

13 August 1999

The Secretary  
House of Representatives Standing Committee  
On Environment and Heritage  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir

### **Catchment Management**

The NSW Farmers' Association would like to thank the Standing Committee for the opportunity to comment on an issue that is of great importance to our members. The Association represents over 15, 000 members in NSW, many of whom are active members in Catchment Management activities and on Catchment Management Committees.

There are several environmental issues that will present major challenges to Agriculture in New South Wales and Australia in the future. The Association is aware that in order to address many of these issues, a response simply must be managed on a catchment scale. Catchment Management provides an avenue to coordinate such a response. Indeed Catchment Management has been responsible for much environmental remediation work in the past, however there are grave concerns that the movement is losing its potency to deal with ongoing resource management issues. A major overhaul is needed and the Association therefore welcomes the Standing Committee's inquiry.

The Association would like to submit the attached comments for your consideration. Should you require any clarification or further information from the Association, please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 9251 1700.

Yours sincerely

Simon Carson  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR  
CONSERVATION AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

## **House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage**

### **Inquiry into Catchment Management**

#### **Introduction**

The NSW Farmers' Association has historically supported Catchment Management as an effective way of addressing environmental management as it operates on a scale that enables a coordinated approach. It is widely accepted that the natural resources that farmers depend upon to maintain their income must be managed carefully. Many complex issues such as salinity require management to be coordinated at a catchment scale. Individual efforts to address such issues will have little impact unless they are part of an overall coordinated strategy that utilises the full and enthusiastic cooperation of all landholders and land users.

There have been certain developments in the structure, administration and actions of Catchment Management Committees in NSW that have resulted in decreased involvement of the farming community and consequently the effectiveness of the movement as a whole. Farmers manage over 80% of the land within NSW catchments, and as a result their support is vital to the success of any resource management regime.

#### **Development of Catchment Management in Australia**

Catchment Management has largely been supported by farmers since its inception however that support has decreased in recent times. The perception exists that Catchment Management is being dominated by urban interests and as a result has lost its relevance to broad acre farming. Farmers not only feel poorly represented on Committees, the level of Government involvement alienates them. Within the farming community there is a level of mistrust of any Government initiative and the Catchment Management movement in NSW is very closely aligned with the Department of Land and Water Conservation. The issue will be raised again the section of this submission entitled 'The Role of the Community, Private Sector and Government'.

#### **Value of Catchment Management to the Environment**

It has already been mentioned that Catchment Management has potential to provide significant benefits to the environment of NSW. Its effectiveness however, is currently under question in light of the plethora of Committees relating to resource management. For example the following is a list of some of the Committees that manage natural resources in the Murray Darling Basin:

- Regional Vegetation Committees
- Groundwater Management Committees
- River Management Committees
- Landcare

Bushcare  
Rivercare  
Farming For The Future  
Murray Darling Basin Commission  
Murray Darling Basin Community Advisory Council  
Great Artesian Basin Consultative Council.

These Committees deal with resource management issues in a range of capacities. Some are responsible for community coordination, some are statutory authorities and some develop policy. This complexity of Committees and functions has resulted in poorly managed natural resources.

With the large number of committees that involve community representation it is common for representatives to experience burnout as they contribute a tremendous amount of energy time and personal expense. The feeling that no real good is being achieved only worsens the situation.

Resource management and hence Catchment Management requires restructuring, as the current situation has resulted in decisions being made in an uncoordinated manner. Fragmenting management amongst too many Committees not only fails to consider the interactive nature of the environment, but also spreads limited financial resources too thinly for any of the Committees to operate to their potential. To overcome this, the number of Committees needs to be rationalised, with the remaining Committees given more power to make effective decisions that will then be implemented.

### **Best Practice**

The NSW Farmers' Association supports the use of industry developed Best Practice Guidelines for preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation. One function of a Catchment Management Committee could be to set the environmental outcomes for a catchment, and then allow industry to formulate Best Practice Guidelines that would achieve the outcomes. The Association believes that this approach, if taken, would allow sustainability within a catchment to be achieved with the full cooperation of industry.

In conjunction with industry developed Best Practice Guidelines, catchment Committees could be responsible for setting environmental aims and objectives for voluntary property agreements. Such an approach is likely to be effective if Committees are seen to be independent from Government and driven by the local community.

### **The Role of the Community, Private Sector and Government**

The NSW Farmers' Association strongly believes that Catchment Management Committees should comprise a landholder majority, and be driven by the local community. In this way the local community would feel greater ownership and would be more enthusiastic about striving to achieve Committee goals. The Committee could consult with experts for advice when there is a need, however decision-making should remain the responsibility of those people who live within the catchment and are directly affected. The size of each Committee should be determined according to what is required to adequately represent all catchment stakeholders.

Community enthusiasm can be maintained by providing appropriate recognition and reward for resource management initiatives. Farmers often report that they feel demoralised by a political system that fails to recognise their efforts at managing their environment. Ignoring

the good works that are already occurring, and continually concentrating on environmental problems only results in less enthusiasm for resolving them.

Catchment Management in NSW is now seen as an initiative of the Department of Land and Water Conservation. Farmers are unlikely to become involved in the process unless they feel that their decisions are going to be implemented. Such a strong association with a Government department removes ownership from the community and will result in Committee decisions being disrespected. The role of Government should be to provide adequate funding, the secretariat and training facilities. Representatives of Government Departments can be called upon by the Committee for advice to aid them with their decisions. To help maintain autonomy the chair of the Committee should be nominated from and elected by the Committee.

Government also has a responsibility to ensure that legislation facilitates the actions of Catchment Management Committees. Restrictive legislation will only dis-empower Catchment Management Committees and limit their effectiveness.

A trend that is growing in popularity in NSW is for the formation of sub-catchment groups that are already achieving many gains in resource management. Any future structure should recognise the contribution of these groups. Their work and efforts can be channeled into the aims and objectives of the community of the whole catchment. In the situations where sub-catchment groups have undertaken activities that have been beneficial for the community in the catchment their work should be recognised and moneys spent remunerated.

It should be noted that in NSW the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning is currently reviewing the State's planning legislation, the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (EP&A Act). It appears to the Association that many of the issues addressed by this review of Catchment Management are also being debated in the review of the EP&A Act. The Association therefore recommends that the standing Committee take into consideration the implications of the review of State legislation, particularly its implications for resource management.

### **Planning, Resourcing, Implementation, Coordination and Cooperation**

As discussed above, the fragmented nature of natural resource management has considerable implications for its effectiveness. Duplication of Committee objectives and functions increases costs that are ultimately borne by the community. If the number of Committees can be rationalized, funding can be more effectively used.

Funding of catchment Committees is an issue that needs to be addressed by the Inquiry. At present community members are often discouraged from participating in resource management Committees because of the costs incurred. Government Committees that rely on volunteers need to be adequately funded to allow all parts of the community to participate. Given that Catchment Management Committees are often run by volunteers, it is vital that they are also provided with funding to develop the skills required.

In the past it has been suggested that the structure of Catchment Management be altered to facilitate the development of Catchment Management Trusts. The Association has Stated publicly, when the idea was first floated, that it is strongly opposed to the formation of Catchment Management Trusts, as it does not believe their formation is warranted.

Currently communities voluntarily contribute in excess of 50% to the funding of resource management projects, through cash and in-kind contributions. In previous forums on this issue it has been suggested that levies be imposed on catchment communities. The

Association considers that such a levy would be a retrograde step, as it would impose further costs on those who have already contributed to resource management issues.

### **Monitoring, Evaluating and Reporting**

Monitoring of activities is vital if the effectiveness of Committees is to be evaluated. At present many Committees have no reporting mechanisms in place which makes it difficult for benchmarks to be set. Training and support are required to ensure that efficient reporting and evaluation mechanisms are implemented consistently.

The Association is of the belief that the Catchment Management movement would benefit from an effective monitoring, reporting and evaluation program. Not only would it provide the organisations with an indication of what activities should be employed, it would also provide an excellent indication of where funding has been successfully utilised and where it should be funneled in the future. All reporting should be done on a regional basis.

### **Conclusion**

To regain farmer confidence and enthusiastic involvement in the Catchment Management movement the following recommendations are submitted for the Standing Committee's consideration:

- There should be a rationalization of all resource management Committees into a simple, stronger structure that is better able to deliver sound resource management policies and then see them implemented;
- There should be a rural landholder majority on Catchment Management Committees;
- Appropriate compensation should be paid for voluntary members on the Committees. This includes expenses and sitting fees;
- Appropriate compensation should be paid for moneys spent by landholders contributing to Catchment Management activities and incentives provided to ensure ongoing involvement;
- Training for members of Committees, where appropriate should be made readily available;
- Committees should be provided with the autonomy to make decisions and follow them through, acknowledging their position and authority;
- Government involvement must be kept to a minimum, facilitating Committees actions;
- Committees should be provided with a structure for adequate monitoring, reporting and evaluation;