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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

Tuesday, 28 March 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 Billson, Mr Causley, Ms Gerick, Mrs Irwin and Mr Jenkins

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.

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Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

HARTLEY, Mr David, Executive Director, Sustainable Rural Development, Agriculture Western Australia; Commissioner for Soil and Land Conservation

HUMPHRIES, Dr Robert, Manager, Environment Branch, Water Corporation

LEYBOURNE, Dr Marina Lynne, Acting Manager, Catchment and Waterways Management Branch, Water and Rivers Commission

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage into catchment management. Committees gather evidence for their inquiries by inviting submissions from the public of interested parties, and then hold inspections and public hearings across Australia to talk to the people on the ground, in this case people who are involved in catchment management activities.

Yesterday and earlier today the committee met with the GeoCatch catchment program at Busselton, the Avon Catchment Network at Northam, and the Swan Catchment Council here in Perth. At today's public hearing we will hear from state government agencies involved with catchment management, the Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia, the Western Australian Municipal Association, and the Urban Hills Land Conservation Committee.

Before proceeding I advise the witnesses that the committee public hearings are recognised as proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect that the 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 a contempt of the parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should 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 representatives of the Water and Rivers Commission, the Water Corporation, and Department of Agriculture, Western Australia. We have received submissions from the Water and Rivers Commission, the Water Corporation, and the Western Australian government, and have authorised their publication. However, before we ask questions maybe you would like to give a brief introduction on your positions.

Dr Leybourne—I will begin. I do not actually want to go back to some of the things that the Water and Rivers Commission raised in its submission, but I would like to just give a very brief overview from our organisation's perspective.

To begin with, we look at catchment management as being a way of bringing all stakeholders together to work on agreed goals to achieve sustainable catchment management. For us the most appropriate mechanism is for the government to work in partnership with the community, and particularly with catchment groups, or what we call in Western Australia natural resource management groups. We look at catchment management as being very much the same as natural

resource management and so we look at it with that perspective, at a regional and subregional level.

I would like to provide for you just a brief overview of what natural resource management looks like in Western Australia. Basically what we have is a bunch of regional groups, which are the green ones at the top left—there are about six regional natural resource management groups—and then sub-regional groups underneath. Yesterday you went and met with GeoCatch, which is a subregional group in the south-west, and you will find the Avon and the Swan there as well, so you will see how those fit into our overall structure. That shows how the government agencies work with the natural resource management groups.

The main organisations are Agriculture Western Australia and the Water and Rivers Commission, which work with dry catchments and wet catchments. We work with the wet catchments—what we are terming wet catchments—which are the catchments that are more in the urban areas.

The other thing I would like to just quickly discuss is the fact that the Water and Rivers Commission obviously deals mostly with water resource management, and the catchment management approach is absolutely necessary in order to look at things such as clean and pristine water resources. So what we are looking at here is the fact that we go from the catchment through to the various providers of water to the end result, which is clean water for customers. The Water and Rivers Commission actually provides the focus at the catchment level to help the catchment resource managers to ensure, at the end of the day, that the water is going to be of a quality that is drinkable. Dr Humphries can provide more information on the middle section, which is the Water Corporation's responsibility.

I will not go through all the states, but you can see how Western Australia is broken up. On the left-hand side under 'catchment', there are the catchment management authorities, which is basically the Water and Rivers Commission working with the community. The centre part, under the two utilities, is really the Water Corporation's responsibility. But the Water and Rivers Commission has delegated some responsibility for catchment management to the Water Corporation in some water resource catchments, and that is why there is a little overlap into the catchment management area. I thought that just might help provide a better overview of water from a catchment to a tap perspective.

CHAIR—Thank you, Dr Humphries.

Dr Humphries—The Water Corporation is a public crown corporation in Western Australia, and we supply about 98 percent of the population's drinking water. There are a couple of minor utilities that do that regionally. Our view is that the full costs of catchment protection should be integrated into the price of water. That is why we are extremely happy to receive delegation authority from the Water and Rivers Commission, and we invest more than \$1.5 million a year in catchment protection, particularly of the hills catchments behind Perth, and the two large groundwater mounds that are on the coastal plain here.

It is the Water Corporation's view that drinking water catchment protection is of good standard in general in Western Australia, particularly for the metropolitan water supply. I think

it is fair to say it is a bit weaker in the regional areas, where in some cases we are extracting water from alienated catchments with private land in them. We are working with the Water and Rivers Commission to improve matters there, although I would hasten to say we do not have any gross water quality problems in those catchments. There is just a higher risk, both of contamination from nutrients and so on and also from pathogens like giardia and cryptosporidium.

At a broader level the corporation is concerned about the loss of available water resources, particularly in the south-west, and mostly from salinity. Basically, all of the rivers with inland catchments are now ranging from brackish to saline and that restricts the options, both for public water supply and obviously for environmental value protection. So we see that we have a role to cooperate with community groups in both urban and rural areas to assist in improving water quality outcomes, and particularly to avoid overinvestment in just one end of water quality protection, which is waste water.

I understand that you have spoken to GeoCatch. In that particular catchment the Water Corporation has installed a tertiary waste water treatment plant, which reduces the human nitrogen load by more than 80 per cent and the human phosphorus load by about 95 per cent. There was fairly strong community pressure to irrigate the remaining effluent to the tree lot, which would have cost another \$4.5 million. What we did instead was say that the main threat to Geographe Bay is nitrogen from agricultural sources, so instead of investing in the wood lot, we would invest both money and professional expertise in association with Water and Rivers to deal with the rural nutrient issue.

I guess our view is that using models of that nature there is a huge scope for industry to cooperate with both government agencies and community groups to get better outcomes, so we are quite strongly dedicated to doing that.

CHAIR—Thank you. Mr Hartley?

Mr Hartley—As I said before, I am representing Agriculture Western Australia, which is committed to developing sustainable land management systems. However, it is significant or relevant to this committee in the sense that what ends up in rivers and streams is the end result of your land management. Erosion, salinity, et cetera, can easily end up in streams and affect water quality. So our goal is sustainable land management systems with a primary focus on salinity, but also on the prevention of land degradation, soil erosion, tree clearing, and rising water tables.

We do this in two ways. The first is through regulation. We have a state act of parliament called the Soil and Land Conservation Act of 1945 which gives the commissioner the power to manage land and prevent land degradation. For example, if the commissioner believes that soil degradation will occur, he has the power to place a soil conservation notice over the particular parcel of land, which obligates the land manager to follow the practices as laid down by the commissioner. This is mainly used in the areas of clearing. Under this particular piece of legislation, with the way it is being implemented, we have now effectively reduced clearing down to a few hundred hectares of agricultural land a year.

The second major area where we use the act is in drainage. People wanting to undertake deep drainage to remove saline water are required to give the commissioner notification 90 days in advance, and the commissioner then decides whether to object and place a soil conservation notice over that land, or to approve the drainage going ahead. A third area that is not used as commonly is that of soil erosion, either by wind or water, if the commissioner believes that erosion may occur. The same applies: a soil conservation notice can be placed over that land, instructing the land manager to perhaps not cultivate, or to re-establish some sort of a cover.

The regulations are only used as a last resort. Our policy as an agency is certainly to engage with land-holders, and to work wherever possible in the partnership approach already described, and to use educational rather than regulatory means to try and achieve sustainable land management. The system that we use is through catchment management, starting at the very base level of land conservation districts, which are prescribed under the Soil and Land Conservation Act. Some 140 of these groups are active. They are advisory bodies to the minister and can recommend that the minister take certain action in that area to prevent land degradation. They also have the capacity to strike a rate or a levy and raise funds within their district for soil conservation or natural resource management purposes.

The next major area is the Landcare groups, which are voluntary community groups, as they exist throughout the rest of Australia as well. There are some 500 of these active in this state. We then go from that local level up to the regional natural resource management groups that Dr Leybourne has already mentioned. Once again the whole-of-government philosophy here is that we work in partnership with these groups. We are attempting to develop regional strategies with each of these groups, planning at a regional level to prevent land degradation and to manage our natural resources in a sustainable manner. We are also developing those plans at the level below that, the sub-catchment level, and you may have experienced this yesterday. At another tier below that, the focus catchment level, our approach as an agency is to select those catchments that are at risk as far as salinity or other degradation is concerned, and to give them intensive treatment or support for 18 months to two years in collecting information about their catchment, analysing that information, developing a plan, then having and implementing a catchment plan. That is an example of one that I can leave with the committee. It is quite a thick document and the culmination of a couple of years work. But it is actually a blueprint to implement a range of activities that should prevent rising water tables and soil erosion in a particular catchment, at individual farm level.

We are now supplementing that, though I should say that this process is very intensive and very slow. It is going to take us 15 to 20 years to cover the agricultural zone of Western Australia, which is about 18 million hectares. Fifteen to 20 years is a long time, and within this period there are catchments at risk that need to be advised of their level of risk. So we are complementing our focus catchment approach with a rapid catchment appraisal approach, in which we are endeavouring to cover the whole of the state within five years, providing people with advice on the risks they face with respect to salinity and on what their options are.

We feel as a government we have a moral obligation to make that information available to people. Once they have been advised of the level of risk and the options available, those groups will then in turn flow through into this focus catchment concept. Thanks, Mr Chairman.

CHAIR—Thank you. How often do departments like yours, and other relevant departments, meet to plan and coordinate and try and get a cross-government natural resources strategy?

Mr Hartley—Frequently. We have a natural resources chief executive officers group that meets every two to three months. There is also a senior officers group, which is my level, the level immediately below the CEOs, which meets about every two months—in fact we are meeting again this afternoon—or as required.

In addition to that, the CEOs of our four natural resource management agencies sit on the Salinity Council, which is a community based organisation that comprises about 30 representatives of the community and government. In my view it is a highly developed network for communication between agencies, and I guess, as you know, Mr Chairman, I am able to make direct comparisons with New South Wales, where I worked for 25 years, where this rarely happened at all. But there is a quite formal structure in this state that works very well.

Dr Leybourne—Mr Chairman, I could add that there is a Cabinet Standing Committee on salinity management which comprises the ministers of primary industry, water resources and environment, and is chaired by the Deputy Premier. They meet about every three months as well. They deal with a range of issues, primarily salinity, and the Salinity Council obviously reports to them, but they have been looking at broader natural resource management issues. As I said earlier, that basically encompasses catchment management.

In December last year they actually endorsed a framework which is basically looking at partnership agreements between government and community. This is their framework policy document that was endorsed by the Cabinet Standing Committee. It has not been released publicly yet, but it is in the public arena so I am also happy to leave it for you. The Cabinet Standing Committee oversees the natural resource management issues in the state, and that document was developed jointly by the chairs of the regional natural resource management groups, so it was that top line in the diagram I gave you earlier. Either the CEOs or senior officers from each of the four key government agencies meet every two to three months as well, as a sort of joint community government group. In fact, at each meeting at least two CEOs tend to turn up so it is a fairly high-powered group, and they jointly developed that particular policy document. That is actually helping to bring the government and community closer together.

CHAIR—You are confident then that the funding that does come through for a diverse group of people—Rivercare, Landcare, Dunecare or other groups—is money that is being well spent—that there is an overall plan and it is not being wasted on ad hoc projects?

Mr Hartley—I wish I could give you that assurance, but no, I do not think I can. I think there is a lot of room for improvement in the way community groups and government agencies spend those moneys. When the NHT mid-term review was on I was interviewed by the consultants for that and I was a little critical of the processes at the moment.

I think we have been going through an evolutionary process, learning as we go, but we still need to do a lot more in terms of being strategic, and having a strategic plan for projects that we fund. In the past I think there has been a tendency to fund a project in isolation from the overall

strategic plan if the project's proponents could make their case look good. It was and is a rather ad hoc process that I think we need to improve.

Dr Humphries—Could I just make a point, Mr Chairman. With the Water Corporation's environmental improvement initiative in the GeoCatch area, we have not initiated any actual projects yet, but they will be assessed in terms of their ability to maximise the reduction of nitrogen, phosphorus, and faecal micro-organism loss. There will be a simple common law agreement between any recipients of Water Corporation money because these projects will become privately owned assets, like a dairy waste pond or similar. So we are picking up that issue quite strongly in consultation with Agriculture and the Water and Rivers Commission in that specific catchment. That may serve as a useful model for extension.

CHAIR—The catchment management committees we have met over here have all said that they have identified priorities and hot spots where they want to spend their money. But of course that has to then be extended across the state, so the structure you have got in place here you think can identify hot spots where money should be targeted initially to try and overcome some of the problems that have been—

Dr Leybourne—What we are hoping is that the development of the regional strategies will help identify where the money would be better spent. I agree wholeheartedly with Mr Hartley's comments. I think things are improving; it is an evolutionary process. I think money is being spent in a less ad hoc manner than it has been in the past, but it can still be much better targeted. Sure.

CHAIR—How much state government money was shifted out when the federal money came in?

Mr Hartley—This is an accusation we get all the time from the federal bureaucrats. We do get accused of cost shifting. The amount of money that has been allocated to the program I manage—which is sustainable rural development—has steadily increased over the last four to five years. It has gone up from about \$18 million a year to \$20 million a year, so there certainly has not been any reduction. At the same time, federal money has increased substantially. I think the total NHT funding for this state is close to \$30 million per year, so there has been a substantial increase in Commonwealth money, that is true. But there has not actually been any decline at all—and I can only speak about the Agriculture portfolio—in state consolidated funding.

Dr Humphries—Mr Chairman, in my view—this is a personal view rather than a Water Corporation view—given the severity of the problems, particularly across the southern two-thirds of Australia, there is fairly severe underinvestment at both state and Commonwealth level. While \$1 billion sounds like a lot of money, the estimate to contain or even constrain salinity, let alone fix it, is probably in the vicinity of \$6 to \$10 billion. I am sure it would be similar for the Murray-Darling, if not more so.

CHAIR—Yes, it is a real challenge. Julia, have you got a question?

Mrs IRWIN—Thank you, Chair. Your submission emphasises the poor and infrequent enforcement of state legislation for land and water management. Is an overhaul of Western Australia's land management legislation needed?

Dr Leybourne—Some of the legislation is currently being overhauled. The Rights in Water and Irrigation Act, from my organisation's perspective, is going to parliament shortly. It is being extensively overhauled and extensively modernised as well. I think Mr Hartley could perhaps describe in more detail some of the issues related to agriculture, which is probably the more important legislation.

Mr Hartley—I think it does need an overhaul. We rely very heavily on the Soil and Land Conservation Act, which was last amended in 1982. Frequently, we need to rely on an act that is fundamentally about land degradation when we are trying to solve biodiversity problems, such as tree clearing and the impact it may have and also water quality problems. Too often we have to use the Soil and Land Conservation Act because we do not have other pieces of legislation which are adequate to protect water and biodiversity, so I would have to agree that there is a need to overhaul the legislation.

Our current legislation is also found a little bit wanting in the area of large-scale drainage projects. The legislation was designed to examine a drainage project on-farm, but with some proposals coming forward for huge canals, hundreds of kilometres in length, the legislation, which is basically about land degradation, is not adequate to cope with some of the environmental issues that subsequently—

CHAIR—What would they be used for, drainage? Would they have saline water or—

Mr Hartley—There are proposals being promoted by some federal politicians and former politicians which suggest that we should be draining saline water 300 kilometres from inland out to the ocean.

CHAIR—Pipeline to the sea. I have been through that in Victoria and New South Wales.

Dr Humphries—Just picking up David's point, could I say that for a project of that scale the Environmental Protection Act, which is a very robust piece of legislation, would kick in. We do not necessarily have a deficiency of state powers, but there is a mixture of old legislation and a mixed ability or even willingness to implement or use it. You can do nearly anything with the Environmental Protection Act because it has a provision for environmental protection policies, which are effectively amendments to the act, but they are a fairly cumbersome beast. Having worked in that agency trying to get some in place I found they take about 24 to 36 months each if they are contentious—and they certainly are when you are talking about infringing on people's perceived common law rights.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr BILLSON—Your submission differs quite markedly from others in relation to coordinated natural resource management legislation. I cannot think of another one that has so categorically rejected that overarching natural resource management legislative tool other than

yours, and you outline some reasons for it. My curiosity is triggered by another part of your submission, where you are suggesting that changing community attitudes is the way to make some progress in catchment management. Do you find that is a bit difficult to reconcile where you have, recognising the interconnectiveness of the task for changing public attitudes, but in a legislative sense, that interconnectiveness is not quite so clear?

Dr Leybourne—It would be nice to think that we could have combined legislation. I am actually a New Zealander; they really went to town in New Zealand and overhauled 57 different pieces of legislation into one. But the reality is that there are a number of different agencies and a number of different ministers and therefore trying to combine them is probably a bit difficult. And at the end of the day what we are really trying to do is to work in partnership with the community groups, using carrots rather than a legislative stick, and trying to change community attitudes from the ground up rather than trying to enforce them. And to work with them it is not necessary to have overarching legislation.

Mr BILLSON—So it is not necessarily a policy goal not to have the overarching pragmatic response to what you think is doable?

Dr Leybourne—No.

Mr BILLSON—The issue of local government drifts in and out of your submission. I am wondering if you would like to talk about the aspirations you have for local government's role, particularly in land management, land-use planning, even in the metro area, subdivisional design and stormwater issues that creates; and where you see local government's longer-term contribution.

Dr Humphries—I can say a little bit about the stormwater issue. The Water Corporation's view is that the administration of drainage does need reform, mostly because the Water Corporation in the metro administers or runs a main drainage system.

Mr BILLSON—What diameter pipe are you using as the trigger?

Dr Humphries—It is more like the FBI actually. Where drainage crosses a local government boundary we kick in, so it is effectively about transfer of water not size of pipe. And in Perth many of the drains are open. In fact, about 70 percent of Perth's rainfall is infiltrated more or less where it falls. This is by accident, partly because of the sandy soils. So there is not an extensive drainage network like those in many of the clay-based cities like Adelaide and Melbourne and so on.

However, the difficulty is that there is continuing pressure on the Water Corporation because our drains are the primary exit to important lakes and the Swan Estuary to improve water quality, but we have no catchment control powers and it is effectively from local government administered land that those contaminants are coming, with the odd exception of an illegal discharge which we can detect and terminate if we find it. But we are working on a revised drainage model in consultation with the Water and Rivers Commission to try and extend it to a full catchment basis. It is a bit of a case of watch this space, in the sense that it is work in progress, but I am optimistic that we could do that. A similar model probably should apply to

the six declared country drainage districts too, where a similar relationship between farm scale local government and then corporation main drainage exists.

Mr BILLSON—The resourcing issue is always a biggie.

Dr Humphries—Yes.

Mr BILLSON—In some other jurisdictions there are models in which a levy or a rate not dissimilar from what you have available under the Soil and Land Conservation Act is exercised, say, in the greater metropolitan area to raise funds to be applied up-catchment where people might not even recognise a problem exists, but which is the cause of what is more evident further downstream. You appear to have the tools. Why is that something that is not more widely exercised in Western Australia?

Dr Humphries—I think there are two reasons. One, the water quality—certainly from urban drainage—is pretty good in Perth. It is a very clean city, relatively low-gradient with sandy soils and, as I said, most of the run-off is trapped and infiltrated and in effect re-used as ground water. For the reach of drainage administration to be extended, new drainage districts have to be declared. For example, for the Avon component into the Swan Estuary there would have to be a drainage district extension into rural areas, and that really has not seriously been discussed at this juncture. We are looking to maybe pilot an integrated whole-of-catchment scheme with a willing local government authority, but of course there are sensitivities about a large water corporation sort of taking over a small local utilities drainage scheme.

Mr BILLSON—You will get over that though.

Dr Humphries—Sure. But the rate base is probably close to adequate to do that for the metro scale of catchments. It is not true for country catchments because it is current state policy not to rate rural drainage and the Water Corporation receives a community service obligation payment simply to cover the maintenance of the rural drains.

Mr BILLSON—Are you able to authorise direct transfers out of your budget into up-catchment areas?

Dr Humphries—Yes, there is nothing to constrain the corporation from doing it.

Mr BILLSON—Does that happen?

Dr Humphries—Only in the case of the Busselton based environmental improvement initiative that I mentioned earlier.

Mr BILLSON—And is that a suggestion that more of this is likely to happen in the future? What we are hearing, Dr Humphries, is that where the work needs to be done is where the resources are not—

Dr Humphries—Oh, yes, sure.

Mr BILLSON—And where people are most obviously impacted is where the resources are, but we need to somehow-

Dr Humphries—Yes, we would agree with that. This environmental improvement initiative program being run by the Water Corporation in the Busselton area is the first manifestation of that. The board of the corporation have approved it as a generic model. At the same time we have to operate in a commercial manner, so we have to make a business case for extending it. If you like, there is a commercial constraint to the extent we can do it. We would see there needs to be a serious duty of care ethic amongst urban and rural catchment landowners too. I mean, you cannot do everything in-drain, and focusing on the drainage corridor and best management practice-type interventions will simply not be adequate in its own right. It has to be a combination of both.

Mr BILLSON—Just to close on that theme: On your rating notices is there some interest in putting a designated catchment levy hypothecated to upper-catchment activities so that the commercial case is overcome and the resources become available?

Dr Humphries—We are discussing that internally. I think it is fair to say there is a fairly high level of government sensitivity about levies, and because we are a crown corporation if we unilaterally do it there may be some interesting comments. But we are certainly looking at it. For example, one option we are looking at, not related to catchments, is offering our consumers a green power additional levy of \$10 or \$20 a year, saying that all of your water and waste water services will be fuelled by sustainable energy just to assist Western Power to build up their greenhouse stuff.

CHAIR—Could I just pick up on what you are trying to flesh out there. In your opinion, do you think that the community is well enough educated—and I suppose I am zeroing in on city Australia here—to understand that the problems we have in these catchments are something that you cannot point a finger at anyone for, they are a problem because of our past management, we did not understand, we were ignorant. Do you think that the community is well enough educated to accept that environmental levy to try and address some of those problems?

Dr Humphries—I think the answer would be yes. When South Australia, specifically the Adelaide coastal plain, did it the community response to that was, ‘Why isn’t it more?’ We certainly have not done it in Perth because there is somewhat of a cant against levies in general.

CHAIR—So, the big problems are out there in the big catchments?

Dr Humphries—Sure.

CHAIR—How do you address it? It is a real problem.

Dr Leybourne—This weekend the state government is releasing a revised salinity strategy which proposes a salinity levy. At this stage—

CHAIR—Across whom?

Dr Leybourne—Across the whole of Western Australia, as a voluntary levy. That has been—

Mr BILLSON—How voluntary is it? I mean, we have voluntary school fees, if you do not pay them, you miss out on something.

Dr Leybourne—I think the intention was to use the word ‘voluntary’ to see what the reaction was. It was leaked, deliberately I think, to the papers about six weeks go. So there has been a bit of a debate in the papers about it and there have been a lot of letters to the editor, both in favour of and against. The idea was that a greater burden would be placed on urban land-holders to help solve some of the salinity issues.

CHAIR—Residents of Australia, I suppose.

Dr Leybourne—Yes, basically. You have the same thing in the Murray-Darling Basin as well. So it has been an interesting debate generated by the newspapers as to what the salinity level might look like. Some of the comments have been, ‘Well, why just salinity, why not make it a broader environmental levy?’ And there have been questions, ‘Why make it voluntary?’ I think the word ‘voluntary’ was used to gauge reaction in the first instance. What the government is going to is not decided yet.

CHAIR—Do you think that the community would have the confidence in your department—for instance with the information that was available—to say that they would accept that, or is it just some ambit claim by the department?

Mr Hartley—Our agency monitored the newspaper letters to the editor and found it ran about three to one against the idea of a levy. My assessment of that, to answer your original question, is I do not think the community is ready or understands yet the connection between the diffuse activities that occur out there on this huge area of land and what ends up in the streams in Perth and the Swan River here. Neither from salinity nor blue-green algae—only a week or so after this debate occurred in the newspaper we had a massive blue-green algae problem in the river and I do not think the general public drew the connection between blue-green algae and land management issues. So I think we have a fair way to go to educate the community to accept the levy.

Mrs IRWIN—Actually, that was what I was going to follow on with. The government has to explain this to the wider community, ‘We have got a problem, we need your help to solve it.’ Just one small group of people cannot do it.

Dr Leybourne—Yes, we look at the blue-green algae as an ideal opportunity to perhaps provide that education. It was interesting that some farmers in the eastern wheatbelt, where the nutrients were coming from, did not see the connection either.

CHAIR—That is true.

Dr Leybourne—They could not understand that what they were doing on their property several hundred kilometres away was actually affecting the Swan River.

CHAIR—The slopes of New South Wales are saying exactly the same thing.

Dr Humphries—Could I make a general point which I think is very important. There is another really critical element to the issue of understanding here, and that is when we as communities make the decision to urbanise or develop rural land, we are implicitly making the decision to degrade water quality. To me there is quite a significant level of naivety about what is possible to achieve having made those land use decisions and so on.

The Peel-Harvey estuary south of Perth is probably one of the best examples of estuary restoration in the world. There we have absolutely stopped very severe blue-green algal problems. The Swan bloom, by the way, was a mere tickle compared with what used to happen in the Peel-Harvey. That was basically solved by engineering surgery on the estuary, by increasing flushing. There have been significant improvements or reductions in nutrient loss to the estuary, but they in their own right would never have achieved the outcome. If you like, there was an implicit social contract between the government and the urban community to fund this \$50-\$60 million hole to improve flushing, and an expectation that farmers would do their bit to give a balanced outcome by reducing and managing fertilisers. But I do not think that the social contracting aspect was sufficiently robust. That harks back to my general point about duty of care.

CHAIR—So we can live with some of this, you are just saying we need to get a sense of the balance?

Dr Humphries—I think people have to be educated about the art of the possible too. The example that comes to mind is in the Peel-Harvey system, in that part of the lower Serpentine where there are some tidal lakes which have not been fixed by the channel. They are simply too remote, they are too small, they are still getting relatively large phosphorus loads through them. And there is something like 165 times too much phosphorus coming through to have the lowest lake, Goegrup, in good condition. You have to completely close down agriculture in the catchment to solve that problem or do something radical like divert the Serpentine River, which is delivering the nutrients away from the lake. That is the reality of that situation. It would be multimillion dollar, highly intrusive, and it would clearly engender all sorts of concerns.

Mr BILLSON—Can I just take you back though to your opening comment. You are saying a decision to subdivide inherently equals damage to natural systems.

Dr Humphries—Sure.

Mr BILLSON—It has been put to us that it would be less so if you guys were more active at the point of subdivision, looking at lot-yield subdivisional design, protection of remnant vegetation, stormwater run-off coefficients, velocity and direction of your outfall drains, just to name a few.

Dr Humphries—I fully agree with that.

Mr BILLSON—In other word, if there was a more proactive step by the Water Corporation to work with local council to formulate subdivisional plans with a greater eye to those things

and habitat restoration and those sorts of things. In a great city we are obviously going to have a whole stack more humans coming to live here.

Dr Humphries—I agree with that, and in fact the Water Authority, which is the immediate predecessor of the Water Corporation, really initiated water-sensitive urban design, which is now WA Planning Commission policy. It is a policy statement rather than a statutory enforced policy and virtually all new subdivisions now have some element of that, and the Water Corporation has nutrient-attenuating and other structures built in. The difficulty is that we do not have technically mature fixes to some of the particular Perth Swan coastal plain problems. But, yes.

CHAIR—How do we raise this issue in the community's mind? Do we have to wait until our standard of living collapses before we start to raise in the community's mind that we do have a problem?

Mr Hartley—I think the solution is time, and events like we saw here, with blue-green in the Swan River, really did focus people's minds on what it means when the river gets closed down for a week or 10 days, and you cannot water ski and you cannot fish and you cannot swim. I think unfortunately it is going to take a number of events like that, and time, before people draw the connection between broader catchment management and what ends up in our streams and rivers.

CHAIR—People tend to sit back and say, 'Oh, the magic government can fix this.' We do not take any taxes from people, we just have this pot of gold and we can fix this. Do you think you can get that message through? How do we get that message through?

Dr Humphries—I think that the problem is that there is a lack of realisation or unlinking of personal responsibility in these things. People washing their cars on the verge do not realise they are contributing to the next algal bloom in the Swan. I am not sure how you can easily get sufficient importance attached to this. It really needs to be in the top three, four or five things that urban and rural land managers do to get serious action. Just like getting a wheat crop in on time—if you do not plant on time, you will not get one next spring. It really needs to be on that level of importance. In my view there probably needs to be some improved legal underpinning, as well as aggressive government education and support programs, to ensure that technically stupid things that waste money are not done, which I think has been a problem.

CHAIR—So does your corporation have an advertising campaign on television or—

Dr Humphries—We run a very strong water conservation advertising campaign every year and that achieves about a nine or 10 per cent saving off the gross water usage in Perth.

Mr BILLSON—I think Ian's point, though, is it is a bit bigger issue than that.

Dr Humphries—Oh, yes.

Mr BILLSON—Where does natural resource water management sit in the destiny of your state? Now, I see it is pretty fundamental. If you ruin your natural systems your productive

capacity is going to suffer so it is clearly an economic issue. There are lifestyle implications to living in a place like Perth when you cannot swim and ski or those sorts of things, and the whole amenity of your living space is deteriorated. That has significant impact on the future of the whole game here in Western Australia. Is it getting pushed at that level, as a compelling strategic issue, for the state and the leadership to home in on?

Dr Humphries—I think my colleagues in the lead agencies—the Water Corporation is fairly strong in the areas where we have a direct interest, but we do not have a statewide mandate in natural resource protection. I think it is for Marina or David to probably—

Dr Leybourne—We have had a television campaign as well. In fact, it has been fairly closely linked to the Water Corporation's things as well, on bore use and other issues relating to water resource management. I was not involved in the development of it, so I have only been the recipient, having seen it on television. It is amazing how many times I have seen it considering I never turn the TV on. So I think it has been reasonably effective. Certainly the algal bloom has obviously helped as well, but the impact of the Water and Rivers Commission has increased a lot in the last few months. I think that has been a combination of the television campaign and the algal bloom; the amount of publicity we have had through the papers as well.

CHAIR—Under the licence conditions, of course, community service advertising does occur. So maybe it could be done on television through that. In terms of the licences there is some community service advertising in their licence. Maybe we should be looking at it in the bigger picture because it is not just the urban areas, as Bruce says—that is probably the minor one even though the concentrations might be greater—it is the large catchments, where there are very few people, which are the real issue.

Mr Hartley—Agriculture Western Australia has been fairly careful about what messages it sends to farmers. We have tried to balance their thinking at a catchment level, to get them to remember that what happens on their farm affects the whole catchment, without blaming them. Farmers are very, very sensitive about being blamed for salinity problems, which they in turn will say have largely been induced by government policy in years gone by. So we have to be pretty careful about trying to balance their responsibility on a catchment level with not pushing too hard to blame them. We certainly have not undertaken any advertising campaigns about the broader impacts of their actions.

CHAIR—In the Murray-Darling we are still coming to terms with information, we are gradually building up information about where the problems are and how they are affecting other areas. What sort of information base do you have here in Western Australia?

Mr Hartley—Well, certainly much better than the eastern states in terms of our knowledge of salinity and the causes of it and where it is a major problem. We have a fairly good GIS—geographic information system.

CHAIR—Is that because it sits on top of the ground over here with dry land salinity?

Mr Hartley—The minds here have been focused on it for 40 or 50 years. It is only a very recent problem in New South Wales. It started with places like the Liverpool Plains, Inverell,

Wagga, Yass, Gunning and so on, but it was not large enough for the community as a whole to appreciate that there was a serious problem. It did not matter that people like the Agriculture Department in New South Wales had been saying for 15 years that this was the tip of the iceberg. The message really was not getting through.

Over here, people have had to live with the problem for so long because the water tables are much shallower here. That is the fundamental problem—the distance between the watertable groundwater here and the surface and the rootzone of the plant is considerably less than in the eastern states, and that is why the problem has emerged much earlier here and people's minds have been focused on it. It is a real problem affecting large areas of the landscape.

CHAIR—So you would be confident you have got a fairly good database here?

Mr Hartley—Yes.

Mrs IRWIN—How do you feel about a national database? A few of the groups and organisations we have been speaking to are saying it would be good if there was a national database.

Mr Hartley—Well, it would obviously be a pretty good thing. We are fairly self-sufficient over here in the west at this stage, but it would be good to have a national database so that we could assess the magnitude of the problem on a national level and see what we can learn from places like Western Australia that, in salinity, are a bit ahead of the east, and so on.

Mrs IRWIN—Sharing ideas.

Mr Hartley—Sharing ideas.

Dr Humphries—I thought the national land and water audit had that as its major task, actually.

Mr BILLSON—How do you look after your volunteer communities? The relationship can be strained at times, but by the same token, without that volunteer effort—given the investment that is required to address some of these problems—I am not sure how we are going to get there. There seems to be this tension: 'We love and need the volunteers but, gee, they can be a pain sometimes.' That is the message we get. How do your organisations try and involve the volunteers, look after them, and get the value out of them in terms of your programs and their personal desire to make a positive contribution?

Dr Humphries—I will make two comments about that. I am sure David and Marina have got things to say too but, for example, wherever there is an urban drainage catchment group, the Water Corporation is either a convener or a participant. It is normally the Swan River Trust or the Water and Rivers Commission that we work with on those. A problem from the Water Corporation's point of view—and we are relatively wealthy—and certainly for Treasury-funded agencies, is being able to resource those groups adequately. Basically, agency budgets have been declining in real terms nationally, certainly at state level, for more than a decade now. Yet community awareness and wish to participate is going up, so there is a real tension and

resourcing difficulty there. That is even true for the Water Corporation, and we have the same fetish about full-time equivalent numbers as everybody else. However, we try and do that and meet with them.

The main difficulty we have is trying to get agreement about exactly what to do, if you like, balancing good scientific engineering appraisal of what is possible and what is worth doing with community desire to do things, and frequently they are a bit out of whack. David and Marina might like to comment on that. That is often the key—it is the resourcing issue, plus sometimes disagreements, and without being seen to manipulate it or be too big-brotherish, if you see what I mean.

Dr Leybourne—David would probably be the best person to talk on this, but I agree with you, it is a huge problem, particularly in a state like Western Australia, where distances are huge. And for the volunteers, particularly if you look at regional and our own groups and the more local catchment groups, it is the distances they have to travel for meetings, the cost of actually going to those meetings, that is so large. In fact, you will have an opportunity this afternoon to talk probably a bit more about the subject with the Urban Hills Land Conservation District Committee because all members of that committee are volunteers except for the community Landcare coordinator who is attached to that group. That is a paid officer and provides some support that way. But Agriculture Western Australia is the main organisation supporting community groups, so they would have more to say.

Mr Hartley—Yes, we are running into a very serious volunteer burnout problem, and you have probably picked that up around Australia. As an organisation we pay a combination of sitting fees and travel expenses for all of our peak bodies and some of our regional bodies, but for only a relatively small proportion of the total number of people involved in the Landcare movement. I think we need to be looking to do more in terms of giving support because I think we are getting extremely good value for money from some of these regional communities with the very large number of hours that are put into natural resource management issues and the relatively small contribution by governments to their operating expenses.

Mr BILLSON—I get the feeling sometimes that sustainable natural resource management is as much about sustainable human resource management as anything, with the effort that goes on out on the ground. We are trying to find models, experiences and evidence that shows what works so we can work these through our systems and maybe share that more generally. If you had one thing you needed to select from your experiences that was the kernel of success, what would you pick from your experiences in Western Australia? What would you say is an essential ingredient if catchment management is going to work?

Dr Leybourne—My essential ingredient is effective community Landcare coordinators who are well-positioned. That is one element that is a little ad hoc at the moment.

Mr BILLSON—Horsepower on the ground.

Dr Leybourne—Yes. But the community Landcare coordinators' primary role is to coordinate the activities so that volunteers can actually work on their farms, and together, without spending time on a lot of the admin and coordinating roles. And I think good

community Landcare coordinators are highly effective in the areas that they operate. We obviously get a mixture, we get good and bad ones and some groups that do not work so well, but certainly those that are effective have done incredible jobs.

CHAIR—That is because we have cut out extension in our departments, isn't it? We have followed the New Zealand experience.

Mr Hartley—I think that is a fair comment. I think it is replacing what happened in the old days, when the department of agriculture had their local friendly agronomist or extension officer there. It used to work very closely, yes. It is irrefutable that they are not there in the numbers that they used to be 20 years ago, and I think that the CLCs are certainly filling that void in the community.

Dr Humphries—I would just like to comment from my personal experience. This is not a Water Corporation view necessarily, but from the late 1970s to 1992 I was involved in various capacities with the Peel-Harvey restoration project, and that had about five critical ingredients in my view, all of which have to line up.

One was bipartisan political commitment, which lasted the duration, and the short-termism of electoral cycles is clearly antagonistic to getting good attack on decadal and 100-year time span problems. The second element was perfectly adequate resourcing. And I am not aware that my colleagues have ever experienced that, but those days were luxury, quite frankly. It is hard to document, but my rough estimate is that something like \$1 million to \$1.5 million a year was spent investigating the problem for eight or nine years. Then a head of community impatience built up, you know, 'We've got to get the boffins off the case and do something.' Then there was cabinet commitment to the funding and \$50 million to \$60 million was spent on the engineering solution. But again, I am not sure what the budget was—between \$0.5 million and probably \$1 million a year on continuing catchment activities through the Department of Agriculture's Pinjarra office. And the other really important thing was that there was a clear focus for the activity. I think a real danger with integrated natural resource management is that people put 30 problems on the table ranging from big to small, acute to chronic, and try and deal with them all at once.

The advantage of the Peel-Harvey thing was that phosphorus was the main concentration. The reason for that was because the algae in the estuary was a nitrogen fixer, so controlling nitrogen from the catchment would not have fixed the estuary. So the objective of the management strategy was to force the estuary into phosphorus starvation and therefore control the algae, and the combination of increased flushing from the channel with better phosphorus management by farmers and intensive animal operations, which occurred over about a decade, has largely achieved that.

The last element was that the problem has been prevented from being made worse. Reinvention of bad land use decisions has been prevented by very strong planning controls, by linking an environmental protection policy with state local planning controls so that things like septic tanks are limited, while irrigated horticulture—which is extremely polluting—has effectively been banned from the catchment. There is no new clearing, no new drainage, et cetera. These things have been quite rigorous. That is the good side of it. The bad side of it is

that the whole process has been seen to be top down: the community was not adequately consulted, it was inflicted on them. There is some level of grumpiness about that.

So, I am not sure we got the balance right but it certainly delivered restoration in that particular case. It was also technically suitable to deliver that restoration, and that is not globally true either. The ratio between the size of the catchment and the size of the estuary was right to deliver that, but if you have a huge catchment and a tiny receiving water body, other than a diversion around it, you really cannot manage it. But that to me is the nub of the most successful thing I have had personal involvement in. And similarly for the protection of the drinking water catchments, there is very strong patrolling, adequate funding and a good legal basis again.

Mr JENKINS—Just to change tack, what is going to be our response in global trade terms? Are we going to be beat up upon because we are not doing the right thing in using sustainable agricultural practice?

CHAIR—The non-tariff trade barriers.

Mr Hartley—We have pre-empted this, in that there is already anecdotal evidence coming out of Europe. The Europeans are starting to look fairly hard at issues like greenhouse, and make assessments on products produced throughout the world according to their greenhouse ratings. They could easily say, ‘That’s a global issue and we’d be justified in not buying Australian wheat because of the greenhouse emissions associated with its production and transport to market.’

We are attempting to institute what we call environmental management systems, systems of accrediting various agricultural practices so that we can certify them and say that these products are produced under environmentally sustainable conditions. We are in the very early stages of identifying four or five major indicators of what constitutes sustainability and then trying to match up with that some half a dozen of the significant best management practices that will then achieve improvements in those indicators.

We hope to have something up inside a couple of years, something that really will work, but we see it as a long-term project of trying to change the way we produce so that we can satisfy the world, and particularly the Europeans. We have seen it with hormonal growth promotants, we have seen it with animal welfare issues, and I think we will see it with greenhouse and then probably salinity—when they start to use those sorts of issues as reasons for not buying our products.

Mr JENKINS—Do you think that they are likely to be impressed by this cooperative model, where you hand out the carrots to get to the right behaviour, or are they going to mark us down because even under the limited legislative provisions that we have had, we have never used them, and that we do not go down that path of using the stick when it is there and—

Mr Hartley—I think they will judge us on the outcomes we get rather than the process. They will be looking to ensure that we have at least changed direction in terms of the major indicators, even though we may not get a truly sustainable system overnight. If we can show, for

example, that we have slowed down the rate of rising water tables, which is the first stage in combating salinity, if we can show that we have effectively stopped clearing and therefore emitting greenhouse gases, I think that will be a strong indicator. It is my view that they will judge us on the outcomes rather than the process.

CHAIR—I am a cynic in that area because I just wonder how much of it is environmental protection and how much is protection for their own product. Thank you very much, it has been very interesting. We have had several documents handed to us. The committee will accept the material from the Water and Rivers Commission on catchment management in Western Australia as an exhibit. Would a member please move that the exhibit for the Water and Rivers Commission be accepted as exhibit No. 2?

Mrs IRWIN—I will.

CHAIR—Thank you.

[12.35 p.m.]

ESBENSHADE, Dr Henry, Director, Natural Resources Management, Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia

WALKER, Mrs Susan Lesley, Chairman, Natural Resources Management Committee, Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. We have received a submission from the Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia and have authorised its publication. Before we ask questions would you like to give an opening statement?

Mrs Walker—I think most of what—

CHAIR—Is in there?

Mrs Walker—Yes.

CHAIR—We will proceed to questions.

Mr BILLSON—Thanks for coming. The question of an integrated natural resource management approach has come up everywhere we have travelled. The Western Australian government response differs from what we have heard elsewhere. They would rather not take that coordinated legislative approach but seek cooperation between the various agencies that manage bits of the natural system. Does your association have a view on that, and how do you see your interests well accommodated in that sort of an outlet?

Mrs Walker—We see it better accommodated without a legislative framework—not a statutory type association, but more a voluntary type association, so that it becomes community based and the community actually own it. Usually if it is an agency based one the community do not feel they own it; they feel it has been a tops-up approach rather than coming from the grassroots. But we do need a much better integrated approach because the problems go across not just land but land and water so that we need to involve the Water and Rivers Commission as well as Agriculture Western Australia.

Mr BILLSON—So that model your association has keeps an eye out on all these different areas of activity—to put your view and to make sure your constituency has its interests represented. Is that how it works now, or—

Mrs Walker—Yes, and we also feel that natural resource management should be integrated with regional development so that you do not have cross-cutting, to ensure that all projects fit within both frameworks, that somebody suddenly does not come up with a great project that is really bad for resource management.

Mr BILLSON—So you are pretty relaxed with the model being pursued here?

Mrs Walker—Well, we have not seen the final draft of the model that is being pursued.

Mr BILLSON—But the noises, you—

Mrs Walker—Well, the noises worry us with regard to statutory recognition. A lot of the time some of the community representatives are not perceived by the community to be community representatives; that they are ministerial type representatives rather than the community choosing their own representatives, and that is causing some hassles.

Mr BILLSON—So that the appointments of New South Wales and Victoria on these sorts of things need a list of skills so that the competency within the organisations or the boards or the committees covers the types of impacts that you would be considering. Would you like to see some elected representation to work alongside technical experts?

Mrs Walker—Well, it would be hard to elect representatives given that we have two producer bodies in Western Australia.

Mr BILLSON—That is a fair point.

CHAIR—Could I just expand a little bit on some of those areas. The previous witnesses, one of them, I just do not recall which one, said that farmers in particular are saying, 'Well, don't blame us for the problem, we're only following advice received in the past,' and I suppose that is true to a point. Do you believe that the advice that the farmers and graziers are getting at the present time is adequately helping them to change their land practices to try and address some of these issues?

Mrs Walker—We are not getting much advice out of government departments because there is no extension service available. They will only work with groups—

CHAIR—So is there anything on the Internet or something like that? Most farmers I know probably do not have the Internet, but is there any sort of advice there? Do they have it on the Internet?

Mrs Walker—Not that I have picked up but I do not spend much time on the Internet.

CHAIR—So the only coordination you have got is through these catchment management groups where the farmers belong to those and you get some advice through—

Mrs Walker—We do not actually have many catchment management groups. We have a number of small groups and we still have our land conservation district committee. Some of the areas have those groups and some areas are actually trying to form much larger groups to ease the burden on the volunteers. In my particular area we are trying to link two land conservation district committees together under an incorporated body which will then lessen the admin load on farmers, and under that particular incorporated group there are about five or six catchment groups who go off and do their on-the-ground work without having to worry about all the admin. We have a community Landcare coordinator who helps with a lot of those sorts of areas.

CHAIR—So is the coordinator able to get the information that you think is needed?

Mrs Walker—Yes, she gets information and she also organises field days and she attends the meetings of the catchment groups if they need help. She helps them write funding submissions.

CHAIR—In the past probably there would be demonstrations on properties of soil conservation, agriculture, new products and new varieties. Does that type of thing not occur any more?

Mrs Walker—There are some field days but, again, the community Landcare coordinator will let everybody know it is on so if they want to go they are able to go. But if it is to a distant place, she would be able to take as many as she can fit in her car.

CHAIR—So if, for instance, government came over the top with the big stick and said thou shalt do certain things, would that place very severe financial burdens on property owners? Could they actually comply with conditions that would be put in by statute?

Mrs Walker—Not if it was going to be a financial burden because, as you are well aware, the commodity prices are low and people do not have that spare cash to go into Landcare projects.

CHAIR—I suppose the whole of this debate comes down to the point that you were talking about, that you would prefer to see the voluntary implementation of some of those things. Julia knows that I agree with that, but the point is that if you are not getting the information out there, how is it going to work?

Mrs Walker—But we are getting information out there through our CLCs; because we have had community newspapers, the community newspapers will allow the CLC space in all of them, and the people read their community newspapers. They might not go and buy the *West Australian*, but there are lots and lots of community newsletters in Western Australia. In my particular area, there is the *Wellstead Whisper* and the *Manypeaks Murmur* and the *Plantagenet News*. There is a lot of information. Our community Landcare coordinator would put out, say, two pages a month.

CHAIR—What about the famous recalcitrant, what about someone who says, ‘Well, it’s not my problem, I’m not going to do anything about this’?

Mrs Walker—We are getting fewer and fewer people saying that.

CHAIR—Is that peer pressure, do you think—

Mrs Walker—Well, I think it is a softly softly approach and people are now beginning to realise.

CHAIR—Or you get a change of owner, hopefully.

Mrs Walker—Yes.

Mr JENKINS—What concerns me is that I am not sure there is a sort of overall whole-of-government approach in the absence of some form of legislative base. Can you give me a comment on perhaps whether the myriad different departments have a different culture from the way in which they interact with the community?

Mrs Walker—We mainly see Agriculture Western Australia and Water and Rivers. We do not tend to see many other departments out there.

Mr JENKINS—CALM is not involved?

Mrs Walker—Well, to a very minor degree. CALM we only see if there are plantation issues.

CHAIR—This is forestry plantations?

Mrs Walker—Yes. But we do not tend to see them with any other issues at the moment. It may differ when the split goes through. As you are probably aware, they are going to split the department and that might make a difference.

Mr JENKINS—I got the impression yesterday that some of the groups—definitely the community—were able to influence the behaviour of the agencies on the ground, so something might be happening here in a tall building in Perth. Through the agencies being directly involved in a community based group, that community based group, because it could give a clear indication of what they wanted, had some ability to influence the players on the ground.

Mrs Walker—Well, to a minor extent, because our agency people say that they can only be on our committees as consultants and cannot take any part in the decision making. That is the message we have been getting from the agency people in our area.

Mr JENKINS—In playing that consultancy role do they open up to what the possibilities are?

Mrs Walker—No, they tend to do that to our CLCs. The big breakdown in the system is that they tend to talk to our community Landcare coordinators rather than to the community itself. That is causing problems because the community feel they are being left out of the equation in certain areas. Although the community employs the Landcare coordinator, the agency calls them into meetings, but we do not get the feedback from the meetings.

Mrs IRWIN—Just referring to your submission, you mentioned the role of federal and state governments and the community but you did not mention local governments or the private sector. So what do you think the role of local government should be?

Mrs Walker—They should be involved in a lot of areas; they are very reluctant to become involved. They are concerned that they will have enormous financial responsibilities placed on them if they become involved.

Mrs IRWIN—What do you think the private sector's involvement should be in catchment management?

Mrs Walker—That is very hard to decide because it would vary in the area you were in. If it was a very remote area, it is probably no. Alcoa has been involved in a lot of areas in the wheatbelt. I live in the very south of the state and there has been no involvement there, in the pastoral areas.

Mrs IRWIN—Why do you think this is—mainly because of education again? Do we get back to that, people are not aware?

Mrs Walker—I do not think a lot of people are aware of what is going on. There has been some really good work done. We have a waterway that is now miles better than it was 10 years ago. It is now clear. We have an Oyster Harbour catchment group and they have been working on the Kalgan River. What came down the Kalgan River was just atrocious and now it is clear as it runs into the Oyster Harbour, which is part of the Albany Princess Royal Harbour.

Mr BILLSON—With the local council connection, it has been put to us by local government associations and some individual councils that, if only they were given more money, they would play a bigger role. My suspicion is that there are probably more sexy things councils would do with that money than direct it into natural resource management. Is that your sense of it, or do you feel that if local government were given greater recognition and greater accountability that they may—

Mrs Walker—We have tried to involve them with our community Landcare coordinator and certainly there is an involvement with the land conservation district committees, that there is a local government representative on all of those committees and yet—

Mr BILLSON—It amounts to nothing.

Mrs Walker—Yes.

Mr BILLSON—Do your councils see that they have a role in working towards the long-term vitality of their communities and longer-term economic objectives, and if that is the case how do you feel about natural resource management? Is that what you are seeing?

Mrs Walker—Yes. And that was why we were saying that, if they integrated the regional development, perhaps we may get more involvement from our local councils because then they would say, 'Oh well, it's this whole integrated approach, maybe we should become involved.'

CHAIR—Do you think councils are aware, as we were told yesterday by the Avon committee, that in fact there is a real risk that 30 per cent of the economy could collapse if something is not done, so that would then have big impacts on councils and communities? Do you think they are aware of that?

Mrs Walker—Some of them are and a lot of them are not, because in some areas—in the Serpentine-Jarrahdale area—the local council are heavily involved. I think they are in the Peel,

in some of the wheatbelt areas they are, and in the pastoral areas I would say they were not, and in my south-west area they are not, but some of the south coast, Geotech, round Busselton, councils are involved. So it does depend on which part of the state you are talking about.

CHAIR—It was also put to us out at the Avon committee that, if there is a partnership between all spheres of government, the community and the land-holders, and the decisions are taken at a local level, then the hard-nosed locals will drive it to make sure that you get some results, some efficient results. So we really need to get them all involved and everyone participating. I am probably disappointed that you say that local government is not getting involved in it. We need some more education there.

Mrs Walker—Yes.

Ms GERICK—Excuse me, Chair, I think if you look at the Serpentine-Jarrahdale Council, they are very close to the metropolitan area. It is one of those councils that rims the metro area, and coming originally from the country I think one of the things you will find is in the remote communities you are not going to get Internet, you have only got radio and TV. The local governments are so concerned with other issues that these probably are not reaching the top of their pile yet.

But I suppose the next question is: in that case how can communities such as yours that are remote get your local knowledge in so that it is getting fed into the system?

Mrs Walker—Well, that is a very interesting question.

Dr Esbenschade—There is your letter that has not been answered.

Mrs Walker—We have tried writing to the minister who deals with regional development to see if we can get this integrated. Unfortunately we have had no response to the letter that I wrote.

Ms GERICK—When did you write the letter?

Mrs Walker—18 November.

Ms GERICK—That is okay, that is within six months!

Mrs Walker—But some of the councils—the City of Albany, for example—have a lot of urban, and the ward I live in is the only rural ward, because it is an amalgamation. There used to be the Town of Albany and the Shire of Albany, and they amalgamated into the City of Albany. They are more concerned with the urban issues and so natural resource management seems to rate very low, even though places like Oyster Harbour, which is within the urban area, had some major problems. There are also some major problems with Yakamia Creek, which again is right in the town.

Mr JENKINS—We have heard some complaints about the way in which the Natural Heritage Trust works, and about applications. I think you have given us a new angle, and

perhaps it is because I am from the northern suburbs of Melbourne that I do not quite understand it. I would have thought that you could have waged a case where you say that moderate projects are put up and perceived as being production-oriented, but the actual production outcome was the indicator way back of some improvement that you want to make to the natural resource.

Mrs Walker—They are starting to change that.

Mr JENKINS—So they are starting to accept the argument—

Mrs Walker—They are starting to accept that whereas before they would not. We were planting corridors of trees, and they would say, ‘No, you can’t plant any species that might be used for timber later because that means you’re making a gain.’

CHAIR—Who was saying that, the state agency?

Mrs Walker—Yes, that was what they were saying, that the Natural Heritage Trust says, ‘No, you can’t plant in your corridor of trees, you can’t plant species that you may cut down later because that means you will have made a gain, a commercial gain.’

Mr JENKINS—You think that they have sort of relaxed?

Mrs Walker—They are starting to relax it a bit.

CHAIR—I hope so.

Mrs Walker—Yes, I am sure you have had a lot of complaints about the NHT submissions, because it is a very complicated form to fill in.

CHAIR—Yes, it is horrendous.

Mrs Walker—The other problem that we are finding is that a lot of the money is actually going into agencies rather than on the ground. The Commonwealth is aware of that problem and is not very happy.

CHAIR—We just had that denied here a while ago. Weren’t you here?

Mrs Walker—Yes, I was here. And that is not true.

Mr JENKINS—For works that the agency would have done before, or what?

Mrs Walker—For staff, yes. We have in some areas what are called catchment support teams who are supposed to help along the ground, and I find that through NHT we have what is supposed to be a regional body, and their executive officer is funded through NHT. We have Bushcare officers as well funded through NHT. Waterways WA has some technical officers who are funded through NHT.

Mr BILLSON—All people that should have been there anyway.

CHAIR—So we are not getting extra on the ground?

Mrs Walker—Well, you are getting some extra. Certainly the community Landcare coordinators—that is wages—are actually operating on the ground and are helping the people on the ground.

Mr JENKINS—With the applications, have you got examples of where there is a simpler version—it cannot be a similar program? Are there less onerous sources of funding that are good examples of the level of accountability that is appropriate?

Mrs Walker—The state revegetation grant application form is not quite as complicated, but certainly the NHT forms are extremely complicated. People find them very difficult to fill in. Even some of our community Landcare coordinators have problems. I am probably the wrong person to ask about filling in forms, because I have done a lot. I have been involved in other things at federal level, and so I have been involved in writing submissions and filling in application forms.

Mr BILLSON—Do you get the Greening Western Australia arrangements here? Is that something that finds its way out into your areas?

Mrs Walker—Some of the time it does. At one stage they were actually overseeing our state revegetation grant.

Mr BILLSON—My colleague before was picking up on a theme that I have raised on other occasions about trade implications, where the Europeans in particular are talking about bad natural systems management not fully recovering the costs of production. How would your organisation and its allies, its competitors, feel if access to markets in Europe for prime beef and things like that were all of a sudden shut off?

Mrs Walker—A lot of our beef actually goes live to Malaysia and Indonesia, but somebody has spoken to my committee about environmental management systems.

Mr BILLSON—Were they saying ISO 14,000-type things or were they encouraging you to develop your own? What was their message?

Mrs Walker—They were still very vague about what was going on, but, because we need to do all that land monitoring, we have a land management society that has a kit that is available for farmers so that they can go and do their monitoring.

Mr BILLSON—That is Western Australian based?

Mrs Walker—Yes. So there is a way of monitoring. A lot of the remote sensing, when you ground truth it, does not actually add up. There has been quite a bit of ground truthing. They say, 'Look, we've got all these lovely satellite images,' but sometimes with the ground truthing, areas that have shown up as being degraded turn out to be things like sheep yards or we have

had a very late season where the crops went in very late and they say, 'It's not growing.' We say, 'Yes, but it only went in in August because conditions were such and such, so no wonder it's not growing—it's only this many weeks old.'

Mr BILLSON—So are you sceptical about those figures?

Mrs Walker—Some of them, because of having found errors. With ground water monitoring, farmers have done their recording and then seen a graph of their particular farm records done out by a departmental person and found it did not bear any relationship—they found that their water levels were actually going down and the graph showed they were going up.

CHAIR—So how does that play out in your membership? Is there an anxiety about what policy makers think is going on and therefore the responses may be a bit over the top?

Mrs Walker—We have to keep monitoring the situation and ensuring—

Mr BILLSON—Keep an eye on them.

CHAIR—It would be better in those instances where you might have a piezometer on the property that the property owner be kept well informed and probably also monitor when people go to measure.

Mrs Walker—Yes. We now have our community Landcare coordinator using a computer program called to do the recording.

CHAIR—That is what I was talking about earlier with the officials about confidence, because property owners have to have confidence that they are getting the right advice.

Mrs Walker—Yes, they do, and be sure the things they record are recorded correctly.

CHAIR—Yes; otherwise people become very cynical about it.

Mrs Walker—Yes. We have a very good example with a report called *The State of the Northern Rivers*. With one of the north-west rivers, the community does not see it fits with what is there and has tried to have it altered in case it is used as a reference. Unfortunately we have not been able to get it altered sufficiently. What we are concerned about is that that will then be used as a reference to say, 'This is what this river was like in 1998' and will be used with no state of the environment reporting. We are concerned that that report will be used as a reference for them, because they are going to start doing another lot of recording—in 2000 they start recording again.

Dr Esbenschade—This is a draft regional development policy for WA put out by the Department of Commerce and Regional Development. An interesting news article came out in the *Countryman* back in September by Phillip Pental, MLA, the member for South Perth. He was very concerned about this policy. He says:

A recent draft policy for WA made only two cursory mentions of salinity.

The very issue Mrs Walker is raising here with the Hon. Hendy Cowan about community representation on these supposedly representative regional groups to replace local Landcare district committees is that, if we do not integrate this Landcare with Regional Development, where are we going? It is getting awfully confused. Bureaucracies are moving very heavily. I provide that to you just for your records.

CHAIR—Is that a copy we can have?

Dr Esbenshade—That would be our original but we would be pleased, if you wish, to get you a copy.

Mrs Walker—We can get some more. I have a copy.

Dr Esbenshade—A similar issue I bring to your attention is this national natural resource management policy draft. We have contributed to the National Farmers Federation's submission.

We are very pleased the Commonwealth is starting to think about how to go at it post-NHT. But some main points that came across to us that may interest you as observers of this catchment process developing, is that it only responds to agricultural and pastoral industry user issues, not other industry users like miners, like suburban farmers—some city farmers come out into the bush.

There is little recognition of the skill and knowledge base of land managers already in existence. It is all, 'The Commonwealth is going to put up a bigger flag and the states are going to toe the line and work with us and we are going to have demonstrations like we have never had before,' and we have seen some of that before. The emphasis is on changes in land use and management which seem to equate with current pressure for devolving to regional decision making. So we are saying here that it is possibly too prescriptive. Some regions do not have good liaison arrangements between the producers. Some do not have good representation on local groups already in place, much less on new regional groups. Regional management groups should be community driven. We have spoken about that to you already. Yet government funding, NHT funding, financial institutions and the marketplace are all being cited as pressure points for enforcement of regional strategies. There is a push for QA and EMS, and we support that, but again we must recognise that there are vast differences across even this little state and here we are, one EMS for pastoral WA—you had better have a west Kimberley and an east Kimberley one, because those fellows know they are in totally different environments.

Mrs Walker—And then the Pilbara and the Gascoyne are different again—yet that is all rangelands.

Dr Esbenshade—The entanglement of Aboriginal rights and interests is a concern with this, if NRM rights become entangled with that.

Mrs Walker—With the native title issues.

Dr Esbenshade—There is a substantial issue possibly going to the High Court now testing the decision in the north-east Kimberley where Aboriginals were granted the rights of resources. There is a Pilbara group—a loose group, a Landcare district committee—linked with some

mining concerns. There is no LCDC for the whole Pilbara region. There was one LCDC and then some mining people. They found the data used in the 1998 WA State of the Environment report sorely lacking and that there had been minimal consultation. All of this, though, painted a picture of regional conditions in the Pilbara.

Economic factors do not appear to be well covered in terms of managing natural resources. The feedback loop that you are asking about—how do we measure better management and possibly put more emphasis on the economics of delivering from a producer's side the sustainable business? And there is a need to involve local government. Indeed, we have spoken to that. There is considerable variability in the size and scope of the proposed NRM regions within Australia. Mrs Walker found this, and I found it fascinating. She says in Victoria that there are 32 regions, whereas in WA there are only six.

Mrs Walker—Sustainable Rural Development, which is part of AgWest, has divided it into six regions. The south coast goes from Esperance, which is very light sand plain, to Walpole, which is 45-inch rainfall, big timber, and producers from those extremes do not have anything in common. They do not see themselves as having anything in common. But within that region there are six bioregions and producers in a bioregion at least have similar interests.

CHAIR—So it is a state problem?

Mrs Walker—Yes, it is a state problem.

CHAIR—It is the same with that information. The Commonwealth does not possess any information—it only gets it from the states.

Mrs Walker—Yes.

CHAIR—So it is coming from the states?

Dr Esbenshade—Just so you are aware, it may be that there could be a question mark on national equity and how funds are distributed at some point, with six of us.

Mrs Walker—Six regions for Western Australia and 32 for Victoria.

Dr Esbenshade—That very same small group in the Pilbara may say, 'Gosh, we're told we have to have one resource national or regional grouping in the Pilbara—how are we going to do this when it's a very big region?'

CHAIR—So to round off, it would seem that the information that is getting out to the farming and pastoralist community is not good and it is not sufficient to give a basis for you to make management decisions on?

Mrs Walker—As an association we try to give out information as well. Somebody raised the greenhouse issue. We are not getting any information out there. I was in Canberra last week at a seminar that was organised by NFF and sponsored by AFFA and it came out very clearly that all the producer bodies said that they have not got enough information, that there needs to be

information and education and that it needs to be done in a coordinated fashion. Because the protocol has not been signed yet, it causes problems. They have not decided what is in or out in terms of what are greenhouse forests or actually measuring outputs, which they are still having problems with, and all these are intangibles.

Mr BILLSON—You need to have a good, solid tolerance of ambiguity.

Mrs Walker—Exactly.

Dr Esbenshade—It should be noted here that Conservation and Land Management are offering contractual agreements with producers for the planting of trees—

CHAIR—It is the same in New South Wales. This committee has done an inquiry into the tradeable rights of greenhouse gases and there is nothing in place at the present time.

Mr BILLSON—We are immensely amused by all that.

CHAIR—It is quite extraordinary.

Dr Esbenshade—Producers are taking CALM honestly and saying, ‘Right, instead of this amount of cash I will expect credits.’

Mrs Walker—It has actually been written into some of our contracts.

Mr BILLSON—New South Wales is doing the same.

CHAIR—Okay, thank you. I am sure we will get some more evidence from you in the future. Thank you very much.

Proceedings suspended from 1.15 a.m. to 1.45 p.m.

BOVELL, Mrs Lillias, Policy Manager, Western Australian Municipal Association

EATON, Mrs Elizabeth, Councillor, Lower Coastal Ward, Shire of Gingin

CHAIR—Welcome. We have received a submission from you and authorised its publication. Before we begin questions, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mrs Bovell—I will ask Councillor Eaton to speak first because she does have another meeting to go to.

Mrs Eaton—I was not sure of the length of time I would have to speak. I have prepared a few notes which are in addition to the notes you have already received. I can make a brief synopsis of those and then you can question me. So I will be more brief than my pages.

My first point is associated with how to encourage land owner change in relation to catchment management. It seems to me that we have a way to go in that encouragement of change. Quite a lot of the issues there relate to the economic component attached to reparation work in relation to issues such as salinity. My perception is that people are often aware of the issue of salinity and they are often aware of the toolkit of things they can do but they are as yet not sufficiently convinced to put their hands in their pockets and actually carry some of those out. I wondered if the next stage of information packages that might be prepared by government would be a more targeted approach to information such that, for each land use type, you had information that looked at economic and environmental predictions for the land use types, so you were able to get down to the next level in terms of the information that is produced.

The sorts of things I say to land owners are, 'The best way for you to make money next year is to do exactly the same as you're doing this year' and they agree to it, 'and the best way for you to make money in 10 years is to change your practices this year.' They are not so impressed by the next part. I think there is a time frame and economic level of persuasion, et cetera.

I see the role of government as being slightly ambivalent in its relationship to catchment management. It has not been very committed through appropriation funding to support the activities of key agencies in relation to catchment management. I think that people on the ground interpret that.

CHAIR—Which government?

Mrs Eaton—State agencies I think clearly are not funded accordingly, which I think has been part of the drain on the NHT funds. One of the items for NHT money not hitting the ground has been that the agencies have accessed that funding because they have not had it coming from state agencies. I think this ambivalence on behalf of government is interpreted by land owners to mean ambivalence generally that leaves them comfortably not changing.

I will probably say also that, within the catchment management process itself, the issues of planning and cooperation are reasonably well able to happen. There are some issues there in

terms of the skills of the catchment groups and their time and availability and those sorts of issues. They do not point to systems change. A number of things such as community education and community consultation can occur without a system change and they seem to be occurring well enough where there is a will. I think also a lot of the other things about coordination of agencies is what I see as the prime role of catchment groups. That can also occur fairly well. The agencies on the whole are obviously willing to work within agency aims and objectives. I see those things as working on the whole fairly well.

We occasionally still have within some of the catchment groups the desire for regulatory powers. I personally would argue against regulatory powers, partly for reasons of setting up yet another government body, which I would have reservations about, but partly also at this stage the member selection for catchment groups is not yet sufficiently democratic to warrant the regulatory powers being handed over. I use that as an example as to why there is a need for changing the reward system in catchment management processes. The demand for regulatory powers is because you cannot make some people do things. So we need to find a better system of rewards, to interest the people we are trying to encourage. The set of rewards so far through the NHT have been a bit hard to sell and it has been difficult to gain enthusiasm and the matching dollars have been difficult to drag out.

I am wondering if perhaps we can move toward a system whereby we are making the things that the NHT or a like funding body finds as being more attractive to the land owners themselves. So we need that carrot to be improved but we also need a better stick in some way, shape or form to try to make sure that this on-ground action occurs. That stick might be a mechanism whereby, if a certain level of achievement is progressed, you are handing out money, but if the achievement is not progressed, then you are deliberately withholding funding. I am not suggesting a system of fines particularly but a better blend of the reward and punishment regime is required to improve the action.

It is based on partly an argument about input and output systems. My example comes from a fisherman at Dongara who talked to me about this. He regarded farming as very largely output regulated, with very little interest in what actually was input. He said, on the other hand, that the fishing industry in WA anyway was very much input regulated. There was a strong link with the Fisheries Department. They were proud of the research done and proud of the role within fisheries and the resultant sustainability.

I am sure people who know the fishing industry better would say it is not a perfect system. I am not suggesting it works perfectly. But it is an example where there is a link between the agency and the producer which is environmentally based. I think the environment is the component that falls out of the gap in output based systems. Our usual systems of self-regulation and market force regulation are not working in relation to catchment management. The environment slips through the gap of those two processes. I think there needs to be a tightening up of that system by focusing on the input and improvement of the reward system.

I rushed through this quickly to get the nutshell of what I was trying to say. I am happy now to field some questions, if that is appropriate.

CHAIR—How involved is local government in Western Australia with the catchment management?

Mrs Eaton—I think there is a creeping commitment being carried out. My example is the Moore Catchment Group, which has eight local governments within its boundaries, some complete, some incomplete. Those local governments at this stage contribute a certain amount of dollars per year to support our catchment group. They contribute also by way of shire councillors in supporting enthusiasm in the community through getting community consultation and community membership. I presume this commitment will grow as the benefits back to local government are also seen and as the groundswell of government support grows, it will grow. It is what I call a kind of creeping commitment; you get them interested in the first step and the things they can do and hopefully they will get more involved.

CHAIR—Do shires have environmental officers that get involved?

Mrs Eaton—I think there is a range of that. Lillias might cover more of that later. Our shires do not particularly but some shires have in the past and will often work in conjunction with LCDC groups to employ Landcare people. Two of the shires have Landcare people and others do not. So it is a mixed bag.

CHAIR—I know it is not totally local government's responsibility. We talked this morning about partnerships between tiers of government. Is there any benefit or value in some of the carrot being consideration in rates in certain instances, where land has to be taken out of production for environmental reasons?

Mrs Eaton—That is often mooted and so far I have not seen a great deal of support for it because I think that, when it is taken out of rates, they are also giving up a freedom of choice as to the way they might use that land in the future. I think that we start to get down to the area of compensation as an interest mechanism. Just giving up the rights over that land for rate reduction so far has not received wide acclaim in the community I am associated with.

CHAIR—Do you think it is an option? There is probably going to be support from other tiers of government.

Mrs Eaton—I think where there is support from other tiers of government, it would be a clear option. Based totally on rates, I think it is insufficient.

Mrs Bovell—The difficulty with the rates issue is that there are some very small local governments and for those that currently employ a Landcare coordinator, part of the funding comes from the Natural Heritage Trust and part from the council. If that Natural Heritage Trust funding does not continue, it will require in the order of a 15 per cent rate hike just to make up the difference in those small local governments. That is a really big difficulty.

Mrs Eaton—In a lot of the country areas, the population base is gradually declining, which I guess is what you are saying also.

Mrs Bovell—The National Trust are currently instigating a covenanting program, and they will part fund private land-holders to maintain some remnant vegetation. Again, with all these sorts of things, there are a few people who are willing to take up that sort of offer. What we are talking about in catchment management and with the salinity problem is a huge area. Are we actually tackling the big picture problem and not just spots? There is a lot of spot activity across the country. A lot of local governments have substantial investment in natural resource management but it is not coordinated and it is not over a broad enough area to have a significant input.

Mrs Eaton—That is clearly true given that most of the land is private ownership land. Part of the spot involvement is where we focus on government owned property and we can get some interesting things happening in some of the government agencies' land responsibilities. But an awful lot of the wheatbelt areas are privately owned, a huge amount.

CHAIR—Say, for instance, if land is resumed for public ownership for a particular reason, then you lose rates anyway.

Mrs Bovell—Yes, you do.

Mr BILLSON—I refer to that NHT example. My experience in local government has rate revenue around 46 to 51 per cent of your turnover. Are you saying you have councils that have an annual turnover of around \$700,000?

Mrs Bovell—There are some in Western Australia.

Mr BILLSON—So there is a real issue about capacity to do just about anything.

Mrs Bovell—Certainly, and it is not just financial capacity. When they are as small as that, they probably do not have a lot of expertise amongst the staff. They certainly do not have a capacity to have specialist expertise in the environment. There certainly are a few councils that have under \$1 million turnover.

Mr BILLSON—My sense is that there is some frustration with local government about natural resource management, and as a local government product I am tempted to defend it. The thing that amuses me is that when we travel to some places and listen to some groups talk, local government has other priorities than natural systems management. It occurs to me that if you are interested in the vitality of your community and the economic future, I would have thought natural systems management would be pretty high up the ladder for things you would want to be focusing on. How is that able to be filleted off as an area of council activity when my sense is that it goes to the core of why councils exist?

Mrs Bovell—It does not get a high priority when there is no doctor in town and the nearest doctor is 200 kilometres away, the school is closing and there is nowhere for the kids to go and the police have pulled out of town. Natural resource management does not get a high priority when some of those immediate problems are there.

Mr BILLSON—The systems are deteriorating to the point where you have no production base and therefore humans leave. That is why you do not have a doctor and that is why you do not have a school.

Mrs Bovell—It is cyclical.

Mrs Eaton—In some of the areas you are talking about, there are very few people over a huge number of kilometres.

CHAIR—For those smaller shires you are talking about, is it a lack of population base?

Mrs Eaton—Yes, it is one of the reasons.

CHAIR—Large areas, but not many people.

Mr BILLSON—So they are doing things that are statutorily mandated and not much else.

Mrs Bovell—Sometimes not even that.

Mr BILLSON—So it is really a scale thing?

Mrs Bovell—It is preservation of their own patch. I have just been down to Narembeen last week to look at some drainage that was undertaken on private land. Something like 200 kilometres of drain has been dug on private land. The particular gentleman feels that his land is waterlogged. He has to get rid of the saline water otherwise he cannot grow his crops. He has had his drains in place for a couple of years and he is actually growing crops on that land. He is not improving the situation; he is perpetuating the problem. Where does the water go? It runs up to the local council road and then disappears somewhere into a neighbour's property. They are trying to preserve their own patch. Whilst people see the benefits of doing that, there is not a continuing, 'What am I doing to Joe down the road? What is happening to the rest of the catchment?' The catchment itself from Agriculture WA's perspective and often from the Water and Rivers Commission's perspective—and we agree with them that the catchment is the way to look at things, but in some you probably have 30 local governments involved and probably as many land-holders—and a few more. It is very difficult to get that perspective to them.

Mr BILLSON—It becomes a resourcing issue and the community is of a mind to address that. There are some thoughts that local government has control of so many of the key policy leaders about land use and planning and has a more direct economic stake in the future of their communities. Would we be unwise to recommend untied FAG money, because it would never get there? It will virtually have to be a tied grant arrangement if it is going to land on natural resource management issues. Is that a fair account?

Mrs Bovell—That is a fair assessment and, of course, one is opposed to tied grants from a local government perspective. Local government would pick that up for land that it has care and control of management responsibility for, but the bulk of the land is in private ownership and I think any level of government is unwilling to get involved in mandates over private land, how people use their own land.

Mr BILLSON—Do you see any other option? When I am in a romantic moment, I would say exactly what you just said. In a perfect world you would have no-one saying anything over anything but that is just fantasy land. If we are going to address the problem, there has to be some incursion into this unalienable property right to do whatever we feel like on our property if the consequences so clearly affect so many other people outside the property boundary.

Mrs Eaton—I think the main mechanisms for that are through land use planning. It is a time when you can put some conditions on land use through that mechanism, and environment takes a second seat every time. Natural resource management is not considered a criteria that you can reasonably apply. By definition, our strongest mechanism at local government level only is that.

Mr BILLSON—And it does not value those objectives high enough.

Mrs Eaton—I am under the impression that if we put natural resource management controls on planning applications, you would lose on appeal.

Mrs Bovell—Local government is not able to put environmental conditions on a development application in Western Australia. It can do and some of the land developers will pick it up. But in general they appeal to the minister. It is an appealable condition.

Mr BILLSON—Going back to this perfect world thing, you would be tempted to say, ‘If you can't deal with those sorts of issues locally, where is the argument to have federal taxpayer funded money going into remedy situations where some of the tools that are available at a state level are not being exercised?’ It is a difficulty.

Mrs Eaton—Is it not possible then to modify your carrot and stick such that the carrot is offered under these particular conditions?

Mr BILLSON—I agree.

Mrs Eaton—At least the message is getting forth, even if you do save your money for a while.

Mr BILLSON—We tried that in Queensland. Politics ran over the top of it.

CHAIR—I guess we are trying to see how we can work through local government because we are always told by local government that they are the closest tier to the people.

Mr BILLSON—And they make you happy.

Mrs IRWIN—How do you feel that links between federal, state and local government can be improved?

Mrs Eaton—I suppose I can only give a perspective of state and local, which is the bit I know best, for the time I have been in there. The other significant bit through federal has been the NHT money, so I am only aware of that avenue. I suppose between state and local, it is a constant talking through the town planning applications, and raising the profile. In my shire at

the moment we are devising a couple of policies that, with luck, will come to be included in a scheme when we review it. It is very much a step by step of those committed people slowly driving things through and receiving the dialogue back from the state. It is a day-to-day working approach.

Mrs Bovell—The municipal association has had some very good working relationships with most of the state agencies and with groups of state agencies. We also have a good working relationship with Environment Australia and the community. We have that group and we have the other group with the state agencies. The difficulty is the three together. The state seems to manage its affairs with the Commonwealth government, and I do not know how well they do that. We work well with the state, we work well with the community and the Commonwealth but in terms of the three together, there does not appear to be a very healthy cohesive relationship.

Mrs IRWIN—So there is room for improvement?

Mrs Bovell—I think so, and I think there is a willingness there at the present time, certainly with the people I deal with at the state level.

Mr BILLSON—Where is Gingin?

CHAIR—Queensland.

Mrs Eaton—In Queensland it is the two-word Gin Gin; this is the one word Gingin. It is immediately north of Wanneroo, along the coast north of Perth. At this stage we are still a growth shire because we are close to the metro.

Mrs IRWIN—So it is a fairly big shire?

Mrs Eaton—No, it is only about 3,500 square kilometres. It is not very big. It is the lower end of the Moore catchment. The remaining seven councils fit in a balloon above that. On the regional component of the catchment management, that is an interesting issue and that is the other thing that catchment management groups do—that is, sort of become a quasi-region. I think there is more time to play to see how these regional groups end up fitting into the other three tiers.

CHAIR—Would you like to make a statement of some kind to fill in some of the areas we may not have covered?

Mrs Bovell—I am not sure because I understand you went south yesterday. You probably spoke with the GeoCatch group. There are a number of those sorts of catchment groups in WA with varying degrees of input from local governments. The local governments' reluctance is not from an unwillingness to be involved in natural resource management. It is a lack of resources. We know from the municipal association too that there just is not the population base, there is not the expertise to be able to be substantially involved. They periodically appear. Certainly the South-West Catchment Council was very keen to involve local government in the south coast regional initiative planning to Blackwood. There are still huge gaps in pastoral areas and the

rangelands. The Murchison Shire only has a handful of people. You can count on two hands the number of pastoralists in that area. Huge areas are denuded and need to be managed.

Mr BILLSON—WAMA has an environment resource officer funded by the Commonwealth. What does that person do?

Mrs Bovell—We are waiting to hear that the position will be refunded. The funding runs out in June.

Mr BILLSON—When I saw that we were going to see you I thought, well, we have an ERO operating in this outfit that put in this mother of all submissions—economical six paragraphs, that is fine by me! I just thought there is that Commonwealth funded role in your organisation. If they are not focusing on these sorts of thing, what are they focusing on?

Mrs Bovell—Have you seen their work program?

Mr BILLSON—I have seen most of them around the country and I thought this was pretty much core business for them.

Mrs Bovell—Agenda 21, National Greenhouse Strategy, cities for climate protection. Certainly she is very heavily involved in a whole range of Landcare issues. At the moment we have got an application in for Natural Heritage Trust funding for a biodiversity project which the ERO has substantially put together to coordinate what local governments are doing in the metropolitan area in terms of their natural resource management areas, the biodiversity corridors. They are all doing a little patch and then it stops at the boundary between Claremont and Nedlands. If they had just carried it on a little bit further, they would actually achieve something. We are planning to work with them all and integrate that into one project and support them in achieving a continuum.

There is Rivercare, the Swan-Canning clean-up program, which takes a substantial amount of work. There are some 20 local governments involved with that. There is pollution into the river. We had an enormous algal bloom a month or so ago.

Mr BILLSON—So the ERO is pretty much focused on program delivery stuff and you have left the policy side of it to yourself?

Mrs Bovell—I look after health as well as environment. It is a resourcing issue and priorities for the local governments. As I said to you earlier, when they have more pressing, emotive type issues out in the wheatbelt area, where there are none of these services which we take for granted in the metropolitan area, the road verges take second, third or fourth place.

Mr JENKINS—I think our Western Australian experience can be characterised as the minimalist view towards regulation and legislation. Yesterday we were in Busselton and GeoCatch were saying they were comfortable without a regulatory or legislative framework to their work. It was put to us that there was sufficient legislation and regulation that agencies that were cooperating under the catchment framework had access to. For instance, when we were looking at the wetlands, it seemed that the Ministry of Planning were driving it. They seemed to

think that they would then be able to put in place a sort of planning scheme that would be able to protect those natural resource elements. I am not sure whether I got the wrong end of the story down there, vis-a-vis what you just said about the lack of powers under land planning provisions for local municipalities.

Mrs Bovell—There is the ability to designate a conservation zone. Serpentine-Jarrahdale council faced a difficulty with that. It is on the southern fringe of the metropolitan area, whereas Gingin is to the north. Serpentine-Jarrahdale took that step and had rate rebates and identified a conservation zone. The Treasury then said, ‘Well, it’s non-productive land and it will incur land tax.’ So the owner was slapped with a \$1,200 bill for land tax. It is very difficult but there are some mechanisms which we can use to improve land. We were then faced with other regulations.

Mr BILLSON—So that was a clash between local government and state government.

Mrs Bovell—Yes. I understand that is not resolved yet. We have rate rebates but, again, it is a question of how many people the local government can sustain at a reduced rate.

CHAIR—That is a strange use of land tax. I have not heard of that before. Non-productive lands are not meant to incur land tax.

Mrs Bovell—We have all unimproved land.

Mr BILLSON—Ian is wishing he had thought of that when you were minister.

CHAIR—Usually land tax is where you have extra land and extra earning capacity so therefore you pay a land tax as well.

Mrs Bovell—Unimproved land is subject to land tax. If we could have an improved working relationship between the three levels of government, we would be very happy with that.

CHAIR—I suppose one thing that I have seen in my area is that local government have been landed with a lot more work than they used to have. It was really roads, rubbish, et cetera, but that was local government. These days there are health issues and social welfare issues. Planning, in particular, in New South Wales is a very big area of local government. I suppose the tiers of government are pushing it down but there is a limit to what the ratepayer can stand.

Mrs Bovell—There is a devolution of responsibility from every level of government and it goes from local government to the community as well. I think local governments are being squeezed. There is a community expectation that they will be involved in a whole range of issues. Elizabeth alluded to that. The community expects us to do this, that and the other thing. Then there are also state agencies that feel they are not resourced adequately too and they say, ‘Oh well, local government should be undertaking it. Local government is the closest to the people; it’s a local government issue.’

CHAIR—In a sparsely populated state like Western Australia, local government would find it fairly difficult to deliver on the ground in most areas. It would have to be a state responsibility, probably.

Mrs Bovell—It would need the local government's cooperation and support. I would not like to see substantially more regulatory input without a bit of cooperation from the local governments. The way to win them is to actually involve the community, and therefore their local governments, in the decision making process as well.

CHAIR—What type of environmental problems do we have, say, up towards the goldfield areas where you have a very low population base? Is there an area there that you could only work through the state to try to resolve some of those issues?

Mrs Bovell—I think that is probably right. However, the local government needs to be part of the consultation phase. The community need to be part of the consultation phase but they are not able to deliver at the end of the day. You asked a question earlier about environment officers in local governments. There are very few of them and most of them are in the metropolitan area. Next you have the urban hills group. Mick McCarthy is the environmental manager with a regional group of councils. He works with one council one day and another one another day and then works for the region. The smaller ones are starting to resource share like that. They will share a planning officer or they will share an environmental manager. They do not have enough work for one. They cannot support one on their own, but they are working through.

There are a number of environment officers, probably a couple of dozen in the whole of the state. Through the environment resource officer program, we actually have an environment officers information exchange forum which we run ad hoc. We try to have three or four meetings a year. It is an informal meeting of the environment officers. We will bring in someone from a state agency or a Commonwealth agency who is in town at that time to talk about greenhouse issues or Cities for Climate Protection, so we can feed the information out to a wider group of people. We use the environment resource officer for that sort of information exchange as well. We try to bring the environment officers into WAMA so they feel they have a network too. There are very few of them, so peer support is thin on the ground.

CHAIR—We heard this morning from a representative of Agriculture and Soil Conservation that there was a very good database in Western Australia on these issues. That is really within government agencies, is it?

Mrs Bovell—Yes. The people that we have to speak to the environment officers usually come from the state agencies.

Mr JENKINS—As we discussed, one of the tempting things for an inquiry of this ilk is to have as the first recommendation that we should have constitutional change and abolish the states. But I have never actually been on an inquiry that has recommended that. It is unlikely that this one is going to. Having said that, sometimes there is a concern from a Commonwealth angle that things lose focus and recognition in going through the states. If we were to contemplate this sort of model or try to get around the present Constitution to fund directly, we would have to look at an appropriate target to do it through. In this area, catchment approach

has been one that has been talked about and gives an opportunity for a model. How comfortable would local government feel if that was the way with natural resource management that the federal government might adopt a more direct route of funding? I am talking especially about smaller municipalities. Even in a consultative role it takes a bit of a resource anyway. How do you protect interests but have that more direct model, or do you think that if the outcome was appropriate that perhaps local government would be very comfortable?

Mrs Bovell—Local government I think would support that. The logical process is through a catchment basis. Local government boundaries do not designate where the problems start and finish. The catchment is the logical basis to work from. How those catchment councils, or whatever they are called, are set up would vary, I believe, between different areas. The local government is significantly involved, for example, in GeoCatch, as is the South-West Catchment Council. In other areas, I think it would have to be a bit of a give and take. If council did not have the resources or the interest to put into it, so be it.

From WAMA's perspective, we have no statutory or regulatory authority over local governments. There are 144 local governments in WA. We can just provide them with policy advice, advocacy and a range of other services which are of economic benefit to them with a bigger buying power. We lobby on behalf of local government, but recognising that there are 144 beasts out there with quite different views and quite different expectations and quite different levels of expertise. Certainly the catchment, from our perspective and I believe from the local government perspective, is the boundary with which to work.

Mr BILLSON—There are some models in other states where there is a separate rate or a levy that is collected either on behalf of or via local government natural resource management activities. Is there an appetite for that type of thing in Western Australia?

Mrs Bovell—There are some. Some local governments already have Landcare levies.

Mr BILLSON—Do they hypothecate the whole amount or is it like a Medicare levy where it is used to collect more money?

Mrs Bovell—There are a range of levies but they do subsidise their contribution to the Landcare officer. That is generally how they fund that Landcare officer—by a levy. Again, you only have a small population from which to draw the levy. We are talking in this state about the possibility of a salt levy. We have had a levy to build a bridge, we have had a levy to build a number of things.

Mr JENKINS—Are these levies just to the properties that are involved, or are they wider?

Mrs Bovell—To the whole of the local government. Kellerberrin has—

Mr JENKINS—So they do not cross boundaries?

Mrs Bovell—No, they would be within the local government boundary.

Mr BILLSON—So if you were collecting \$30 off every property owner in Perth, to fling some of the money over to the Avon catchment—

Mrs Bovell—That has not happened. It has happened within a local government for that particular local government area.

Mr BILLSON—I would be interested in your response to the Water and Rivers Commission's view. We were trying to suggest we could get some better outcomes if they worked more effectively with local government. They view local government's role as implementation of practices through laws, regulations and town planning schemes. Given your light-handed regulatory vision for local government's roles, is there a problem there?

Mrs Bovell—The capacity is there. With 144 different local governments and 144 different town planning schemes, I wonder whether that is an effective way to manage it. We have some problems with siting of noxious industries. Eighty town planning schemes define a noxious industry; the other 30-odd do not. Things slip through the net.

Mr BILLSON—There is a lot of preparatory work required.

Mrs Bovell—There is a model scheme text being developed by the Ministry for Planning.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for the evidence that has been given.

Mrs Bovell—Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate the consideration given to local government and WA and the whole catchment management process.

[2.30 p.m.]

HENDERSON, Mr Rodney Keith, Vice-President, Urban Hills Land Catchment District Committee

McCARTHY, Mr Mick, Manager, Environmental Services, Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council

PILGRIM, Dr Alan Thomas, Chair, Urban Hills Land Conservation District Committee

WESTERN, Ms Elizabeth, Landcare Coordinator, Swan-Mundaring Community Catchment Project and the Urban Hills Land Conservation District Committee

CHAIR—Welcome. We have received your submission and authorised its publication but before we ask questions you might like to give us an opening address to fill us in as to what you are and what you are doing.

Dr Pilgrim—Thank you very much. First of all we appreciate the opportunity of giving a verbal presentation here today, and maybe what I need to do first of all is to describe for the committee members where the Urban Hills Land Conservation District actually resides. It is in the north-eastern part of metropolitan Perth, so it covers parts of three shires— Mundaring Shire, Swan Shire, and Kalamunda. So it basically straddles the Darling Scarp, a little bit of the Darling Range and a little bit of the coastal flats, and it is the first urban land conservation district in Western Australia. It has only been gazetted as of about September last year, and prior to that it was operating as a steering committee for about six months.

I would like to make a couple of quick comments based on the submission that you have received. Under Item 1, where we have identified the value of a catchment approach to the management of the environment, the point there that we would like to stress is that the catchment approach is relevant to both rural and urban environments, and as we are an urban hills LCD we see that as quite important.

Under the second heading, the training and education requirements of local government, the two points we would like to stress are that there clearly is an identified need for at least some basic training for councillors in the principles of catchment management and, in the broader context, environmental management, because it is in area where very many councillors are wanting in understanding. I make that comment as a former Mundaring Shire councillor who has knowledge of the environmental area and was certainly one of two out of 12 that did, so we were in the vast minority.

The second point I would make under the training and education requirements of local government is that many planners in Western Australia— in fact, I think I can safely say the majority of planners in Western Australia— lack academic training in areas related to catchment management. We have very well-trained statutory planners, but in terms of their linkages to environmental planning, I think there is a fair bit of work that needs to be done there. And I

speak on that point as an academic from Curtin University who teaches in areas related to environmental management.

Under the third heading, the role of different levels of government, the private sector and community, and the management of catchment areas, we would see that local government and regional councils are best placed to implement catchment management strategies that involve the community, but they do need to be adequately funded by state or Commonwealth governments to undertake these activities. While many local governments have done work in the environmental area, catchment management would be new to many. On that point I think it is also fair to say that there are probably quite a lot of local governments—and I can only really speak within the West Australian context— that probably feel threatened by the prospect of taking on more responsibility, through perhaps catchment management, without adequate funding. I think one of the points that is quite nicely made there in the document, *Managing natural resources in rural Australia for a sustainable future*, is a comment on page 28, under 'local government', that says that maybe local governments should be encouraged, including through a legislative obligation. I do not have a real problem with that. I do have a problem with the fact that if local government is to do that work, it would certainly need to be adequately funded and adequately resourced, such that the professional staff doing that work were adequately trained—and I could not underscore that enough.

I also think, certainly from our experience with the Urban Hills LCD and with its predecessor, that the success in catchment management is probably going to be difficult to achieve through a top-down approach, from a Commonwealth level. What is truly needed is a partnership approach which provides adequate funding. Those partnerships have to also be interagency partnerships at the state level, which I would say at the moment in Western Australia is certainly lacking.

Our one real link that the Urban Hills LCD has with state agencies is through the Swan Catchment Centre. That has been very successful in providing that linkage between policy and the community on the ground; picks and shovels work. It is probably fair to say that many agency staff feel somewhat threatened by the prospect of dealing with the community, and in that context the Swan Catchment Centre has played a very critical role.

Under point 3, if we are looking at catchment management that is actually going to be meaningful, then I think it needs to be implemented through local town planning schemes, and also through state planning strategies, because you cannot have two systems, I would argue, that are overlapping or intertwined but not actually working in the same direction. I would not see a problem—and I was very interested in some of the previous questions towards the end of the last session—in local town planning schemes adopting catchment management principles. It would take a bit of jiggling but I think it is possible.

Finally, under the fourth point—planning the sourcing, implementation, coordination, and cooperation in catchment management—I think it is fair to say that volunteer community groups such as the Urban Hills LCD have done a lot of very good work and there are many success stories in Western Australia, and I am sure you are very well aware of those successes in the Landcare arena. It is also important to point out, though, that community volunteers are not an infinite resource and that volunteer fatigue is a very real issue. And that has very

important implications for resourcing, because we would see that catchment groups and the land conservation district committees need the support of paid qualified coordinators. At present it has been difficult to get funding for these positions under the NHT model where we have to justify coordinators on the basis of the number of projects that they are doing and the like. Also, it has been difficult to get funding for beyond three years. We would see funding required for at least five years and it would be nice to see longer-term vision in terms of Landcare planning and catchment management planning. I think that is essential.

At the international Landcare conference that was held in Melbourne very recently, at a final plenary session the point was made by an overseas observer that catchment coordinators provide a vital link between community activities on the ground and government policy, and I think that without those catchment coordinators the community's role in catchment management would just simply evaporate.

I have two more points. One is that everybody lives in a catchment, and community education is a very essential component in achieving positive outcomes in catchment management. But, having said that, and that is a very big ask to get the community educated about catchments, community participation has to be more than just the pick and shovel work. If we actually want the community to take on board the principles of catchment management, then the community has to be empowered, it has to have some ownership, it has to be part of the decision making process. That is something that does not happen now, and I am not saying that is an easy process to achieve, but we have to look at ways in which agencies can share that process far more than is currently the case. Thank you.

CHAIR—We welcome Mr McCarthy who has just arrived. Would you tell us some details about the position in which you appear?

Mr McCarthy—I am the manager of environmental services at the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council, which is a regional local government. Essentially, it was the project through the EMRC that identified the need to initiate catchment management work in some of our rural shires, and we were lucky to get the support of the shires of Mundaring and Swan to initially launch the project where we employed our catchment Landcare coordinator. Through that process we have been able to progress catchment management in this semi-rural urban setting, probably in a much more efficient manner than in any other catchment project that I am aware of. Part of that was because of the way we set up the structures of managing the person, giving them appropriate supervision, and making sure that local government interaction and networks were established and well understood. I think that is one of the areas where a lot of the catchment Landcare coordinators operating have not got that local government interface where they can have an influence at town planning scheme level, like Alan Pilgrim was saying, where they need to actually work with the local government. So you are caught between working with the community and the local government. Having to satisfy those two areas places quite a big burden on the person trying to manage the project and also requires a certain level of resources and management guidance, so they get those outcomes with the community and the local governments.

So I think part of the initial thrust of the Urban Hills project was to actually try and influence local government and get those things put into the town planning schemes so that it is not just

the community working out there undertaking a whole lot of good activities, but it is actually brought in under the umbrella of some regulation which will help to do things, such as protect remnant vegetation, make sure people look after their water properly and a raft of issues like that. So I think it is a partnership between a whole lot of stakeholders. We think we have the community section pretty well organised, and we have got very supportive local government so we are happy in that regard.

I guess the next bit is how we put that in and give it the level of statutory recognition and regulation that will lead to people not unnecessarily clearing vegetation or doing the other things that the catchment groups are trying so hard to remediate in those areas that have been degraded through those activities. So I think it needs a really coordinated approach to ensure that that occurs.

CHAIR—Does anyone else want to comment before we go to questions?

Mr Henderson—I would like to agree fundamentally with what has been said so far. One of the biggest issues from a community perspective—and I come from the council level, the shire of Swan; I have now left there and I am still involved with the activities—is that I do not think the public understand when it comes down to what is happening under the ground. We see things happening on the top; we see remediation, planting trees and those sorts of things. But the next step is making them understand what they are doing to the ground water. That is part of the whole picture. A lot of people simply do not understand that, and I think it is a big issue to be handled as well.

CHAIR—Thank you. I am rather interested in how you set up your land conservation district, because I note that it has the power to levy. That particular principle has been resisted in many other areas of Australia, so how did you get to the stage that the community agreed to that?

Ms Western—Setting up an LCDC is a process that is actually written into the Soil and Land Conservation Act. What we did was to take that act and apply it in an urban area where it had not actually been applied before. It is an act that is geared very much towards the agricultural areas and Landcare work in agricultural areas. But because we sit within the Swan Avon ICM program, and we straddle the area that is agricultural and we do not have to look very far east to areas that are degraded by salinity, we decided that, with the Swan-Mundaring Community Catchment Project and four or five main catchment groups that were working separately within that project, we needed a structure that would fit within the Swan-Avon program and, at that sort of higher policy level, at the regional level, some way to link the local catchment groups that we had, that we were working with through the Swan-Mundaring project. We needed a structure, a framework, where we could coordinate each of those catchment groups and have that link between the more regional level and the local on-ground stuff that was happening through the catchment groups.

We went to public meetings and sought input from the community that were involved through the catchment groups, and then out to public meetings as the process is written into the act, and got full endorsement for establishing the LCDC. What we had to do then was get the endorsement of the three shire councils involved, and that was taken through the reporting

process, the framework committee processes of the three shire councils, and also endorsed at the LCDC. That was obviously the best way to go because it had been chosen by the community we were working with. Then we had to get endorsement from the minister because we had actually gone to into an urban area, which is the first time that had been done.

It was supported by Agriculture WA, which had been up until now the lead agency for land conservation district committees. We negotiated with the Water and Rivers Commission as well because it is the lead agency for catchment management work in the Swan region. It is a bit outside the area for Agriculture WA to be working. The Water and Rivers Commission came on board and agreed to act as lead agency for the Urban Hills LCDC. There is a bit of cross-over between the agencies there and the act. We feel we have made a small inroad into agency cooperation in terms of working with the Urban Hills LCDC. It is quite a formal process that is written into the act, and we had to wait to be gazetted, established through an order that is signed off by the Minister for Primary Industries. It was quite formal and probably took a good 12 months for the whole process to be written through.

Mr BILLSON—What about the rating power question?

Ms Western—Yes, under the act there are several options: there are service charges as well as rates. There are examples of that actually happening through the state. There is one Landcare coordinator I know who is supported fully by a rates charge which has been put into place through the Local Government Act.

There are several different options: a rating and service fees, and there is another option as well, I think, that is written into the act. There are three or four different ways of going about it. Our shires are still being introduced to the idea. That is something that needs to be dealt with carefully, I think, when the local governments are being introduced to a way of managing things. The rating system is possibly a little bit more difficult, given that we deal with a largely urban population. It is something that we hope is down the track. But it does have potential for supporting these types of works.

CHAIR—What is your vision statement?

Ms Western—For the overall project or for the Urban Hills LCDC?

CHAIR—The LCDC, yes.

Ms Western—We have not really developed a vision statement. We had a meeting last night actually.

CHAIR—So you are looking at planning issues—

Dr Pilgrim—The overall vision is going to come out to be something along the lines of enhancing the quality of the environment for the local communities, but we are only now working out what our real goals and objectives will be for the next 12 months.

CHAIR—I do not understand the planning laws for Western Australia, but do you have an LEP process whereby you put out a plan for land use which then goes to public comment?

Mr McCarthy—Similar. The town planning schemes which have statute behind them under the Town Planning and Development Act are there, so the zonings within there determine the land uses in those areas. Councils can then develop policies which are recognised at the local government level but have no statutory base, as a way of supporting those areas where those zonings may not be appropriate, to guide the land use in those areas. One of the strengths of the Shire of Mundaring's town planning scheme is that it can introduce what they call codes into the scheme: through a public consultation process a code is advertised and can be over a particular area, like a precinct, or a larger area, and that code is actually brought under the town planning scheme and therefore has the force of law behind it. And there are a couple of examples of codes up there at the moment.

It is interesting that we talk about this because we have just recently done a major urban drainage strategy up there which identified one catchment as having critical remnant vegetation in it. We said that this is a perfect opportunity to develop a code to protect this vegetation in this area so we do not incrementally lose it over time as subdivision or development occurs in that area. That option is available under those town planning schemes, but most town planning schemes really are fairly broad and allow permitted uses within them and they fall within, I guess, the bigger metropolitan region scheme, which is a state government-level scheme, which also provides guidance. In the event that they change the metropolitan region scheme, the local government town planning schemes have to bring their schemes into line with that; they are required to by law. In effect, the local government can be railroaded into zoning an area for a particular use even though it is out of its control and it does not agree with it.

Mr BILLSON—The rating task is more difficult in urban areas?

Ms Western—Yes.

Mr BILLSON—Why is that? The evidence we have taken is that it is quite the opposite: that it is easiest in urban areas, but that it is more difficult in non-urban areas because of population base, capacity to finance it, the number of contributors for the work to be carried out, and the collection system is not that difficult.

Ms Western—I am also talking from the experience of a rural-urban, semi-rural types of local government -

Mr BILLSON—Fringe metro areas?

Ms Western—Yes, that is basically where we are sitting as well. One of the difficulties is having a level of acceptance and understanding in the urban environments or the semi-rural environments of the types of degradation issues that we are dealing with within the local government area, but further out. We are looking at what a lot of people would consider to be equity issues, in how their money is being spent on private land, further to the east or whatever, which is where our key areas are.

It is not something we have addressed or surveyed and it is certainly something that I feel should be looked into in the short to medium term in terms of continuing the types of projects that we have had in place for catchment management. It is something that I feel that the councils themselves are going to have to be pretty comfortable with before we can even put it out there in terms of having it tested, testing the water.

Mr BILLSON—Would it go down better with the taxpayers if it was done right across the greater Perth area and then allocated or applied to highest priority areas of need and even outside the immediate catchment up into the Avon area and the like. Melbourne runs that way; it kicks in \$33 from every rateable property in the city.

Dr Pilgrim—Could I comment on that? I am not sure that that necessarily would be more acceptable because I think one of the things that would do would be to remove ownership. If you are dealing with the regions like Mundaring and Swan Shires and Kalamunda Shire, we can lump those together because the LCD covers a fair bit of those. If in fact there was a levy raised across that district, it would then give the people within that district the opportunity of saying, 'Well okay, we've raised X dollars and this is the way we would like it spent within our region.' That is not to say that there could not be another levy which is a state based system for, say, the salinity notion, but if we are looking at empowering local communities to do more within their own region and enhancing the quality of their river systems or whatever, then it seems to me that a local levy such as that may in fact be more appropriate.

I would then say against that is that one of the great distinctions we have in, say, the rural urban fringes is that we are dealing with much larger populations. That is an easy way of raising money, but in the Shire of Mundaring, for example, there are 35,000 people and Swan has 70,000. If we add Kalamunda to that, we are dealing with a significant number of people. But in terms of the percentage of those people that are actively involved in Landcare and actively understanding the principles of the land conservation district and those that went to the meetings to set up the LCD, we are talking about a very small percentage of people. In the Shire of Mundaring we would probably have about 40 friends groups looking after reserves and we have our catchment groups and all that. So we have a lot of people working but, of our population, we have between one and two per cent doing that work.

In a rural environment, where we are active Landcare, that percentage is very much higher, as you would understand. So the issue is that we have a small percentage of people actively committed. It is much easier, though, to raise a levy—you only have to have a small number of dollars to raise a fairly large amount of money—but the issue that you have to get across then is: how do you convince the other 98 per cent that this is a good idea? Do I want another impost from government?

Mr BILLSON—The other issue too is that the whole concept of catchment management is the capacity for action does not always line up neatly with where the need for effort is, and it can be viewed as a tad indulgent to say, 'Look, we're okay, Jack: we've got a stack of people, we've got a few biodiversity conservation issues, we've got friends groups, so there's already a bit of momentum in that direction. We'll just look after ourselves.'

Where some of the key natural systems degradation challenges are where they do not have that starting position, you never get anywhere. Most of the evidence we have taken is how do you get resources when the locus is over here and the problem is there.

Ms Western—That is exactly the position that we work with as well, but because we are working with the community and the project that I have been working with has been very much focused on developing some community ownership and understanding, the efforts have been geared towards where the community is active and that is where certainly my energies as a coordinator and the funds that support my position are probably best spent—where we can get outcomes for the people who are willing to be involved and where we can get the stuff happening. But the thing is—

Mr BILLSON—Perpetuating existing virtue when you really need to spread the virtue.

Ms Western—It is. The issue is identifying opportunities. There are different sets of opportunities and different ways of managing to get activities happening in those other areas where the degradation issues are, but it is finding the opportunities and making them happen in other ways.

Mr Henderson—Perhaps there is another perspective as well—that is, if you look at the fundamental overheads in running an LCD, perhaps you could seek funding from the broader community for the managerial side of it, and then from the local perspective what gets put in can be seen to be ownership. There may be two avenues there to look at.

CHAIR—There needs to be an overall plan, though.

Mr Henderson—I think so, yes.

Mr McCarthy—Can I just add to a point that Liz was talking about, that is, focusing efforts where they are needed rather than where things are occurring. We took that very strategic approach with ours and identified catchments through using things like percentage remnant vegetation, nutrient export rates, levels of degradation, to come up with priority catchments. In a lot of the areas the community groups are not working in those priority catchments. There are simply not the resources to work in those other areas. By working with the community, you end up learning the best way to get on-ground works done as well as get the community involved in how to take further that strategic planning work you have done. We have done that very successfully. We are now down to looking at objectives, strategies and timelines and budgets about how to get down at that community level.

Those areas where the community is are progressing really well. It still leaves these other areas where there is no activity but they have been identified as areas that require action. I think this is perhaps where the federal government can come in and say, 'Well, look, we realise you're doing good work, we realise you're working with the community here; however, we've got these priority catchments here, what we actually need is on-ground resources to do things, like paying people instead of the community doing it for free.' There are probably about half a dozen organisations in Perth that provide labour to do things in that area. So that would sort of address your local government involvement as well. You could get the local government and

say, 'We've got these plans and we've got your reserves which we're working on. Give us some money to actually go and implement on-ground activities.' That could involve utilising outsourced resources, such as GreenSkills or other groups like that. We are actually looking at taking on unemployed people—and we have done that through the Green Corps project—taking up recent graduates, like GreenSkills, there is eco jobs or a whole range of other things.

It means that you have paid people interested in environmental management doing work on the ground. Perhaps you can even work with them and start looking at some of the strategies that could be developed under that as well. The local government is pretty well fully committed in a lot of these areas to work with the community and it does not have the resources to go out and start working in other areas. We really need some direction from the federal government on that, to actually identify what are priority areas in the state that require these actions. The Swan River Trust is working with the Swan-Canning clean-up program and they have identified some catchments on the Swan coastal plain area. However, I think there is more need to go up into some of these areas, particularly where a lot of work has already been done, and support that with some resources to undertake the sort of work that needs to be done.

CHAIR—Who identified your priority problems? What was the scientific basis for that?

Mr McCarthy—It was really just people who were experienced at that time saying: what is a catchment? How do we measure the health of a catchment? One of the things we said was by remnant vegetation. We know that out in the eastern wheatbelt we have one or two per cent remnant vegetation; up in the Darling Range it might be 40 or 50 per cent—some catchments are totally vegetated because they are in water catchment areas. We had to come up with a figure that we thought was appropriate, probably looking at something between 30 and 50 per cent as being a good range, and that helped us identify remnant vegetation as a cover. Once you have attained that level of vegetation, that is essentially the sponge for all the impacts that happen in that catchment. As long as you can retain that and keep it in good condition, you are unlikely to have water quality impacts, catchment management impacts. That was one measure.

Another measure was nutrient export rates. We know that with all the algal blooms happening in the river, and the Murray-Darling as well, that minimising the amount of nutrients going into the watercourse and going into the river systems is a major way of—

CHAIR—You were monitoring?

Mr McCarthy—We had some limited monitoring data, studies that the CSIRO had done and studies the Water and Rivers Commission do. What we did is look at the land uses. They had developed values for land uses saying pasture land use exports X amount of nitrogen and phosphorus to the catchment. From that we could look at the total subcatchments, work out the areas of land uses within them, and then work out an estimate—it is just an estimate—of what we thought would be the nutrient export from this catchment. If we had a high nutrient export in a catchment with low vegetation cover, that was a priority catchment. Those are catchments that are sitting up there now that might not have a community group working in it. We need to go in there and start doing some reparation work to try and get that catchment health, the vegetation cover, back to something that is more sustainable so that it can absorb the impacts happening in that catchment.

CHAIR—We took evidence at Avon yesterday. They were very strong in their opinion that there needed to be some local money involved with some hard-nosed local people making some decisions, if you were going to get benefits for the money that you spend; otherwise it would just be wasted. Would you agree on that?

Mr McCarthy—I agree with that, but it would have to be given under some boundaries, some guidelines about how it should be spent and on what it should be spent. If you just give them a pile of money, you will end up with it not being efficiently spent. You need to go through a system, similar to the grant system, where people actually apply and say: ‘We’ve got \$50,000 for this catchment, we’ve got a whole lot of landowners, some community associations working in this area—not on catchment management maybe—let’s approach them. They can put up an application and say, “Yeah, I want five grand to do this.” We look at it and say, “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Let’s do it.”’ We can look at those sort of prospects. Because they may not have the on-ground work, some of their submission might include, ‘We need some labour here. We need to get a grouping or some unemployed in—GreenSkills or one of those mobs—to actually do some weed control or revegetation work in this catchment, as well as other things, such as looking at fencing or even strategy development.

We can only take it to a certain level without the community behind us. We cannot really take it any further than that because then we are just doing things on our own. Then when we present it back to the community they say, ‘We weren’t involved. How are we supposed to support and have ownership of this if we weren’t involved?’ One of the key criteria for actually progressing catchment management work—and I do not care who you speak to—is that you have to have the community on board because they are the ones at the end of the day who are going to implement it. They might do it with the assistance of external resources, but they are the ones who are going to be doing it, and they are the ones who are doing it across this country everywhere.

The problem is that the system is not geared up to recognise them as the resource they really are. We need to make sure that the system works to complement their activities in such a way that they are not going broke because instalments are not coming through from NHT; that they have been supported by local government with a certain level of assistance; that the federal government is also behind them in terms of getting money through to those priority catchments; and that there is a system in place where people can access that money in an equitable way and not have to fill out a 30-page application. In that way the activities—‘I’ve got a good idea. I want to do this as it will be good for the catchment’—can happen expediently and can end up in on-ground results. I think in that process you can actually build in performance measures and indicators so that we can say, ‘This catchment has improved in health over the time because this is what we’ve done.’

That is one of the areas where there is a lot of criticism about the NHT in terms of, ‘There’s no performance measurement and there’s no indicators. How do we know we’re doing the right thing?’ The reason is nobody has actually sat down and thought about it and it has not been built into these projects. It needs to be built into the projects. You want money, what are you going to use as an indicator? How are you going to develop it? What is it going to measure? How do we know the catchment is improving? At the end of the day that is what we want to see, improved catchment health, because that means improved water quality and improved lifestyles for the

people who live there, which is why they get involved in catchment management in the first place.

CHAIR—Thank you. That is an interesting concept. There are a few people who will resist that one.

Mr McCarthy—In addition, we have a wealth of experience in our group. The systems we have in place are looked by others as a model for how you should do it. If you want any additional information or want to know about the structures we utilise to efficiently deliver catchment management and Landcare activities, then feel free to contact me.

CHAIR—The structures are in place in New South Wales but I think at the moment anyway only two have taken it up. One is the oldest, which was the Hunter Valley Conservation Trust, and the Hawkesbury-Nepean. They are the only two trusts that I know in New South Wales that have taken it up, so it is interesting.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Gerick**)

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.

CHAIR—Thank you. I declare the hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned at 3.03 p.m.