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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

Reference: Catchment management

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE
Wednesday, 16 February 2000

Members: Mr Causley (*Chair*), Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mr Billson, Mrs Gallus, Ms Gerick, Mrs Irwin, Mr Jenkins, Dr Lawrence and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mr Billson, Mr Causley, Mrs Gallus, Ms Gerick, Mrs Irwin, Mr Jenkins, Dr Lawrence and Mrs Vale

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into catchment management, with particular attention to the following matters:

the development of catchment management in Australia;

the value of a catchment approach to the management of the environment;

best practice methods of preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation in catchments, and achieving environmental sustainability;

the role of different levels of government, the private sector and the community in the management of catchment areas;

planning, resourcing, implementation, coordination and cooperation in catchment management; and

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.

WITNESSES

POLKINGHORNE, Mr Lachlan, National Landcare Facilitator, National Landcare Facilitator Project 227

Committee met at 11.29 a.m.**POLKINGHORNE, Mr Lachlan, National Landcare Facilitator, National Landcare Facilitator Project**

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage into catchment management. This is the seventh hearing of the inquiry. At today's public hearing the committee will hear from the National Landcare Facilitator who is based at Geelong in Victoria.

Before proceeding, I advise the witness that committee public hearings are recognised as proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect that proceedings in the House of Representatives demand. Witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege in respect of evidence they give before the committee. Witnesses will not be asked to take an oath or to make an affirmation. However, they are reminded that false evidence given to a parliamentary committee may be regarded as contempt of the parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should the witnesses at any stage wish to give evidence in private they may ask to do so, and the committee will give consideration to the request.

I welcome the representative of the National Landcare Facilitator Project. We have not received a submission from the National Landcare Facilitator Project but we have access to the project's 1998-99 report. Would you like to make an opening address to give us a background before we ask questions.

Mr Polkinghorne—I will start by explaining the role of the National Landcare Facilitator Project and my role as National Landcare Facilitator. The project is a contract that is let by Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Australia. The principal role for my position is to act as a conduit between community landcare and the Commonwealth government. In that regard I can hold myself out to represent Landcare groups and also Landcare coordinators and facilitators at a national level. I do not hold myself out to be the sole representative of those particular two groups. Principally, I have a communication role. The communication role, on the one hand provides, a national voice, so I would in that regard act as a national person. But that can also work the other way. When I am travelling widely, as I do, I could also represent the policies of the Commonwealth to Landcare groups and Landcare communities. So in that regard I feel I can wear a couple of hats.

Another major aspect to the role is to provide policy advice to the Commonwealth through the principal organisations on what I call the landcare side – being the Australian Landcare Council and also Landcare Australia Ltd. I act as an observer on both those bodies and attend all of their meetings within the constraints of practicality. I would like to emphasise that my background is in agriculture and in business management. I travel widely to carry out the responsibilities associated with my work. I travel to communities across Australia to talk with them about their natural resource management projects that they might have running and also to inspect those projects and gain my own view as to how those projects might be running. Mr Chair, that concludes my introduction.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. One of the issues that the committee has been looking at very closely is not just total catchment management – whether that is working and whether there are better ways of doing it – but also the coordination of programs. There are a number of programs out there that are touching on a lot of these areas. Yours is one. I know of Rivercare and other programs. Do you believe there is a coordination between those programs so that in fact we are getting the best value for the limited dollars that we have and getting our coordination of programs?

Mr Polkinghorne—The Natural Heritage Trust is structured in a way so that, yes, there are a number of programs. In some communities this has initially led to some duplication of both resources and personnel. My observation is that that duplication has been reduced over time and the people working at the grassroots level have worked quite hard to spread their resources more efficiently.

CHAIR—By doing that, has there been a plan developed so that people look at the priorities in catchments to ensure that the things that are most necessary to be done first are done, or is it just done on a projects basis by people who put up programs?

Mr Polkinghorne—As the activities and perhaps as the success of what I call the generic landcare program – when I say 'generic' that will cover a wide range of programs, including Rivercare – has grown, those priorities have been very clearly established. If we look at some of the more successful projects around the country, I think the key criteria to their success are that they have established their priorities very clearly and they have been able to allocate their resources accordingly. In my work I have certainly encouraged that very approach. I really do not think there is an alternative.

CHAIR—With total catchment management, have you an opinion as to whether we are going in the right direction here? Given the fact that inland New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria is all the catchment of the Murray-Darling, which is a massive area, is it practical to say you can work on a total catchment management? How can you do that?

Mr Polkinghorne—That is the challenge we face. I do not believe there is another approach. If we approach the issues of, say, salinity, soil degradation or even greenhouse in their singularity, we are not going adequately to address those issues. While the catchment management approach certainly presents some challenges in drawing people, in drawing the economic resources and in understanding enough about the environment to adequately address it, I consider that it is the only approach. We have to take that approach otherwise we are still going to perhaps just touch on the edges of some of the problems that we have. In that regard, sometimes the political approach has to change, the planning approach has to change and the land use has to change with that – that is a slow process.

CHAIR—So if you have total catchment management committees that represent a total river catchment which are then tributaries of the Murray-Darling system, would you then have an overall committee – comprising probably one from each group just as a suggestion – that then drew up the priorities and the overall plan of action for that whole catchment?

Mr Polkinghorne—I have to be careful about advising on specific structures –

CHAIR—Are there toes that you might tread on?

Mr Polkinghorne—There may be. What we know is that in some regions the right structure for one region is not necessarily applicable to another. Therefore, I have to be cognisant of that. What we do know and what I suggest is that we take a regional approach. That is also where Landcare has changed from its time 10 or 15 years ago, when it was very much local. Now the emphasis is on a regional basis because we see merit in taking the catchment scale approach. So if your tributary, as you mentioned, is on a regional basis, that is where I would focus. It is a strategic approach, and there is a statement about where you can get the best effort for the resources and also the best influence.

Mrs IRWIN—I am just curious to know: has there been any consideration regarding forming a national database for Landcare projects?

Mr Polkinghorne—My understanding of the administration of the Natural Heritage Trust is that each lead department would keep that information by way of project. Certainly my knowledge of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Australia, which is my point of report, is that they do keep that information. How that is used is perhaps another issue.

Mr BILLSON—Mr Polkinghorne, you talk at length about the roles of coordinators in the structure; the value that they add is canvassed in your paper. The general view is that coordinators are fairly thin on the ground, but there are communities doing good work without a coordinator. How is that being achieved? How do those communities without ready access to the coordinators providing the range of support that you have spoken of, manage to get things done or work around the lack of that nexus point that the coordinator represents?

Mr Polkinghorne—That depends very much on local community leadership. I can think of a couple of examples where there is an inordinate community responsibility on two, three or four individuals who are carrying a lot of work that would otherwise –

Mr BILLSON—They are defacto coordinators –

Mr Polkinghorne—Yes. They usually last for a while but then, after a while, they put their hands up and say, ‘No, we have to earn a living or carry our lives in other directions.’ It is usually the local leadership. Even where there are coordinators, that is still very much what I term an important criteria for success. Perhaps the other dimension is where a community has a coordinator and that coordinator’s funding ceases, usually that is followed by a slow-down in the level of activities that are carried out within that community.

Mr BILLSON—We have travelled a lot and heard about burnout, what weight would you place on coordinator availability as a key determinant of burnout within the Landcare groups?

Mr Polkinghorne—I place a very strong weight on the coordinator availability and often I observe coordinators operating well beyond the specific areas that may be outlined in their job description. If I could also talk a little about community burnout; I always listen carefully to communities who are talking about burnout because I see it as a symptom of other issues behind. I really feel that within the Landcare movement and also on a broader scale, there are other issues we should be addressing there. Rather than saying that we have to deal with this burnout issue, I always look for the symptom behind it.

Mr BILLSON—Such as?

Mr Polkinghorne—A retraction of services, be they government or private, might be a principal one. In my observation over the last three or four years, there has been more responsibility placed on communities, and in many areas – I have observed it in my local rural community – there is burnout. One of the strongest networks we have is the Landcare network. The voice comes back through that Landcare network because it is the one that is in place. So the Landcare network actually finishes up carrying that message.

Mr BILLSON—So it is like fatigue – it is getting harder to get things done and give voice to that through their network which is Landcare.

CHAIR—Too many committees.

Mr Polkinghorne—In the most recent annual report that we will be publishing next week, we have cited – this is anecdotal evidence; we have not checked the data thoroughly – the town of Cleve on the Eyre Peninsula of South Australia which is reputed to have 192 committees for 1,800 population including children.

Mrs IRWIN—It is South Australia not Western Australia.

Mr BILLSON—If we can just hang with the coordinator thing for a minute. We are hearing that participation in Landcare has plateaued and there is still a large proportion of the rural community who do not formally associate themselves with the Landcare movement. Is that a by-product of where you do not have coordinators you need some local leaders – generally with very strong personalities – to drive it forward but those same characteristics may repel other people from getting involved? Is it a bit of a double-edged sword where you do not have a professional facilitating the activities?

Mr Polkinghorne—Again, I would say there are other factors at work. The statistics that we have in very general terms are that one-third of rural people are involved in Landcare groups. Then if we take the other two-thirds, my suggestion is that one-third of them we are going to have difficulty engaging in any circumstance. Generational transfer is actually changing that, so time will resolve that problem. I would also hold that, firstly, the number of Landcare groups does continue to increase and, secondly, of the Landcare groups that have been in existence over a long period of time, there has been a considerable turnover of people through that Landcare group. Therefore, the middle third – if I can refer to them as the middle third – often are influenced by the Landcare movement. My comment about our work is that we have not been able to adequately quantify that influence. That influence may extend to knowledge; it may extend to knowledge and attitude; it may extend to activity; but we have not been able to put a handle on that.

Mr BILLSON—I have other questions but I will leave it for a while.

Dr LAWRENCE—In the annual report that we have from you, there is an indication that in 1997-98 there were nearly 500 full-time facilitators and coordinators, though it is pointed out that there may be more people than that because they are full-time equivalents and, in addition, an unknown or unspecified number of project officers and coordinators under the Bushcare program with Environment Australia's NHT programs. Of course, in addition to that, there would be state officers with some responsibilities that would overlap in agriculture extension programs, environment departments and the like. It must be a minefield stepping around areas of responsibility and getting coordination. Some of these people must spend a lot of their time just developing strategies for making sure that they pull together the resources that are available. I would not mind hearing your comment on that, because it strikes me as an incredibly complex system we have now built up across federal and state jurisdictions and departments with different programs of various longevity.

Mr Polkinghorne—That has been an issue for right across the country. I would say that in many cases the previous traditional extension programs that have been state run and state financed have been replaced, in some sense, by programs which are funded by a partnership between Commonwealth and a state and, in some cases, regional authorities. Our point of concern at a national level is providing advice on the development of policy which reduces the duplication of national programs. If I could also provide one example, which you may be familiar with, at Northam where there is a number of coordinators working for different programs. I am familiar with the area and have also been there a couple of times. They have gone to the trouble of setting up what they call the Northam Landcare Centre. My observation there is that they were working very well to alleviate any problems that they might have with duplication. While certainly 18 months to two years ago I was very concerned about this, at ground level it seems to have resolved itself to some extent.

Dr LAWRENCE—You also mention, and you said it then in relation to agricultural extension programs, that what has happened with the application of additional funds to Landcare and other projects is that state governments have to some extent retreated from the field. I presume the net effect of that is that the resources, which looked as if they might be quite substantial, are rather less than might have been anticipated by adding state and federal effort together. Is that an on-the-ground experience?

Mr Polkinghorne—Could you clarify that question please?

Dr LAWRENCE—Well, I know that in my own state of Western Australia the government was – and still is in some of these areas – running programs. Initially, it comes just the Landcare money and then the Natural Heritage Trust money, and out goes the state government money. I am just wondering whether that is being experienced by your coordinators and projects on the ground – that they start to build on a project and discover they are it; there is nothing else.

Mr Polkinghorne—That is possibly where – if I can add to your question – the state or regional authority has committed to providing perhaps in-kind resources. Sometimes those in-kind resources are adequate; some-

times they are inadequate. The response I will provide to that comment is that my concern lies with the community in that the Commonwealth has provided funding over a period of 15 years – there was the Decade of Landcare; there were programs previous to the Decade of Landcare; and then there is the Natural Heritage Trust – and in some cases the funding has not been continued. That argument runs between the state and the Commonwealth, but it is the community that finishes up bearing the brunt of the policy difficulty that you have presented. That is the point of concern to me in that we are dealing with very complex catchment scale matters, and to my mind it very firmly requires some coordination. Therefore, when that coordinator is not there, in a sense it is the community that dips out. That is the current situation that most communities will mention when you talk to them.

Dr LAWRENCE—Just one more question briefly: you would have been aware of some recent publicity about a report that is somewhat critical not so much of the Landcare movement itself, but of the project based approach that has particularly applied under the Natural Heritage Trust. We have not seen the report publicly but one of the members of the advisory committee said, ‘The problem is if you pay a community group to clean up a one-kilometre stretch of river it achieves nothing. You have to tackle the whole river system to have any impact,’ and we have discussed that with you today. Are you finding that the addition of some of these funds are actually cutting across the effort of the more established Landcare groups – where you might have another bit of money coming in for a specific project such as cleaning up a section of river and there is no attempt to integrate it with broader catchment management or area needs?

Mr Polkinghorne—I might be able to quote some examples where that has occurred but, equally, I can quote some examples where that money has been used extremely well to integrate into other programs and has been applied very well.

Dr LAWRENCE—Is that where there is some existing link between the group that has funding and the group applying for it?

Mr Polkinghorne—It is where there is a well-planned project and a community that is very much behind the project. Bear in mind that I can quote another example of a group that wanted to run their catchment plan with a community and they had to work with 27 committees to get approval before they could proceed. Now, that is quite hard work, particularly for people who are not particularly –

Dr LAWRENCE—Volunteers.

Mr Polkinghorne—used to dealing with some of those issues. I am not trying to avoid the question you have asked. To me, experience has been a great teacher and we now know that we should be operating at a regional scale. If we develop the institutional change to do that, it should resolve some of that problem – that is the key.

Mr JENKINS—There has been discussion about the importance of the volunteer effort and whether that is being overplayed at the moment. There has to be a balance between the fact that the volunteers are usually the people that have the stewardship of the natural assets that are being, hopefully, improved – certainly manipulated. Do you think that we have struck that balance through Landcare? I was also interested in the comments you make about the social aspects of the work of coordinators, which is a wider dimension and, as you phrased it, an unintended consequence but a very important consequence. From the groups that we have spoken to, we cannot underestimate that, because it requires a sort of change of thinking, a cultural change – they have not only their stewardship aspects but also social and economic aspects. I am wondering whether you think, with the way things are developing, there is this appropriate balance between the emphasis on volunteer effort, or perhaps it has swung too much to rely on that volunteer effort.

Mr Polkinghorne—There is a balance, and the question is what that balance might happen to be. If we separate private land from public land or community effort, then land-holders are very much interested in their own wellbeing and in how they can implement the appropriate land use system for that particular piece of land that they are managing. Within the National Landcare Facilitator Project, in the following report to the one you have there, we have talked at length about profitable and sustainable systems. I will provide the next two reports to you. Do you have the 1998 report?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Polkinghorne—I will provide the 1999 report to you shortly. As far as the privately managed land goes, it is our view that, for a good national landcare program to be highly successful, it will focus on addressing the need for change where it is needed. If I can go to the other aspect, the Landcare movement is a strong network where there is an enormous amount of volunteer work. It is a large network that is in some ways quite loose. Therefore, it has to be supported by appropriate institutional support to ensure that those volunteers are not taking the entire load. Again, I look very carefully when people are talking about this to see whether this is a symptom of, or whether there are wider community issues at work. Can you ask another question to help me?

Mr JENKINS—I was going to move on from that. The only thing I would say is that we have the problem – I do not like using specific examples but last week we were amongst the catchment area for the Adelaide water supply – where the catchment is private land. Whilst there is benefit to the land-holder in doing appropriate works, the more immediate and more direct benefit was of a public nature because of the protection of the water supply. It just struck me as strange and I suppose, again, it is the appropriate balance between the effort that we expect the land-holder to put in and the public benefit.

Mr Polkinghorne—Perhaps we have not had the balance right in that at present it is very much loaded towards voluntary change and voluntary change of management on that private land. Therefore the question is: what is the role of government in providing appropriate incentive for the landowner to service that public benefit? That is an area where I see a considerable amount of work has to be done otherwise landowners are not going to necessarily engage – they feel they are under siege, to some extent. Or the third element of that is appropriate regulation, which is a whole new topic and, again, we will see situations where people will resist regulation.

Mr JENKINS—My other questions are about the funding of the coordinators: one of the things that this committee will have to come to grips with, especially under NHT funding, are the strictures that are placed on actually funding coordination positions. Nobody denies the importance of those positions; it is getting the relative balance about where the funding should come from. Your report suggests that federal funds represented about 45 per cent for the 1997-98 year – I think it was about \$13 million of \$28 million. You also highlight where there have been successful Landcare groups in getting other funding. One of the questions that Mr Billson usually asks of local government practitioners is that, if they were given a heap of money under untied grants, how much of that money might go to landcare type pursuits rather than putting a bit of asphalt on another bit of dirt road. One of our dilemmas is what appropriate level of funding should the federal government put in, without allowing the states and, to a certain extent, local government to escape. Is the federal funding trend steady or is it declining?

Mr Polkinghorne—At present, I believe it is steady. Naturally, with the Natural Heritage Trust perhaps nearing its particular cycle, there would be plenty of coordinators wondering how their positions might be funded in the future. We see local government as having excellent potential to host coordinators. I am aware of a number of shires around the country that have done it extremely well; equally, I am also aware of some that are still oblivious to some of the work that could be done in natural resource management areas. I cannot answer your question specifically, of course. However, I see a very important role for the Commonwealth to take the lead, and that depends on the particular environmental priorities that the Commonwealth wants to address. I still believe that the future funding for coordinators will be a combination of federal, state and regional.

Mr JENKINS—When you have areas like Gunnedah where I do not think we could say they were oblivious to the importance of coordinators, they were just saying to us that, given the economic situation of the area, they doubted whether, say, a local government authority would be in a position to fund the positions. Whether that is an attitude that can be changed –

Mr Polkinghorne—Again, as you mentioned, it may be dangerous dealing with examples.

Mr JENKINS—I have fallen into the trap again, I am sorry.

Mr Polkinghorne—I am familiar with Gunnedah and I also know the coordinator that was there. But let us look at the central wheat belt of Western Australia where local people – local farmers – have agreed to be rated to pay the coordinator. The direct consequence of that is that the coordinator takes a very targeted and strategic approach because there are many landowners very interested in the use of their dollars. While I agree with your observations that it could be quite difficult to change the culture within local governments, that is our challenge to do that. I believe it can be done; I have seen it occur.

Mrs VALE—You have mentioned several times the need for change and in your report you also highlight the importance of demonstration projects to show farmers the benefits of new technologies and land management practices. Who usually undertakes such demonstration projects? Could you tell us of any that have had the outcomes that you would like to see?

Mr Polkinghorne—Can I just provide a bit of history: prior to the Natural Heritage Trust the National Landcare Program invested considerable sums of money in what were called demonstration projects. These often were relatively small projects and, while they were very useful in providing a demonstration to the local farmers and providing some involvement for the local school, and perhaps they might have been placed on a highway where they were quite visual, many of those projects have subsequently fallen into the category of being the projects that are small and untargeted and may or may not be sitting in with catchment priorities.

The demonstration projects that we see now as being much more applicable are farm scale demonstration projects that are funded by the farmer or farmers who might own that land, funded by the local community in some way, funded by the state and funded by the Commonwealth. They might have a research element to them that could be funded by any number of research organisations, if we can add some weight to the development

part of research and development. They have a commercial nature to them so that the other land-holders can see the relevance of the particular demonstration. The state can also be involved through their extension programs. That can be in a communication capacity; it can be in an analysis capacity.

By nature then – given the kind of program that we within the National Landcare Facilitator project are suggesting – those kinds of demonstrations are larger in scale. I can think of two good examples: one is at Corrigin in Western Australia which is called the ‘Valema farms project: putting sustainability to the test’. It has a small amount of Natural Heritage Trust funding there to support the coordinator – the project manager is a better term – for the project. But then there is considerable finance from industry and also from the state. That is a very ambitious and I believe successful project. They have had considerable challenge in obtaining enough money to actually run the project. I believe that is an excellent example.

The other example we showed Minister Warren Truss last week is at Geelong in Victoria where the local farmer cropping group called Southern Farming Systems has put in two projects called ‘concept farms’. Those projects are about 400 acres in scale; they incorporate alley farming, raised bed farming, water control, use of the water for horticultural purposes and then attendant development of sustainability benchmarks. We are very clear on our preferred direction for demonstration projects.

Mrs VALE—Could you expand on the project in Western Australia where you said that it was looking at sustainability and putting sustainability concepts to the test?

Mr Polkinghorne—I believe that property is 2,700 hectares, and the particular landscape was cleared around the 1920s – perhaps a bit earlier. It has principally a watertable problem in that there is a high watertable so –

Mrs VALE—It has salinity.

Mr Polkinghorne—There is not a lot of surface salinity, but it is coming to them very quickly if they do not do something. So they have to implement high water-use enterprises on the property. It is easy to say that but, for the local farmers who have been under economic pressure, the call on their resources is substantial. But with considerable changes in taking a ‘whole farm’ approach from an enormous tree planting program to the implementation of a eucalyptus oil mallee enterprise on the property and a range of other enterprises that might include growing high water-use crops and other more intensive options to give the landowners economic capacity, they are working towards what I would term a more sustainable system.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much.

Mr BARRESI—My question is related to the line of questioning that Harry and Danna have raised. What are the possibilities of using your demonstration projects in order to raise money – an alternative source of funding? Have you looked at that as a possibility? You mentioned that we may have a sell job in trying to get local governments to move in a similar fashion to the way they did in Western Australia in terms of paying coordinators. Is there a place for some of these demo projects to sell the good message of what you are doing and being able to attract other funds?

Mr Polkinghorne—We actually look at it the other way in that these demonstration projects, to be done properly, because of their nature require considerable funds. In setting up the projects, because of the complex nature of catchment management it is very easy to narrow down the particular areas that the projects might operate in. We just know by experience that putting together that funding can be quite difficult. A successful project will attract additional interest but it needs to be successful in the first place before some people will come on board. Therefore, it is the same story where some leadership and some element of risk is involved. A further comment is that we also want to find the line between overfunding a project merely because it is a demonstration project – it is most unlikely that a project is going to be overfunded, but it is possible – and also keeping that project commercial in nature so that it has relevance to the other land-holders in the district. The project I talked about at Corrigin is a prime example where, on the one hand, it needs to finance a lot of activity to be able to demonstrate sustainability but, on the other hand, it wants the farmers that go in the gate to be able to identify and relate to the commercial practice on the farm.

Mr BARRESI—I just would have thought that there might have been scope for private funds through corporations whose very livelihood depends on successful farming techniques and the sustainability of the environment. Therefore, they might be a bit more willing to open their wallets for PR purposes or even just for the sake of their own company’s future.

Mr Polkinghorne—In each of the projects I have mentioned considerable funds have been provided by the private sector, and that is how they have actually funded the project. For example, in the Geelong based project, we know that there are some large corporates that are willing to finance and have financed who actually have very little to do with, and very little investment in, agriculture.

CHAIR—So do they do that for publicity or can they get a tax concession for it?

Mr Polkinghorne—In one case the corporate has asked that it is not publicly acknowledged in the literature that is provided. Therefore, I would have to ask them what their particular motives are. However, naturally, where there is a tax concession available, we would work through Landcare Australia Ltd to obtain that tax concession. That is always a major attraction.

Mr BILLSON—I have three quick questions: first, we have heard of the success of coordinated funding – sorry, let me describe it another way – bulk funding being made available by the Commonwealth both in a regional sense and even in an urban sense where catchment organisations, or catchment organisations and another agency, have dealt with the nitty-gritty of who specifically shall receive what amount within a given area where there is a large transfer of significant sums of money. I am quite attracted to that as an idea. Can I draw from you your response to trending that way but saying to those catchment organisations, ‘Sure, the money is there but we absolutely insist upon the research having been done, a strategy having been produced, realistic annual works programs having been developed and your proving it is all do-able before we give you a zack.’ That would mean those agencies would help us deal with the vandalism in Queensland on vegetation clearance and those sorts of things. They would become agents for having the states, the Commonwealth and even the local councils meet a level of performance so that they can get those large sums of money. I would be interested in your reaction to that type of model.

Mr Polkinghorne—The outline of the model is one that I favour. But I believe that, if you asked people to complete their research prior, there would be many projects that would stall because we still have a considerable amount to learn about how landscapes and how ecology works and how we manage – how we alter – the system for production purposes. I would also caution against placing natural resource management organisations, be they Landcare groups or other kind of groups, in a position where they are political agents. Just yesterday I spoke with a Landcare coordinator from Queensland who has been involved this week in some of the activity at Winton regarding the potential legislation concerning Queensland vegetation, and they can be placed in a very difficult position. Overall, the bipartisan approach that we have principally had, particularly at a Commonwealth level, has been highly valuable and we would like to preserve that, because it then means that the Landcare movement has wider acceptance within the community.

Mr BILLSON—Let us use this broad design thumbnail sketch: you would argue that the federal government in this current environment should be the ones pushing for an acceptable level of practice, of homework and of demonstrating the bona fides of other levels of government before funding is made available; or would you try to get whatever you could get done now and see what else you can do on the state policy level – or whatever the problem might be?

Mr Polkinghorne—It might happen to be a combination of both. What I would be looking for from the federal government is an approach that runs beyond 30 June 2002. The real issue, as I see it, for the Commonwealth is to develop a medium-term policy. People in regional Australia are very alert to the short-term nature of the policy that we have, and perhaps they are not aware of the amount of work and discussion that is going into developing some of that medium-term policy. But on any side of politics people are passionate about the environment that they live and work in. That is the lead that I would be looking for from the Commonwealth and that, in turn, may require some hard bargaining with state or regional authorities. However, I do believe that, in many cases where we have only partial knowledge, we have to proceed to some extent – again, it is a question of balance.

Mr BILLSON—On the financing of physical works, in our visit to South Australia one of the people providing evidence categorically said that water related projects – water efficiency and better delivery distribution systems for irrigation improvements – could well be self-funding; that they were commercially viable and justifiable in their own right; and that the business case was very strong because of the productivity benefits and the savings on water. My sense is that that would hold true for water because water of itself has value. I wonder to what extent that business case could be argued for land restoration, vegetation and grass improvement type projects and whether we should not look to saying to landowners, ‘There is commercial justification in you doing your own works. Government can provide you with coordinators, a clearing house for the best available information and support for regional cooperative projects.’

CHAIR—You are arguing for the old extension policies.

Mr BILLSON—What I was hearing from this person was that the government and taxpayers should look after the extension stuff and let the farmers pay for the works on the farm because they are commercially justified in that way. My sense is that his water bent probably skews his account of that. I am wondering what your view is at a broader level.

Mr Polkinghorne—I think you are asking a very broad question, and it is easier to focus on the water. One aspect is that commercially we have not valued our natural resource and in that regard we have not valued it for ‘commercial exploitation’ – if I can use the term – so that somewhere in the discussion that is a very important element. There are some developments there. Speaking from a land-holder’s point of view, some land-

holders – and it is more than just a few – feel that if they are to preserve the valuable environment that they have that might be in the form of a native grass or might be in a remnant vegetation form, they are looking for greater incentives than are currently available. The flip side of that is that once a lot of land-holders understand and know a little more about their local environment they will naturally put their own resources towards preserving that environment, and that event has worked well to date. My view – I will give my view after having made the comments – is that I would like to see land-holders supported for the long-term stewardship of particular pieces of vegetation or bird and animal life –

Mr BILLSON—So the non-productive stuff.

Mr Polkinghorne—Yes, the non-productive need to be more clearly supported in that regard. I feel that, while some of our programs have supported them in the short term, if we look 25 or 30 years into the future where there may possibly have been changes in land ownership, then it is a bit more difficult to think that that will be preserved.

Mr BILLSON—Just to close off this commercial side of it and the coordinators being self-funding through a cooperative of land-holders: while there are some examples of where that happens, my sense is that, if we are hoping for that to be the future, we are going to be disappointed. I looked at those people whom we met in South Australia. One the guys was just run off his feet, recognised for doing so and was working with about 40 land-holders. Now salary, oncosts, vehicle, \$75,000 grand a year and \$1,000 a farm, he is halfway there and he is run off his feet. Is that your sense of it when someone says that they will be able to self-finance? I just cannot see it happening in the long term and I am not sure how helpful the examples are where it is being done. I suppose it beats the hell out of nothing.

Mr Polkinghorne—Again, it is the case of what is good for one particular regional community might not be good for another. I believe that there are a number of coordinators that work with many more farmers than 40 and do it very successfully and very strategically.

Mr BILLSON—I should clarify that, he had 40 projects that are going at this one time. He obviously works with a broader bunch but there were 40 people who feel a direct benefit from his presence on their farm – that is probably a better way of describing what he is doing.

Mr Polkinghorne—If the coordinator is working with 40 projects, I believe the coordinator would be finding life extremely challenging.

Mr BILLSON—He looked exhausted.

Mr Polkinghorne—Certainly a real issue for many coordinators is that they work with numerous projects. The self-funding issue depends on the commitment of the community. I would not like to be prescriptive in saying that it is either achievable or totally not achievable, because we do have some communities in Australia who make decisions to place a very high value on certain assets that they might have within the community, and therefore they may choose to finance a coordinator in that regard. I think a general statement is that it is unlikely that the majority of Landcare communities are going to be able to self-fund a coordinator. I do not see the economic capacity in regional Australia to support that, given the other calls on their resources.

Dr LAWRENCE—Just one very quick question to conclude your observations about farmers being provided with incentives or some form of reward for long-term stewardship of the land, particularly where there is remnant vegetation or even equally the need to set aside certain areas of land for rehabilitation. Have you thought about a mechanism for doing that that would see the money actually used for that purpose rather than being suborned into the farmers' annual budget – because I have seen that happen before with some schemes. I am not saying they are dishonest but it is a bit tempting to use the funds. For instance, where money has been provided in Western Australia at times for fencing off remnant vegetation some of it has been used for fencing; that is clearly more economic in its focus than protecting the vegetation. What mechanisms can the government use that would assure it that the money was going for that purpose?

Mr Polkinghorne—I am familiar with the remnant vegetation fencing program in Western Australia. There are other people to whom you should ask that question because they have done quite a considerable amount of work in this area of providing incentives for landowners. Suffice to say that one has to establish a way of providing money, but there is also the ongoing public requirement to understand who is going to look after that and keep an eye on it. If it does have public value, one would think that it is appropriate to allocate some public resources towards supervising that in the long term also.

CHAIR—Is it the role of TCM committees to make sure that that is done?

Mr Polkinghorne—There may be examples – and I think there are already – of the so-called TCM committee fulfilling a role there. I am again very cautionary about turning some of the voluntary groups into regulators and whether that falls there or not, I am not sure; it depends on the specific proposal. I will look at it.

CHAIR—I have three final questions. First of all, in the advice that is given from Landcare, Rivercare, Bushcare and other groups involved, do we use the expertise that is available within our research institutions and our state government departments to give that up-to-date advice on management?

Mr Polkinghorne—I believe my view is similar to many other people's in that there is an enormous amount of information available. It is often quite difficult to access but can be accessed, and providing the capacity for people to access that information can actually help in its dissemination.

CHAIR—From what I gather you deal mainly with private land-holders in your advice but, of course, not all land is private land, there is public land as well. Do you think that the state governments are doing their fair share of managing the natural resource on the public lands?

Mr Polkinghorne—I have a view and a concern, particularly where there are large areas of public land that are set aside for the good of environmental presentation, that that land is not adequately managed. That may take the form of mammoth weed infestations. That situation is quite common where there are significant weed infestations on public land whereas the private landowners are under some kind of enforcement procedure, often from the authority that has control over the public land. The other aspect that is of concern is that bush-fire prevention on public land is sometimes inadequate compared with that which the local landowners might provide. They are just two examples. So again we come back to the issue of long-term management. Often it is a political move to preserve particular areas of land in the short term but it is not matched by adequate long-term management plans for that land.

CHAIR—Finally, this committee did some work on emissions trading and carbon credits last year, and I was just wondering whether that has been mentioned around the traps as some way of generating some income in this whole catchment management area.

Mr Polkinghorne—In my work, I have taken considerable interest in the greenhouse/carbon credit area. My observation at present – I have made this position public on a number of occasions – is that the corporates, if I can refer to them as corporates, have positioned themselves very well to take advantage of any benefits that might accrue from carbon trading. But my observation is that the farming community and farmer organisations have not been active in positioning themselves and perhaps asking even the preliminary question as to how they can position themselves to utilise those opportunities. It may well be a very simple answer in that it is in joint venture arrangements as is happening in Western Australia with the Department of Conservation and Land Management. However, I fear that the farming community, the land-holders, are going to be on the end of the queue when it comes to taking advantage and seeing what opportunities come up.

CHAIR—There is a potential there, if a market develops – it has not developed at this stage.

Mr Polkinghorne—Yes, I believe there is a potential there. A potential trader would look at the farming community and see many small units of trade. The challenge from our side is that it can be done. I believe there is a role for organisations like Landcare Australia Ltd in fulfilling its role to pull together some of the possibilities there.

CHAIR—I think we have had a pretty fair run at it. Thank you very much for your evidence, Mr Polkinghorne.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Billson**):

That the paper on *The role of community landcare coordinators in management* from the National Landcare Facilitator be accepted as exhibit No. 1.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Vale**):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by section (a) of standing order 346, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 12.35 p.m.