

Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry**Inquiry into the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities Annual Report 2011-12 and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Annual Report 2011-12****Public Hearing – Wednesday 13 February 2013****Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio****Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry portfolio****The Hon. Dan Tehan MP asked (paraphrased from the Proof Committee Hansard transcript):**

1. How many groups have we engaged under the Community Coastcare priority under Caring for our Country, and how much has been expended?
2. What are the contact details for Coastcare facilitators in Victoria for support to community groups in applying for funding?

Answer:

1. Through the Caring for our Country initiative more than 4500 community groups have been engaged to protect, restore and conserve coastal and critical aquatic habitats. Indigenous communities, Landcare and Coastcare groups, schools, local governments and volunteers have participated in on-ground actions to remove marine debris and rehabilitate waterways, wetlands and marine habitats. As at 31 January 2013 a total of \$66.2 million (GST exclusive) has been paid to support projects under the Caring for our Country Community Coastcare priority.

The Standing Committee asked (through written additional questions):

At the hearing there was discussion around the issue on monitoring and management standards for the National Reserve System. It was acknowledged that some improvements could be made. Could you please provide the Committee with:

1. An explanation of the current system of monitoring and management standards for the program; and
2. What improvements are either planned or in progress for this program?

Answer:

1. Australian Government funding to a partner for an investment in a property that is to be included in and managed as part of Australia's National Reserve System (NRS) requires that partner to monitor and manage their property to protect and conserve its biodiversity. As part of their Funding Agreement with the Australian Government, the partner is required to manage the property consistent with international conservation standards, including by preparing interim management guidelines (within three months) and then a plan of management (within two years). These timeframes provide for consultation (as needed) with neighbours, traditional owners, natural resource management professionals and others, ensuring a plan of management is agreed that, once implemented, will support and protect the property's biodiversity values. Monitoring arrangements are normally established as part of this process.
2. *Australia's Strategy for the NRS 2009-2030* (NRS Strategy), agreed by the Australian and state and territory governments in 2009, provides a national framework for improved cross-jurisdictional coordination to enhance the NRS. The NRS Strategy identifies national targets and priority actions to improve integration of the NRS in the international and national context, improve the design and selection of protected areas, accelerate the establishment of the NRS, support effective planning, management, monitoring and reporting, and strengthen partnerships and community support. The NRS Strategy complements the *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2030* and the recently released *Australia's Native Vegetation Framework (2012)*. The Australian Government is working towards aligned delivery of these strategies with the states and territories to achieve agreed national policy outcomes for biodiversity.

The Standing Committee asked (through written additional questions):

1. What practical actions have been taken by the Departments in response to the *Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*? Please place these in the context of the four areas identified by the Review as needing further development (i.e. monitoring, evaluation, reporting and consultation).

Answer:

- 1a. The Caring for our Country Review notes that 'a monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework is vital for future resource management initiatives'. The Review also found that the design and implementation of the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement process has matured over the course of the Caring for our Country initiative, though there is room for further improvement. In response to the Review a new Monitoring, Evaluation Reporting and Improvement (MERI) Strategy is being developed and will apply to Caring for our Country and the Biodiversity Fund. The new MERI strategy continues to draw on the principles set out in the *Natural Resource Management MERI Framework (2009)*, while aiming to provide a significantly streamlined, simplified, more consistent, integrated and comprehensive approach to monitoring, evaluating and reporting. Many stakeholders and particularly regional bodies have well developed MERI plans and maintaining this framework will facilitate a smooth transition to the requirements of the new program.

The Departments are working together to improve internal systems and processes to support the collection and communication of project and program data and information to underpin a commitment to better information sharing and accountability. The MERI

strategy sets out the roles and activities that will be undertaken by both the Australian Government and those receiving funds to implement Caring for our Country projects, and provides important information to guide MERI projects at all scales.

- 1b. Stakeholder feedback during the Caring for our Country Review suggested that more consultation should accompany the setting of outcomes and targets, reflecting a combination of scientific, community and regional experiences. In response to the Review, program design for the next phase of Caring for our Country (from 2013-14 to 2017-18) was informed by an extensive public consultation process on the design of the program conducted between June and August 2012. Stakeholders were asked to provide comment on a range of documents including *Caring for our Country: An outline for the future 2013-18* and discussion papers on the Sustainable Agriculture stream and Sustainable Environment stream. Consultation was undertaken in a variety of ways, including online discussions, videos, and ministerial roundtables hosted by Minister Ludwig and Minister Burke, written submissions and quick polls. One hundred and thirty eight written submissions were made on *Caring for our Country: An outline for the future 2013–2018* and on the discussion papers provided.

Draft five-year outcome statements for the Sustainable Agriculture stream were provided to stakeholders and ministerial roundtable meeting participants for comment during the consultation process. Feedback received indicated broad support for soil condition outcomes and for the proposed strategic investments in industry partnerships, innovation and community capacity building. Final comments on the draft outcome statements were sought from the roundtable attendees and members of the Resource Management Committee of the Primary Industries Standing Committee. This additional feedback enabled further refinements to be made to the outcome statements prior to seeking ministerial endorsement.

Feedback regarding the Sustainable Environment Stream received through stakeholder consultation and the ministerial roundtable was considered in the design of the next phase of Caring for our Country, 2013-2018. The design of the next phase was also informed by the findings of the Review, government priorities and the Caring for our Country 20-year outcomes.

The Australian Government will continue to consult and collaborate with local, regional and state partners; increase the use of social media and other existing channels to link projects and communicate Caring for our Country information to stakeholders; investigate ways to provide greater access to the reporting of achievements; and present examples of good projects on the Caring for our Country website (www.nrm.gov.au).