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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

Reference: Employment in the environment sector

THURSDAY, 6 MARCH 2003

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

Thursday, 6 March 2003

Members: Mr Billson *(Chair)*, Ms George *(Deputy Chair)*, Mr Barresi, Mr Cobb, Mr Hunt, Mr Jenkins, Mr Kerr, Mr Lindsay, Ms Livermore and Mr McArthur.

Members in attendance: Mr Barresi, Mr Billson, Ms George, Mr Jenkins and Mr Lindsay

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

- The current contribution of environmental goods and services to employment in Australia;
- The future potential growth, including barriers and opportunities for growth, of environmental goods and services and impact on employment;
- Current status and future requirements for an appropriately skilled workforce;
- Appropriate policy measure that could encourage the further development of the environmental goods and services sector; and
- Information and reporting systems that would support the uptake of environmental goods and services to enhance overall business performance and development of the sector.

WITNESSES

BINNING, Mr Carl, Chief Executive, Greening Australia 153

Committee met at 11.07 a.m.

BINNING, Mr Carl, Chief Executive, Greening Australia

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage and our inquiry into employment in the environment sector. This hearing is the seventh for the inquiry and today we will be receiving evidence from Greening Australia. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses before they provide testimony that the giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. On that up-beat encouraging note, can I invite you to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or any introductory remarks you care to share with us.

Mr Binning—I will give a brief introduction but try and allow good time for discussion. I will provide a little context for Greening Australia. Firstly, Greening Australia is a grassroots community based organisation. We turn 21 this year. We employ around 300 people nationally in 80 locations in regional Australia. We started essentially as a tree planting organisation but, as with the growth and sophistication of the environment sector, our role is now to help regional communities understand the natural resources in their catchments and to implement strategies to address problems such as biodiversity, water quality, salinity, carbon sequestration et cetera. We have had a very long and productive relationship with the federal government on both sides. We currently run a number of programs: Bushcare Support, which underpins the bush care component of the Natural Heritage Trust; we work with rural communities on farm forestry; and we were recently awarded the Green Corps contract, which trains about 1700 young people per annum. We are primarily a service provider but also a policy contributor, particularly at the national level. Prior to the Natural Heritage Trust, we ran a whole range of programs such as One Billion Trees, river corridors et cetera.

We are one of the few environmental organisations which has a long record of employment in and also encouraging people into the environmental sector. That is really the context in which I present today. First, I will address issues around the people we directly employ and the career structures those people have. Secondly, I will turn to the broader issue of how the environment industry is funded, the issues surrounding the funding of that sector and what impact that has on employment.

Most of our people come from environmental management backgrounds. There is relatively poor career structure and professional development in Australia, and relatively short-term employment. Most employment is on an 18-month to three-year contractual basis. Professional development probably reflects the fact that, if you compare the environment sector to nursing or teaching, there is a lot of structured and vocational training in those professions, whereas in the environment sector, people tend to do a fairly generalist environment management degree with relative little vocational training, so it takes them a little while to find their feet once they come and join us.

Career paths are tied to this short-term funding cycle where most people work with us for three or four years—if we are brutally honest—then they have had enough and tend to move on to another sector. A key challenge for this sector is to develop a career structure and hierarchy

where people feel as though they can succeed and progress. Two things have led to that: the first is the growth in what is essentially the landcare movement; and the second is the diminution of state agency extension networks in rural and regional Australia.

I will turn now to some of the things that could be directly done to address those gaps in the career structures for people that directly work with us. One of the key problems is the short-term nature. Most of these programs are run on a budget cycle and there is no security of employment. This makes it very hard for people to plan for the future and the majority of staff who work with us get fed up with that at some point in time. A very good example of this at the current time is the Natural Heritage Trust, which is seeking to shift its investment from the national to the regional scale. At the moment, a range of very important bilateral agreements are being negotiated with the states. However, that has held up funding to the community sector so that in the last two months, Greening Australia has lost in the order of 20 to 30 staff. We will go through a gradual attrition through to June.

I would like to emphasise to the committee that the issues which are holding up the funding are important to Greening Australia. We are very strongly supportive of the Commonwealth working with the states to resolve these issues and get better frameworks in place for delivery of environmental programs, but at the same time from an employment point of view, it means that many of our best staff are forced to look elsewhere and hence go elsewhere. As we move to develop these catchment bodies that are going to be responsible for investing both Commonwealth and state funding in natural resource management and environmental management, it is very important that we establish them as stable institutions and ones that are able to give greater security of tenure to the staff they employ. I would greatly encourage the committee to run a parallel study between the education and health sectors looking at the context for employment in the environmental sector and the issues will become very apparent.

The second issue is that at that regional scale the processes through which people are employed are quite blurred. There is a lot of tension between the role of different government agencies, the community sector and individual private consultants. If you think about the role of a state agency, for example, they are often a purchaser, provider and key conduit to the community and landowners. This means that as regional plans are being developed there is no clear way for tendering for the provision of conservation services. Again, just to sharpen the point on my pencil a little, we would advocate that competition policy, in both competitive neutrality and competitive tendering, underpins the provision of those services at the regional scale. This might seem quite an unusual position from the community sector but our experience is that it is very hard for us to compete on even grounds with the state agencies. I find it quite perverse that we can put someone on the ground in a car for $100,000 but a state agency can undercut us when they know full well that the costs are significantly higher. So there is a range of impediments to actually employing people on the ground in the regions because we do not have a level playing field.

Finally, in terms of the people that we employ, I will reflect a little on Green Corps. Green Corps is a fantastic program where we are able to take 1,700 young people in rural and regional Australia, give them a youth training wage for six months and expose them to the environment industry. That program is commendable, but what I would reflect on today is: what we do with those 1,700 people as they run through the program? I think there are a couple of key opportunities. The program would benefit from being more closely tied to the potential employers of people coming through the program and I think there is also considerable potential

for tying traineeships to the back of the program. If, for example, we could take someone in the program who shows promise, develop a mentoring arrangement over the first six months with the local industry or a local employer and then offer a traineeship running off the back of that, we would have potentially opened up a pathway. At the moment, the pathway is a little less clearly defined and hence a little more difficult for the young people to find. I hasten to add that I am not at all critical of the program, I just see those as potential refinements to the program in creating clearer pathways to the future.

They are probably the key recommendations. I have a couple of additional ones which relate to the broader terms of reference for the committee. They really relate to how we create an environment for employment in the environment sector that is less critically dependent purely on government funding. I think this is very critical issue for the committee to think about in relation to some of your broader terms of reference.

I have tabled a document called *Building a stronger social coalition*. The document articulates a rationale for tax reform for philanthropic donation to community-based organisations. The essential argument here is that if community organisations derive 80 to 90 per cent of their funding from government it is very hard for them to become resilient. It is very hard for them to provide continuity of employment. There is a key graph on the first page or so of the document, a pie-graph, which shows the cost to government revenue—in terms of forgone tax revenue —of donations versus grants to community organisations. As you can see, grants represent well over 95 per cent, I think, of the contribution. The argument we are making is that to build a stronger community sector essentially builds our capacity to provide long-term security to our staff. Again, working on those cyclical contracts that have only a two or three-year lifespan makes it quite difficult for us to provide that security of tenure.

There are a couple of issues relating to security of ongoing funding versus landowner responsibilities. I will not say a great deal about this today but, if we look at the context of the environmental issues facing Australia, governments cannot achieve success alone. They can only achieve success in partnership with the business sector, with the farming sector and with private individuals. There are a lot of issues to be resolved in terms of where private responsibilities for environmental management end and public responsibilities start. We are not seeing adequate investment outside of major corporations in Australia in environmental improvement. The committee might consider some of the market based incentives and even consider wading into the ground of compensation for forgone property rights in rural communities and how that might underpin greater environmental works.

My final comment is at a tangent. There is a little work still to be done at the university level on the training that people who come to the environment sector have. I would describe an environmental management degree as the arts degree of the sciences; you get a smattering of everything. We tend to find that the people we recruit have great generalist skills and very few specialist skills. The dilemma that this puts us in is that we must train them in a particular area of speciality. There needs to be a shift to encourage greater specialisation—be that in community engagement, in adult education and training, in water quality or in biodiversity assessment; there is a whole bunch of specialities that any individual could choose—as well as a generalist background amongst the people who are coming out. I think the curriculums could do more to encourage people to choose a specialty and pursue that as well as the general background that they require.

I will end by reiterating the top three policy recommendations. Employment in this sector is far too short term and far too contract based, and we need to look at other major public sector employment sectors, such as education and health. If you were to compare those to the environment sector, it would be very clear how underdeveloped the sector is. We need a level playing field, particularly at the regional scale, between Commonwealth and state agencies and the community sector. We call for competition policy, competitive tendering and competitive neutrality to be applied. In Green Corps, I see a really strong opportunity to develop better pathways through traineeships.

CHAIR—Clearly, the predominant area of your activity is government funded; you have touched on that. Where do the 20 to 30 people who leave your organisation go? Do they go to similar organisations? Are they going to contract based employment where the funding cycle may overlap the one that they are in? I am interested in where they go.

Mr Binning—It really reflects on the size of the bump that the sector is getting at that point in time—that is, how much of a dip the government funding is essentially making over that period. Our current experience is that we are probably losing about half to the sector. The other half are probably going to the regional bodies, which are busy expanding to meet their new requirements. The issue I would like to highlight is the need for a level playing field at the regional scale so that people do not have to keep looking for the next big opportunity and jumping ship. We need to develop a stable career path. But the exit is quite significant.

The other issue I would like to draw to the committee's attention is that retaining good staff in remote locations in Australia is very difficult. Our experience has been that we often get them for three or four years, but we do not provide a career structure and when we hit a funding crisis they go back to town where they feel they can earn more. So we lose that capacity within the rural community.

CHAIR—Looking at the analogy with the health and education sector, would we need to consider a hospital and a school that move to where the next remediation exercise might be? Is that the kind of thing you have had in mind?

Mr Binning—I do not think there is a need for that much movement, in that environmental management is relatively new in the public policy agenda but the issues have been developing for 100 or 120 years. Most catchments in Australia have got very significant issues that are going to take, I would estimate, at least 50 years of concerted public effort and investment to resolve. I will just give one analogy. Imagine the natural environment is a piece of capital. We have essentially, because we have applied the wrong technologies, run that capital down over 50 to 100 years. If we look at things like the Natural Heritage Trust as a major investment in public infrastructure, but natural infrastructure, how much does $1 billion buy you? It would not even buy you a road from Sydney to Melbourne. So the level of investment that we have going into the sector is a fraction of what is ultimately required.

Conservative estimates say that there is a $60 billion problem out there; I would probably treble that figure. That means that through these new catchment and regional structures you are going to have continuous investment from the public sector over the next 20 to 30 years at least. What that says is that there is an opportunity to develop and put in place more robust and stable models for employment and more structured career pathways and career hierarchies within

those catchments, rather than running things on an environment statement to environment statement basis.

CHAIR—To bring out additional resources—beyond government funded programs and beyond virtue-driven activities through philanthropics—and to drive private sector resourcing, do we need to do more to take the landscape perspective? Should we bring it down to the land-holding itself to see value in that work and encourage private interests to contribute to private benefit on their own properties and then drive further some of the work that you are speaking of that is principally funded through the taxpayer at the moment?

Mr Binning—Governments can directly invest; they can encourage voluntary investment; they can look for win-wins, where private benefit and public benefit are aligned; or they can regulate. Environmental regulation is still at a relatively early stage. The committee will be aware of the discussions on water reform, native tree clearing et cetera. It is not until you have got to the point where you have a stable regulatory structure that you actually generate the resources that can employ people from the private sector. I will just keep going with this for a moment or two longer. Water in rural Australia is worth big money and that area employs a lot of people in its own right. That is because water use is very heavily regulated already within the country. Likewise, if you look at the pollution or brown side of the agenda, a lot of the environment protection agencies have moved to a model of co-regulation with large point source polluters, as we call them—the BHPs, Rio Tintos and Comalcos of the world. That has grown a whole different sector and, I would argue, a much more professional sector than the one that Greening Australia works within. That is because environmental management becomes perceived as part of the core business responsibility.

We are only really starting the journey of translating catchment targets down to individual landowner responsibilities in Australia, and it will take 10 to 20 years. Providing landowners with the tools and professional support they require to interpret catchment objectives to match what they need to do on their property and what their responsibility should be in funding that are all key elements of the current debate in our industry. Again, water reform and native vegetation clearing are really the lead on those. That is a bit of a waffly answer.

CHAIR—So taking the catchment stuff and driving it into farm based plans with environment management systems that are underpinned by standards and recognise opportunities for improved performance is the way you are suggesting we make that transition?

Mr Binning—I would strongly commend the Wentworth Group report to you. It was prepared for Carr recently and the blueprint was prepared for the federal government last year. The report to Carr puts a very clear framework together for moving from catchment objectives down to property scale objectives. The guts of it is the development of a property plan, which is signed off, provides certainty for the landowner and very clearly articulates what the public will fund versus what the private landowner will be responsible for funding. It is quite a visionary document, and I do not think I can add a great deal of value to it other than to commend it to the committee.

CHAIR—You note that they say five per cent of the taxpayer investment finds its way to the farmer or the land manager and the rest of it is taken up on the way through by a whole range of things.

Mr Binning—A look at the education and health sector would reveal some powerful insights into the efficiency of delivery of government dollars in the environmental sector. Having said that, I would also note that the process of engaging regional Australia in environmental management is quite new. Twenty years ago, we were paying farmers to knock trees over, and we have made a huge shift in the community expectation upon landowners. As a result, investment in the social processes, although extremely difficult to measure, are a fundamental foundation, and I would argue that the Landcare movement is international best practice and has achieved a great deal in the last 15 years—however difficult that has been to measure. On measurement, Greening Australia are about to launch a new triple bottom line framework for reporting against our outcomes, which looks at the efficiency with which we deliver programs and their social and environmental impact. Another impediment to securing greater levels of funding, either from government or the corporate sector, is the inability to quantify what we have achieved, so we are working fairly hard on that.

Ms GEORGE—I was interested in your observations on the employment conditions—or lack of them—for the people in your sector. It is a common problem throughout the community sector and in areas where there are not structured training arrangements. Do you have any idea of what the transition rate is for young people going through the Green Corps program and then moving on, within a defined period of time, into related employment?

Mr Binning—I do not think I have statistics on that. I certainly do not have them in front of me. I do not think we have statistics on them going into related fields. I believe the program overall achieves about 60 per cent employment uptake but that has not, to my recollection, been divided between different sectors. I will need to take that on notice and provide advice to the committee.

Ms GEORGE—It would be useful if you did have that information. I know from Senate estimates we were able to get the figures for transition rates for work for the dole, which are very low for the investment that goes into that program. It might have other positive benefits but secure employment at the end of it is not one of them. You say in your background paper that there has been some discussion about the possibility of a green apprenticeship. Would you elaborate on that? I think that might be an avenue worth exploring: when you have something that comes with accreditation structure training arrangements, the chance of work improves.

Mr Binning—Our consortium partner with Green Corps is a network called Job Futures. They have much more intimate knowledge of employment pathways than I do. A green apprenticeship or traineeship is a fantastic idea. If you think about what we have at the moment, we take those 10 young people, we supervise them and we train them through formal training for about six weeks in the conservation and land management package, which is an accredited training package. But for those that show potential, other than some general career counselling, we do not provide them with a clear pathway into the future. I think there is an excellent opportunity to offer potential employers green apprenticeships or green traineeships to provide the next stepping stone for those young people into the work force. The issues around the degree to which governments should provide support for those apprenticeships and traineeships are beyond my expertise. Obviously you need to create the right balance between the employer keeping these people once the apprenticeship is finished and making it not too onerous on the employer.

Mr JENKINS—I am interested in your comments about the generalist nature of environmental science courses. Could you flesh out the types of specialist skills that you think are required? I was interested in the ones that you listed, like engaging the community and things like that. I would hope that they were embedded somewhere already, but perhaps I caught the wrong drift from what you told me.

Mr Binning—I think it is to provide a niche. I will go through the social side first and the environmental side second. On the social side, there is psychology, law, extension and facilitation skills, adult education and training, core training group facilitation or conflict resolution—they are all skills I have a smattering of, but as an employer of those people I do not feel great confidence in casting them out into those tasks immediately after they have come on board. For those who show a particular interest in working with rural communities to devise plans for natural resource management, those skills could certainly be further strengthened.

The second area is potentially more urgent. Natural resource management problems have this whole-of-landscape context, but then there is very specialist expertise that is required within that context. For Greening Australia, they are skills such as seed collection, direct seeding, understanding of Australia's flora and fauna, and basic botany skills. I do not think there are many environmental graduates in Australia who would know one plant from another. They have maybe done six months of botany but, if you are out classifying different vegetation types, that is not sufficient. In the area of salinity, an understanding of water hydrology and an understanding of GIS are critically important in terms of water quality, water flow regimes and stream bank stabilisation et cetera.

These are all areas in which it probably takes a three-year effort to develop strong skills. It is almost like majoring in something during your environmental management degree—that is the way I would put it to you. The criticism that I would have of the courses is that they provide a smattering of everything but nothing in depth. From an employer's point of view, I think those courses would greatly benefit from encouraging students at the end of first year, let us say, to pick a specialty or a couple of specialties to develop and refine in the course of their degree.

Mr JENKINS—At the public hearing in Melbourne last week, we had a discussion about perhaps needing to put the environment into jobs—it is not a matter of environmental jobs. Picking up on some of the things that you just said, why can't we get a botanist and put the skills into them to be out there in the field doing the things that they like—or a hydrologist or someone with the other skills you mentioned? It could be that the more specialist formal training could have smatterings of things that we find in the generalist environmental science degree. Or should we have some form of continuing vocational training that leads to a postgrad or add-on year to round off the skills that you would be seeking?

Mr Binning—I would not confess to have undertaken a comprehensive review of environmental management courses in Australia. My comments are those of an employer and necessarily at a fairly high level. I think you always have that dilemma of the balance between a theoretical training and a vocational training. Those with a theoretical base are probably going to struggle when they hit the field and have to have a fair bit invested in them. I was arguing that those with a vocational training are the ones who do not have enough specialist expertise. I think the ones who ultimately succeed and make the biggest contribution in Australia are the specialists who then become generalists. That is probably the most focused answer to your question that I would give. They are the ones who can really pull together a range of disparate

information and then say: this is what we need to do. They are then actually able to say how to do it, which is the critical step.

Mr BARRESI—My question is a follow-up to a question that Ms George asked you regarding the number of Green Corps participants who go on to further employment. My question is: how many of them go on to further education or training, whatever that may be? Is it being used as a stepping stone into training? It may not be formalised—I understand your answers to Ms George and Mr Jenkins—but is it used even in a de facto way as a bridge into further training?

Mr Binning—It certainly is. I will go back to my office and send through those figures on transition rates, because they do exist. What I can recall of them is that the program achieves much higher transition rates than equivalent programs. One of the reasons for that is that the program has universal access, so about a third of the cohort are on their way to university or some kind of further training in any event, about a third of the cohort are lost and looking for what is next in their lives, and about a third of the cohort are true safety netters. The department would argue that the program has been successful because it brings together that unique mix of young people. I think the transition rates are something in the range of 60 to 80 per cent but, rather than quote a figure to the committee, I will go back to get the exact figure.

Mr BARRESI—You mentioned the need to look at alternative sources of revenue rather than being so dependent upon government. How much of the work that you do is subcontracted by large corporations seeking to improve their triple bottom line credentials?

Mr Binning—That area is growing but it is slow. Broadly, Greening Australia's funding can be divided into three chunks: one-third of the money comes from the federal government; one-third of the money comes through community groups that are ultimately funded by either state or federal government; and one-third comes from a mixture. We do a range of what we call fee-for-service work for corporates and individual landowners, where we provide a direct service, be it trees or direct seeding et cetera. We have a range of corporate sponsorships with the likes of Alcoa and we have a relatively modest membership and philanthropic donation base.

My comment on industry partnerships is that they have probably gone two ways. The mining industry, for example, has got a huge task in environmental remediation. Because that task is so big and so close to their core business, they have tended to take it in-house, and they have their own environment research institute and they work through them to devise new techniques. There probably could be greater liaison between bodies like that and the community sector.

The second is essentially traditional sponsorship. Whilst that sponsorship is tremendously valuable to us, it is essentially about aligning brands for mutual advantage and doing feelgood projects that are genuinely good projects but are not what I would call real triple bottom line projects, where the projects are fully integrated into the business objectives. I would tend to argue that we still have a fair distance to go in Australia not only from our side of the table, in understanding how we can contribute to large corporate business in a way that adds value rather than just image, but also from the corporates' side, in understanding how they can make a substantive and lasting contribution to Australia's environment. That area is full of potential but I do not think we have found the levers yet to catalyse it. I think it is rhetoric.

Mr LINDSAY—Mr Binning, in an answer to the chairman on an earlier question, you talked about the difficulty of keeping people in remote parts of Australia, because they wanted to come back to the cities. What do you think is a remote part of Australia? It is not a trick question. I am just interested to know. Is remote Australia anything outside the capital cities?

Mr Binning—I think it is a continuum, so it gets progressively harder. We just lost our staff member in Roma, for example. That is probably in the middle of that spectrum. When our person in White Cliffs in New South Wales disappears, I doubt we will find someone to replace them very easily. In locations as close as Orange, Yass, Murrumbateman et cetera, certainly there are people there to be employed, but to retain them in those locations is nevertheless still challenging. In immediate regional centres, we do not have a lot of difficulty finding people. We probably have greater difficulty in keeping them there for a longer period of time. As we move further out, we often have to find someone who is willing to move there, and then when they go they leave a huge hole. It is a bit analogous to the doctor problem in Australia, I suspect.

Mr LINDSAY—But people in other fields of endeavour—geologists, for example—go and work in the middle of nowhere. Why don't environmentalists go and work in the middle of nowhere? What is different?

Mr Binning—I think they do for a period. I think they really hit the wall career-wise. For most people in what is called the facilitator and coordinator industry, their career maxes out at $40,000 to $45,000. They come out after doing three or four years of university, they are young and ambitious and they want to go out to rural Australia and make a contribution. One of two things happens. The first is that they fail, because they are too wet behind the ears and they get spat out very quickly. It is actually a really hard job, because the social processes are quite tough. They can also succeed, of course. If they succeed, they put four to five years in and then they hit their career ceiling, they hit the funding bump and they just think, 'Bugger this, I'm going to go and do something different.' There is a final category, which is the people who just love what they do and are long-termers, but they would make up less than 20 per cent of our staff. People who have been there for more than seven years are rare and incredibly valuable to us as an organisation. I do not think the challenges are solely for government. I think that the Landcare movement writ large, of which Greening Australia is a part, has a fair bit of its own internal thinking to do about how to provide better career structures for those people. It is not simply a failing of government; it is a failing of ours as well.

Mr BARRESI—What would you consider the most senior position in the career structure that can be offered by any of the environmental groups out there? Obviously your position is the most senior in Greening Australia, but what are the various positions out there? Can some cross-transfers take place—from the catchment management authorities to the various Landcare groups, for example?

Mr Binning—I will give a personal perspective, which is that the generalist and the manager are more rewarded than the specialist in our industry. This is not uncommon in the world of managerialism that we have at the moment in the public sector. A typical person who comes to us and stays in the industry will end up in a state agency and then move through to middle management and, potentially, senior management. The difficulty, where they have developed very strong skills in agronomy or the management of native pastures, is that potentially their strongest role would be in training the trainers or developing more robust structures through which people could be trained in best practice techniques. That is the critical gap in our

industry—those senior field staff who are mentors. We do have a small number of them, but they are there for the love not the money. Some of these issues are internal to the way we structure ourselves as an industry as much as they are issues for government. But having said that, the short-term nature of funding makes it extremely difficult to put those structures in place.

Mr LINDSAY—I was at an inquiry in Melbourne for another committee a week ago, and evidence was given about a web site, which is run by a couple of Melbourne people, for jobs in the environment. Are you aware of that web site?

Mr Binning—Yes, it is www.nrmjobs.com.au.

Mr LINDSAY—That sounds right.

Mr Binning—I commend that to the committee.

Mr LINDSAY—Do you use that?

Mr Binning—Yes, absolutely.

Mr LINDSAY—So it provides a valuable function?

Mr Binning—Absolutely. Particularly at a grassroots level and even at quite senior levels within the natural resource management community, that web site is the place at which you tender for jobs and also secure employment.

Mr LINDSAY—I want to take up a point Mr Jenkins took up, which was also raised in the other inquiry I was at, in relation to generalist and particular skills in higher education. Evidence was given—by RMIT, I think. Does anyone remember? Was it this committee?

CHAIR—Yes. We were all there, Mr Lindsay. We are interested in whether your recap marries with ours.

Mr LINDSAY—The RMIT people said that they structure their courses around allowing their students to choose some specialist subjects. They ask the students what they want to do and they design a package around that, apart from the generalist stuff. Are you aware that that sort of higher education degree is available, and is that the kind of model you think is appropriate?

Mr Binning—It sounds fantastic. As I said, I have not undertaken any review of the courses in Australia and would make no judgment on their value. My comments are really as an employer. When we employ people, we tend to find that they are passionate about environmental problems and have a general understanding of those problems, but we have to train them in what to actually do about them. That skill set is not there.

Mr LINDSAY—I understand you took over from the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers in the Green Corps program. Is that correct?

Mr Binning—Yes.

Mr LINDSAY—You spoke about security of tenure for staff when that changeover occurred. Do you think the government should try to militate against that, or do you believe in the open public tender process?

Mr Binning—That is a big question. There are a number of things bundled into that question. I will answer it as candidly as I dare. Firstly, when you are talking about quite large scale programs—Green Corps is a $70 million program—the budget cycle puts all of the organisations under acute pressure. We had three or four things coming to a close, and I think I counted 180 staff on the line. In that situation, you are forced to bid for work. I argue that we had no choice but to bid for that contract.

Secondly, I think it would be a very retrograde step if governments did not, from time to time, put in place competitive processes for the provision of core services. We have consistently argued in all the work we have done that, essentially, competition policy and competitive neutrality should apply. Thirdly, in the same way that governments are looking at rollover provisions in the welfare sector for organisations that have performed well, I think that is an area that would be worthy of consideration by the committee.

The contracts that we sign with the government at the moment are essentially input based contracts. They are contracts that look very closely at the staff and resources we are applying to the problem, but not so strongly at the outcomes that are achieved, although there are outcome based targets there. We would much rather live in a world where we sign up to ambitious targets and, if we work well and achieve those targets, we could have great confidence in rolling over a proportion of the work we do. Nothing pleases me less than the mechanics of that process, but to some extent I think it is inevitable, with governments contracting out large-scale work, that from time to time it will be tendered and people will compete. I do not know if that is a clear enough answer.

Mr LINDSAY—I hear what you are saying. Thank you.

CHAIR—The work of the Wentworth Group and, in fact, some of the evidence that we have heard emphasises standards, minimum requirements, basic activity necessary to continue in production. We have heard evidence—whether it be the best available technology, the BAT system, in Europe or the essential land management targets that are imposed upon land-holders—that there is a role for standards to perform in ensuring a level of performance. We have heard that because of the existence of those standards the services you provide are valued more highly—because they are essential inputs to maintaining those standards and, therefore, continuing activity. Is it your view that greater emphasis should be placed on attainment of standards and that the limitations of incentive based systems should be more openly canvassed?

Mr Binning—You need a good mix.

CHAIR—What is your sense of that mix?

Mr Binning—I would make a range of comments about standards at the moment. I was at a workshop on environmental management systems the other day, and one of the farmers stood up and said: ‘If you want to come to my property and tell me what to do, and then you can’t tell me

what to do, you are probably on a bad run with me.' We know what we want to achieve on a catchment scale, but the tools for translating that down to the property scale are challenging and difficult. At the moment, we are asking farmers to step up to meet our catchment objectives. But we cannot say, 'We do not like these salty rivers. Can we please have all our native plants and animals back?' We cannot actually tell them what we need them to do on their properties.

What we do know is that we need significant land-use change in Australia. If you imposed standards at the property level, you would have World War III with the rural sector, because it is going to take 30 or 40 years to get there, and governments' pockets would not be deep enough, because the bill would be huge. I would advocate a process whereby the most willing farmers volunteer to step up and meet catchment objectives on their properties and are given significant assistance to get there but, once they are there, they would be required to stay there at their own cost.

If you go down that path, there will be farm businesses that are rendered unviable by the need to meet catchment objectives. Very clear and clean structures for dealing with cases of genuine economic hardship are required if you are going to make the big strides forward. I have brushed over three or four points but, again, I would argue that they are pretty well canvassed in the Wentworth report.

CHAIR—In the Wentworth report, a land manager who is unwilling or unable to provide a property management plan is faced with the possibility of being bought out by the government, which would then put the property back on the market with those caveats of PMP requirement as part of it. Is that type of courageous policy the kind of driver that you believe is needed to see a wholesale change?

Mr Binning—If the government tries to impose that, I think it will get itself into a huge mess. Suppose we want to achieve this change over 20 or 30 years: if you look at actual opportunities in farm turnover in Australia, most businesses that are going to be run unviable are pretty marginal businesses to begin with. Many of those landowners are already looking to exit. We have put a proposal to government, which looks like it will be successful, to establish a natural resource management bank. This is a bank that will purchase properties that it thinks can make a significant contribution to the environment, fix them up, do the environmental remediation work and then resell them on the market with those environmental outcomes secured through a planning instrument. I think the government would be much better placed using both the private and the community sectors to operate on open markets rather than trying to centrally impose those standards on landowners in a very short period of time. As evidence of that, I would look to the problems that have been experienced in Queensland in regulating tree clearing, despite a reasonable degree of commitment from both sides of the fence. It has just been too difficult politically.

CHAIR—We have heard evidence of the need for an inculcation of sustainability thinking in senior and middle management, and at the company board level. Is it your view that, for instance, the Institute of Chartered Accountants, the directors group and the MBA streams at university should embrace sustainability as a key element for successful activity into the future, just as they may do risk assessment on currency changes and regulatory reform?

Mr Binning—Absolutely. The other day a colleague of mine took the head of VicSuper for a drive. Since that time VicSuper, which is a superannuation fund, have said they have $30

million to invest if anyone can tell them how to invest it and make a difference. So everyone is now scrambling around. That was just one key individual. I would like to say that the Prime Minister's business and community partnerships roundtable, which will discuss how social and business objectives might be brought together, is a process that could be very usefully mirrored on the environment side. I do not believe that the environment and business sectors adequately understand one another yet. The only groups getting at all close to that understanding are the large resource based companies—the BHPs, Rio Tintos et cetera—where it is core business. The rest of the community is still largely naive, but we are equally naive of their needs. I know it sounds waffly and like another committee, but I think that a process for dialogue and the establishment of a framework in partnership with the government through a roundtable process, if it were given a mandate and had the right people, would go a long way.

CHAIR—Thank you for your contribution to the committee. If you think of something further that might be of interest, please provide it to us because we are seeking to shape our own thoughts on the subject.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms George**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 12.04 p.m.