

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage

Inquiry into

Catchment Management

A submission from

North Central Catchment Management Authority, Victoria

Key Points Raised in this Submission.

The North Central Catchment Management Authority believes that:

1. the continued development of a catchment management approach to address environmental degradation is essential.
2. catchment management needs to be led by a peak body that is a partnership between the community and government
3. the catchment management approach is successful because it involves a process of raising community awareness that ultimately leads to action
4. catchment management requires a partnership between all stakeholders with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, coordinated programs and agreed priorities and cost-sharing arrangements.
5. best practice methods for addressing environmental degradation can be developed when scientifically rigorous technology is combined with landholder experience.
6. the use of public funds requires that providers of catchment programs are accountable for their actions.
7. a challenge facing catchment managers is to develop catchment health indicators that are meaningful and simple to measure.

Terms of Reference

1. The development of catchment management in Australia

The North Central Region of Victoria has a long association with a catchment approach to the management of its natural resources. The region had many examples of broad-based community involvement in addressing environmental degradation long before catchment management was generally recognised and endorsed by governments as sound policy for natural resource management.

Recognition of the linkage between sustainable land, vegetation and water resource management and agricultural productivity was first demonstrated in the North Central Region (and Victoria) by the establishment of the Avon-Richardson Catchment Improvement Committee in 1980.

The North Central regional community, in partnership with State Government, enthusiastically took up the challenge of addressing salinity with the development of salinity management plans. The plans became a model for future catchment-based planning and implementation programs.

The North Central Catchment and Land Protection Board, established in 1994, was the first community-government partnership to provide regional leadership for natural resource management across the four sub-catchments of the region. The Board had an advisory role to the State Government on regional priorities for catchment management under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act* 1994. Whilst the Board had an advisory role only, its structure and role were important in establishing widespread community support for a peak body. It was also responsible for the development of the Regional Catchment Strategy which, for the first time, addressed natural resource management across the region in an integrated manner.

The Regional Catchment Strategy (Attachment 1) brought together many more detailed and localised plans such as salinity management plans, which had been developed and implemented through a strong partnership between the community and government.

The transition from an advisory Board to a Catchment Management Authority (CMA) with its additional statutory functions under the *Water Act* 1989 occurred in 1997. The Authority is responsible for waterway and floodplain management and for regional drainage. It has direct operational responsibility for these waterways business functions and collects revenue (Waterway Management Tariff) from the North Central Region community for that purpose.

2. The value of a catchment approach to the management of the environment

The North Central CMA believes that a catchment approach to environmental management can achieve a number of outcomes that would not be possible through an issue-specific approach. Key outcomes are:

- Catchment management provides a *process that begins with awareness and leads to action*.

Catchment management requires extensive community input into the development of plans and strategies. This builds community awareness and understanding of the processes that impact on the land, vegetation and water resources of a catchment. Once this understanding is achieved, i.e. *the cause and effect of their management actions*, there is a greater responsibility by land managers to manage land in a way that takes into account any potential off-site impacts, e.g. dryland salinity, nutrient run-off into waterways.

- A catchment approach ensures that impacts arising from addressing one issue are considered in the planning process. For example, floodplain management must consider not just managing surface flows to minimise flood risk to agricultural assets but the provision of floods at optimum height and frequency for wetlands and areas of environmental significance.
- A catchment approach requires a partnership between private and public land managers, government technical and advisory personnel, and agribusiness. The partnership enables roles and responsibilities to be clearly identified, programs to be delivered in a coordinated manner and, consequently, more effective use of human and financial resources.
- The partnership and consultative nature of catchment management ensures that resource management plans are highly credible and have strong commitment from the partnership. Consequently, there is a high level of accountability in the implementation phase of the plans. This accountability applies to all partners and therefore implementation occurs readily. The community-based salinity management plans (SMP) in the North Central Region provided the model for achieving coordinated action across a sub-catchment or catchment, e.g. Tragowel Plains Irrigation SMP, Avoca Dryland SMP.

3. Best practice methods of preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation in catchments, and achieving environmental sustainability

The experience in the North Central Region indicates that the development and implementation of best practice methods for addressing environmental degradation is achievable when two elements are involved:

- the methods combine scientifically-rigorous research and local community experience, and
- strategic or action plans are developed that incorporate best practice methods and also agreed priorities, identified responsibilities and cost-sharing arrangements for implementation of the methods.

This approach has been demonstrated in the North Central Region through the development and implementation of, for example, catchment-based Land and Water Management Plans, River Health Strategies, Pest Plant Action Plans and Rabbit Action Plans.

It is important to note that these plans respond to the goals, objectives and strategies of the overarching Regional Catchment Strategy, which provides the basis for future investment by government and regional communities in land and water resource management.

To achieve best practice in catchment management the North Central CMA has been charged with a statutory and community endorsed role to develop partnerships in the region. Through this partnership approach, the North Central CMA ensures the development and implementation of management plans is inclusive of all relevant stakeholders. The North Central CMA has established partnerships with key groups including:

- Department of Natural Resources and Environment
- Seven Rural and Urban Water Authorities
- 16 Local Government municipalities
- Environment Protection Authority
- 136 Landcare groups
- TAFEs and Universities

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

It is vitally important that the roles and responsibilities of those involved in catchment management are defined to avoid duplication, overlap and misunderstanding that result in inefficient use of resources.

State Government

The major roles of the State Government are to:

- Set out clearly the State natural resource management policies and its expectations in relation to policy outcomes; and to support them with necessary legislation
- Receive and, after discussion, endorse and support regional plans for natural resource management, which are submitted by CMAs.
- Respond after consultation to community views and needs.
- Provide funding and funding opportunities to ensure achievement of its aims.

Catchment Management Authorities

The North Central CMA is a board of directors representing stakeholders in natural resource management. The members are selected based on their skills. The CMA has the roles of:

- securing funding from various sources to enable the regional catchment strategy to be put into effect.
- working with all stakeholders in the region, including the providers of technical assistance, to execute the plan by engaging them to carry out the strategy.
- monitoring and evaluating progress towards achieving the strategy.
- amending the regional strategy in response to government policy changes, community demands and success and failure in its operation.
- reporting to government and the community on progress towards achieving the aims of the strategy.

The CMA is essentially seen as directing actions. From a strategic position, it uses the regional community strategy and available financial resources to achieve the goals as agreed with government and the community.

Local Government

Local government is the voice of local communities in rural and regional Victoria. Local government is encouraged to be an effective partner with the North Central CMA:

- through participation and support in various North Central CMA forums, and
- within its sphere of influence, and especially through its Corporate Plan and municipal planning schemes, to implement and support the regional strategy.

Government Agencies

The North Central CMA's senior partner is the regional arm of Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

There are many other government agencies with which the North Central CMA operates in partnership (refer #3 above).

These bodies may be characterised as the technical base for various aspects of natural resource management. The North Central CMA obtains scientific expertise for the development of on-ground works of all kinds (including private sector contracting), the provision of both strategic and specialist advice, extension and natural resource educational services.

Private Sector

Increasingly, private consultants with good scientific, advisory, educational and financial skills have established their businesses in rural and regional Victoria. This group should be one of those harnessed by CMAs.

There is an opportunity to engage the corporate private sector more than is currently being done.

Community

The community provides the foundation for natural resource management. Their understanding and support is key to the success of all programs within the North Central Region. Its members will be part of local government forums, implementation committees, landcare and bushcare groups and the VFF. Its members will participate in a variety of other natural resource forums.

The community has been, and still is, a very much under-valued contributor to the natural resource management effort in Australia. Appropriate recognition and support for the community continues to be one of the greatest challenges for future natural resource management arrangements.

5. Planning, resourcing, implementation, coordination and cooperation in catchment management

The North Central CMA has demonstrated that, by having one peak body responsible for integrating all natural resource management issues with an appropriate organisational structure, the key elements of catchment management (planning, resourcing, implementation, coordination and cooperation) can be managed effectively.

One of the strengths of the North Central CMA structure is that it links all segments involved in natural resource management; from individuals and landcare groups through to State and Federal Governments. It is believed therefore that CMAs can provide an opportunity for adding value to the Natural Heritage Trust program (NHT). By harnessing the community's goodwill and commitment to working to regionally agreed priorities, CMAs can provide a vehicle for delivering more effective use of NHT funds and consequently increased on-ground outcomes.

The development of a Regional Catchment Strategy and complementary Action Plans provides a model for integrated catchment management that involves the key stakeholders.

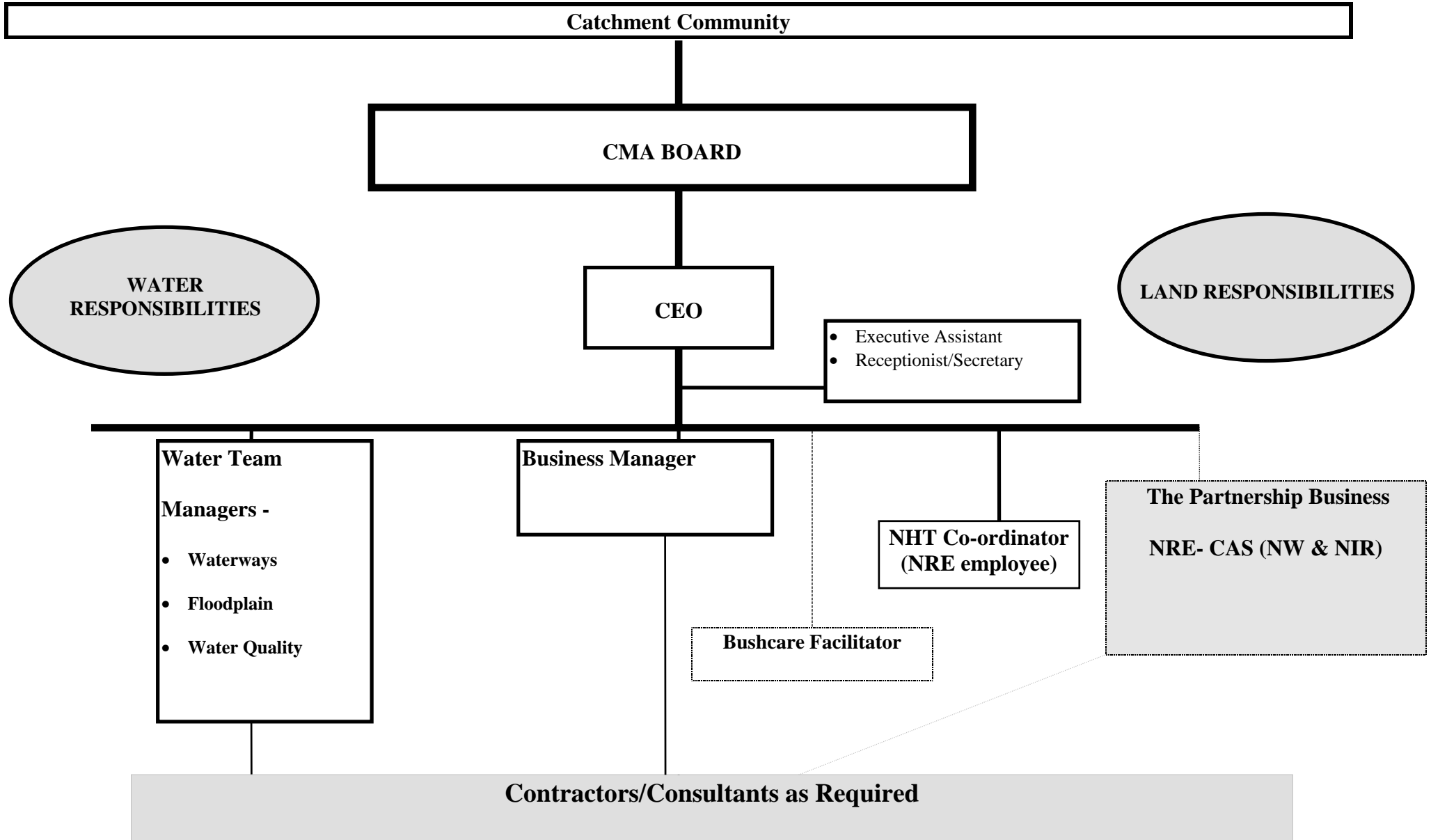
Resourcing the implementation of plans requires State Government to support the efforts of regional communities. What is required is a secure financial base on which to construct short and mid-term budgets that match the planning timeframes of community groups.

Furthermore, a balance is required between State Government and regional communities. It is also important that government recognises the public benefit that accrues from addressing environmental degradation.

The regional community is now contributing through a Waterway Management Tariff, which provides an important source of funds for catchment programs. The tariff does help develop community ownership of the challenges, however the community has questioned whether the balance is right.



North Central Catchment Management Authority Organisational Structure



6. 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.

The North Central CMA acknowledges the critical importance of having monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for catchment management programs.

The use of public funds, including the local tariff, State Government funds and Natural Heritage Trust funds, requires that providers of catchment programs are accountable for their actions.

Secondly, there must be a means of measuring changes in catchment health so that catchment programs can be evaluated and modified where necessary. A challenge facing catchment managers is to develop catchment health indicators that are simple to measure. Generally, the current approach is to measure and report on outputs, such as area of land sown to perennial pasture or trees, but the linkage to actual outcomes, such as reduction in soil recharge, is more complex and difficult to gauge.

The North Central CMA currently has a system based on quantitative measures, however it is desirable for these measures to be translated into qualitative indicators of catchment health.

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements are fundamental to community action plans, Implementation Committee business plans and North Central CMA programs.

Attachments To The Submission

1. Regional Catchment Strategy - North Central Region