within the catchment. They also have a fundamental ability to adopt the principles and ethics of catchment management in the way they run their business. The private sector is a large part of the economic sustainability pillar of catchment management and therefore has a role to play in the social and environmental pillars as a balance, and catchment management in general. It is important that the private sector is a partner in this approach and that the financial benefits that can be made available through them to complete important onground actions do not impinge on the independent nature of the committee.

It therefore becomes evident that for effective catchment management the government must provide some financial security for these organisations to operate. It is a necessity that finances be made available for the operating of the committees and for catchment coordinators to support these volunteer organisations. Catchment coordinators, administratively employed by government agencies, provide a vital service acting as an interface for the effective community/government partnership. It is important to note that it is not feasible to access this financial security in the form of a levy on ratepayers. This committee operates over a large geographic area with a small population density. Any form of levy on ratepayers to fund catchment management is not economically viable. Additionally, catchment management is not a revenue raising body for natural resource management.

- **Planning, resourcing, implementation, coordination, and cooperation in catchment management**

As outlined in the previous dot point, the role of a catchment management association is not to resource or implement catchment management. This is the responsibility of government. Planning, coordination and cooperation are the key words at the catchment management level. Implementation is best achieved through local governments, Landcare groups and other subcatchment groups planning onground activities.

Resourcing for catchment management can occur at two levels. The operational funding for the committee and supporting coordinator should be the responsibility of government. This will ensure an independent committee creating an effective community government partnership. A second level of funding that may occur is through private sector contributions and other government project initiatives. This can be accessed by groups for undertaking projects that link with priority issues as determined by catchment management.

- **Mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on catchment management programs, including the use of these reports for state of the environment reporting, and opportunities for review and improvement**

Apart from representation to the regional assessment panel (RAP) for NHT projects the BRCMA has not taken an active role in this area. While it feels that this important work to be undertaken it is the view of this committee that it is not the role of a catchment management association. This work should be carried out by a regional body, on which representatives from this committee may sit or provide advice to. This body should be independent of the catchment management programs, which is why the BRCMA do not see this as their role. The BRCMA also only operate across half a catchment (QLD Border Rivers) and it is therefore difficult to do this work effectively. This issue is currently being addressed by the BRCMA

and any independent review body should also consider the implications of state borders and catchment boundaries.

An independent review body would be important to further the community consultation process as it would help to ensure the ongoing review and improvement of catchment management associations and their catchment strategic plans. This is vital for progression of successful catchment management and community/government partnership.

If an independent regional body does undertake to monitor, evaluate and report on catchment management programs then it would be appropriate to use this information as support for any state of the environment reporting. Equally, if all environmental/natural resource programs are considered as catchment management programs then these reports could constitute the entire report. However, there is currently a large amount of research (university research, industry monitoring, etc) that is not considered catchment management (but should be) that provides valuable information and this information should also be reviewed for state of the environment reporting.