



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE
INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT
MANAGEMENT**

PREAMBLE

The Shire of Gingin is a rural Municipality situated on the northern fringe of the Perth Metropolitan Area, and encompassing an area of some 3 325km². The Shire is traversed by two principal waterways, namely:

- a. The Moore River, which originates in the inland “Wheatbelt” and runs through the Shire from north-east to south-west, emptying into the Indian Ocean at Guilderton; and
- b. The Gingin Brook, the headwaters of which rise to the surface just north of the Gingin townsite, and which runs west to join the Moore River.

Both waterways have been central to the development of the Gingin district since 1830, largely determining early settlement patterns in rural areas and shaping the physical appearance of the Gingin and Guilderton townsites. Indeed, it would be accurate to state that an intrinsic and intimate relationship with the River and Brook forms a substantial basis for community identity throughout a large portion of the Shire.

In common with many other waterways throughout Western Australia, both the Moore River and the Gingin Brook are being detrimentally impacted upon by human activity within their individual catchment areas, and issues such as increased nutrient levels from fertiliser run-off, salinity, siltation as a result of erosion from cleared land, the spread of introduced plant species throughout native riparian vegetation and, particularly in the case of the Moore River, construction of flood mitigation works by private landowners are of great concern to Council.

In recognition of the need to address these issues, in 1995 the Shire of Gingin was instrumental in establishing the Moore Catchment Group, a community-based body consisting of representatives from eight Local Governments and Land Conservation District Committees within the Moore River Catchment Area. Since that time, the Group has been working with the Water and Rivers Commission of Western Australia to undertake a study of catchment concerns within the greater Moore River Basin area, and to generate an increased awareness of the impact that human endeavours are having on the health of the River itself.

CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT INQUIRY TERMS OF REFERENCE

Council offers the following comments in relation to Terms of Reference Two to Five, inclusive.

2. The Value Of A Catchment Approach To The Management Of The Environment

The philosophy of catchment management based on integration of best practice in agriculture with environmental/habitat protection is the way forward. Mechanisms for land improvement on-ground need to be integrated – no one solution can be expected to be endorsed. Equally, systems encouraging land improvement need to be integrated.

3. Best Practice Methods Of Preventing, Halting And Reversing Environmental Degradation In Catchments, And Achieving Environmental Sustainability

Adequate advice comes through from Government officers to those people who are interested; however, reaching those who remain uncommitted is difficult.

The level of commitment to the implementation of catchment management initiatives is variable amongst landowners, and there are some who appear unconvinced as to the need to address catchment management matters on their properties. It is these people who need to be targeted through a process of education and consultation if improved catchment management practices are to have any meaningful effect on the environment.

Catchment management is inextricably linked to landcare, for which there has been increasing community impetus in recent years. Land improvement practices have historically focussed on the application of products to improve crop or pasture yields. Whilst yields remain important, there appears to be increasing recognition of the need to ensure the long-term viability of land in an environmental sense. Again, certain entrenched farming philosophies remain amongst a number of landowners and education and consultation must remain an important focus if reform is to result.

4. The Role Of Different Levels Of Government, The Private Sector And The Community In The Management Of Catchment Areas

Co-ordination between State Government agencies has long been perceived as a problem in the implementation of improved environmental practices.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE – INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

Catchment management is a mechanism for such co-ordination in the area of land management, and must be facilitated in an integrated manner if broad-based, positive results are to accrue. Agriculture Western Australia and the Water and Rivers Commission have, and accept, responsibility for catchment management in partnership with the community. These two Government agencies appear to be contemplating a joint arrangement based on agreement as to which will be the lead agency for particular catchments. It appears that Agriculture Western Australia will be the lead agency for dry catchments, with the Water and Rivers Commission assuming lead agency responsibility for wet catchments. Below the high level structural arrangements many Government staff are employed utilising grant moneys, largely through successful NHT applications. This is particularly so for the Water and Rivers Commission.

Given that NHT funding is subject to an annual application process, the ability of the NHT programme to deal with long-term catchment management issues is limited. Accordingly, integrated catchment management is to some extent in “limbo” and, if tangible results are to be achieved, direct Government funding for co-ordination and promotion is of paramount importance.

Whilst both the Federal and State Governments seemingly embrace the principals of catchment management, the apparent lack of absolute Government commitment to improved catchment management practices sends mixed messages to the community.

Catchment management needs to be supported by a clear commitment from Government. Without this, the limitations of strategies based solely on consultation and education as a mechanism for change become increasingly apparent.

Whilst Council does not consider increased regulation in dealing with catchment management and associated matters as desirable, it would be fully supportive of a Government-generated approach which in the first instance focuses on community education and consultation, and increases the incentives for change.

5. Planning, Resourcing, Implementation, Co-ordination And Co-operation In Catchment Management

The mechanisms of planning, co-ordination and co-operation are soundly based, and provide the system with an appropriate “carrot”. The mechanisms of resourcing and implementation, however, are insufficiently addressed.

Any efficient and effective system of people management, or of encouraging people to change their practices, needs both a carrot and a stick. Whilst fully acknowledging that it may well be desirable that the stick is rarely or never used, it nevertheless needs to exist and does not exist currently.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE – INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

At this point in time, many willing people are putting in a great deal of effort with little observable result, and certainly with little measurable impact on habitat or improvement of agricultural output. As a result, old enthusiasm is hard to maintain, and new enthusiasm hard to generate. This situation is partly due to the difficulties encountered merely in completing the application form required for NHT funding, and partly to the little distance any resulting funds go in making change “on the ground”.

Arguments as to why broad acre farmers are not welcoming catchment management with open arms include:

- **Broad Concerns**

Whilst a completely voluntary approach to landcare may be ideal and politically realistic in the short-term, its limitations are sufficient to form a major argument for change to catchment management systems.

Farming is basically unregulated, and whilst there is strong farming interest in remaining unregulated, there is even stronger evidence from most sectors of business and industry that self-regulation on its own does not produce change. Council reiterates its belief in the education and consultation approach. Notwithstanding, Council recognises that there will be increasing pressure brought to bear on traditional farming practices given changing community attitudes to environmental matters, which may result in some form of legislative control being introduced by Government.

Whilst some agricultural sectors are either experiencing or anticipating market pressures to change land practices (for example, importers’ preference for plantation timber, organically grown produce and natural, not genetically-modified produce), it is difficult to envisage circumstances in which similar pressure may arise for broad acre farming.

- **NHT Funding Concerns**

The contribution by the farming community to the cost of change in land practices is still too high in relation to other farm expenses.

The land practices that NHT will fund may not be mechanisms that farmers believe will either be appropriate or effect the desired changes, or the mechanisms may be perceived as bringing undesirable side effects. For example, fencing streamlines is taken to mean that there will be a fire management issue for the farmer to deal with in a more labour intensive manner than previously.

NHT funding applications are the result of local enthusiasm, and are a compilation of voluntary effort. Whilst not seeking to undermine the efforts of all concerned, a system based on purely voluntary effort is not necessarily strategic in the manner in which it addresses catchment problems.

- **Proposed Changes**

At the broadest level, broad-acre farming can be considered as an output system. Traditional regulation involved the manner in which output was handled, such as quotas.

Whilst there have been some changes here, there has been no demonstrable and systematic increase in consideration for input. A change in focus to an input system would be desirable, and may be assisted by incentives to:

- a. Contribute to land and environment research;
- b. Invest in land improvement rather than machinery;
- c. Protect remnant vegetation, streamlines, etc.

An integrated system of incentives could be set up such that Local Government and land management agencies such as Agriculture Western Australia and Water and Rivers Commission could be funded to support the initiative (in the absence of a centralised Government agency assuming overall responsibility for catchment management matters).

The proposed input system should also, however, include a “stick” in that those landowners not providing the agreed levels of input are subject to greater regulation.