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The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

# **Co-ordinating Catchment Management**

**Report of the Inquiry into Catchment Management**

**House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage**

December, 2000  
Canberra

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## Foreword

Evidence emerges on an almost daily basis that the environmental health of catchments is not what it should be. It has recently been reported that 5.7 million ha of farmland is at risk of being salt ravaged. In addition, 20,000 km of main roads and 1600 km of railway are also at risk from salinity.

Unless we act swiftly and decisively to protect our waterways and soils, the future prosperity and quality of life for all Australians will be diminished.

Catchment degradation affects all Australians, urban and rural alike. Consequently, grappling with this threat is not the monopoly of anyone community group. It is a national challenge; it is an individual responsibility that addresses itself to all Australians.

As a nation, we have already laid a strong foundation, at the Commonwealth, state, local government, and community levels to address environmental problems. The Landcare movement is a case in point and demonstrates the practical and enormous amount of good work that can be achieved. As the growing body of evidence demonstrates, however, much more needs to be done, and more quickly.

Unfortunately, the work of communities as well as policy makers and legislators has often been piecemeal and poorly integrated, within jurisdictions and between communities. Our future efforts must be more coordinated; they must be sustained; and they must be based on solid information and sound planning. And they must be adequately financed.

This report examines and recommends feasible proposals that, when implemented, will deliver decisive results, across the nation.

The Committee, unanimously, recommends three major innovations:

- an assessment of the feasibility of an environment levy to pay for the public contribution to implementing the policy of ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchments;
- a national catchment management authority to ensure that the many programs are coordinated, funded and appropriate to the problem at hand; and
- national catchment management coordinating principles, targets, and legislation.

A report such as this relies upon the voluntary efforts of many people. They give freely of their time and expertise in order that the Committee, and ultimately the Parliament and the community, can be informed and make better decisions. On behalf of the Committee, I wish to thank all those people who assisted the Committee in its work. Without their help, the work of Parliamentary committees would be much harder and the results less certain.

I wish also to thank my fellow Committee members. Their dedication to the important matters addressed in this inquiry is reflected clearly in the report.

While much remains to be done in research and in the field, I am sure the recommendations in this report will go a long way to strengthening still further the solid foundations we have put in place to address catchment management problems.

**The Hon. Ian Causley MP**  
**Chair**





## **Membership of the Committee**

**Chair**            Hon I R Causley, MP

**Deputy Chair** Mr A M Byrne (from 1/6/2000)  
Mrs J Irwin, MP (to 1/6/2000)

**Members**        Mr P A Barresi, MP

Mr K J Bartlett, MP

Mr B F Billson, MP

Ms A K Corcoran, MP  
(from 27/11/2000)

Mrs C A Gallus, MP

Ms J Gerick, MP

Mr H A Jenkins, MP

Hon Dr C M Lawrence, MP  
(from 27/11/2000)

Mrs D S Vale, MP

## **Committee Secretariat**

<b>Secretary</b>	Mr Ian Dundas
<b>Inquiry Secretary</b>	Dr Andrew Brien (from 1/6/2000) Dr Sarah Hnatiuk Ms Bronwen Jagers (to 1/6/2000)
<b>Research Officer</b>	Ms Katherine Harrington
<b>Administrative Officers</b>	Ms Marlene Lyons Ms Jeannie Brooks



## **Terms of reference**

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage undertook a review of the 1997-98 annual report of the Department of the Environment and Heritage, and tabled a report on its review on 21 June 1999. This review was carried out under the provisions of House of Representatives Standing Order 324 (b).

The management of Australia's water resources, particularly regarding the health of urban and rural waterways and water quality standards, was outlined in the annual report and identified by the committee in its review as a topic warranting further examination. On 2 June 1999 the committee resolved to continue its investigation of water resource issues through an inquiry 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.





## List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACF	Australian Conservation Foundation
AFFA	Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Australia
ASS	Acid Sulfate Soils
CALP	Catchment and Land Protection Board
CMA	Catchment Management Authority
CMB	Catchment Management Board
CoAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRP	Conservation Reserve Program
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CWMB	Catchment Water Management Boards
CWMP	Catchment Water Management Plans
DPIWE	Department of Primary Industries, Water and the Environment
EA	Environment Australia
EBI	Environmental Benefits Index
ECITA	Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee

EPBC	Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act
GBCMA	Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
HRIC	Herbert Resource Information Centre
IBRA	Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia
ICM	Integrated Catchment Management
LWMP	Local Water Management Plan
LWRRDC	Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation
MDBC	Murray Darling Basin Commission
NCMA	National Catchment Management Authority
NFF	National Farmers' Federation
NGO	Non-government organisation
NHT	Natural Heritage Trust
NLWRA	National Land and Water Resources Audit
RCSs	Regional Catchment Strategies
SCA	Sydney Catchment Authority
SCMCC	State Catchment Management Co-ordinating Committee
SWP	State Water Plan
TCM	Total Catchment Management
TFN	Trust for Nature
TLWMC	Tasmanian Land and Water Management Council
UBLN	Upper Barwon Landcare Network
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture



# List of recommendations

## Improved Administration

### Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth adopt a lead role in terms of:

- facilitating the development of principles, priorities targets and programs for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems;
- implementing appropriate legislative and institutional arrangements to attain the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems; and
- obtaining from the community the funding necessary to ensure that the problems facing Australia's catchment systems are addressed.

### Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Government ask and resource the Australian Law Reform Commission to examine the feasibility of, and options for, a national body of law to deal with the ecologically sustainable use of land, and in particular, report on feasibility of, and options for:

- consolidating Commonwealth laws;
- consolidating State and Territory laws; and
- integrating laws at all levels

into a consistent body so as to provide for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Committee recommends that the Government work towards an agreement through COAG that requires each jurisdiction to enact complementary legislation to establish an independent statutory authority, the National Catchment Management Authority (NCMA). This authority should have a division corresponding to each of Australia's catchment systems and it should have the following powers and functions:

- to accredit and assist in the development of whole of catchment, regional and local catchment management plans;
- to co-ordinate the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems;
- to fund research on the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems;
- to apply the findings of that research to the development of the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems;
- to facilitate the dissemination of information and access to skills, data and educational programs for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems;
- to monitor the implementation of whole of catchment management plans; and
- with the support and the states and territories, ensure compliance with nationally mandated principles and targets and whole of catchment plans for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

### **Recommendation 4**

The Committee recommends that:

- if the report of the Australian Law Reform Commission referred to in recommendation 3 reports that it is feasible for the Commonwealth to enact a single piece of legislation;
- if agreement can be reached through COAG for such legislation; and
- then such legislation be enacted to apply to all aspects of the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems that are within the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth.

### **Recommendation 5**



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The Committee recommends that, in consultation with stakeholders, national catchment management principles be developed and enacted in comprehensive, national catchment management legislation. The Committee further recommends that:

- these principles should be enacted no later than the end of 2002; and
- all programs in Australia that have an effect upon the use of catchment systems should, no later than 2005, be assessed against these principles and by 2007, modified if necessary, to ensure that they comply with them.

#### **Recommendation 6**

The Committee recommends that:

- the Government work through COAG to set targets for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems under the national catchment management legislation as soon as possible;
- these targets be mandatory, reviewable and disallowable instruments;
- funding be dependent upon partner organisations accepting and aiming for these targets; and
- the Government, in conjunction with the states and territories, conduct a stocktake of current data, and the usefulness of that data when determining national targets.

#### **Recommendation 7**

The Committee recommends that the Government ask and resource the ALRC to report on options for resolving in a cost effective and speedy manner cross-jurisdictional environmental disputes.

#### **Recommendation 8**

The Committee recommends that the National Land and Water Resources Audit be formally established as an ongoing independent statutory Commonwealth authority called the National Environment Audit Office, with the:

- power to collect relevant data and maintain an ongoing audit of the state of Australia's catchment systems; and
- purpose of educating the community on the need for, and effective measures to attain, the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

#### **Recommendation 9**

The Committee further recommends that the NLWRA should be provided with sufficient funding to enable it to complete within the next five years a comprehensive audit of Australia's catchment systems and sufficient ongoing funding thereafter to enable it to maintain an ongoing audit of Australia's catchment systems and the policies and programs designed to ensure the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

The Committee further recommends that funding for the Audit should not come from the Natural Heritage Trust or from asset sales but from general taxation revenues and that any products of the Audit should be made available free of charge.

#### **Recommendation 10**

The Committee recommends that the Government enter into negotiations with all state and territory governments to establish clear protocols for the exchange of information concerning the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems and that:

- funding to the states and territories be dependent, in part, upon entering into information sharing protocols;
- this information be collected and maintained on a national basis, in a national database maintained by the NLRWA; and
- this information be freely, publicly available through catchment area district offices and over the internet.

#### **Recommendation 11**

The Committee recommends that the Government develop and implement an education strategy, including appropriate on ground activities, on the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

#### **Recommendation 12**

The Committee recommends that the government work through COAG to create in legislation, catchment management authorities (CMAs) and that these authorities form the basic administrative element of each catchment system and, overall, of the national catchment management authority.

#### **Recommendation 13**

The Committee recommends that all programs that affect the ecologically sustainable use of a catchment area, region or system, be accredited by

the proposed NCMA (or local CMA), or its equivalent, and that funding be provided only to accredited programs.

#### **Recommendation 14**

The Committee recommends that when local government boundaries are revised they be, as far as practicable, aligned with the natural divisions within catchment systems.

#### **Recommendation 15**

The Committee further recommends that the Government work through COAG to obtain agreement from state governments that they will enact such legislation as is needed to require local governments to exercise such powers as they possess in ways that are consistent with the national principles and targets for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

#### **Recommendation 16**

The Committee recommends that:

- formal recognition be given to 'partner organisations';
- eligibility criteria for accreditation as a partner organisation, be enacted;
- that accreditation as a partner organisation be reviewable and subject to special conditions; and
- all contracts with partner organisations and between partner organisations and other suppliers or clients, be tabled within three months of signature if the contract involves the expenditure of public monies.

#### **Recommendation 17**

The Committee recommends that all programs that affect the ecologically sustainable use of a catchment area, region or system, be accredited by the proposed NCMA (or local CMA), or its equivalent, and that funding be provided only to accredited programs.

#### **Recommendation 18**

The Committee recommends that the Government develop a program to foster the development of, and access to, the internet for rural Australians and the development of information data bases pertaining to the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems that can be accessed over the internet.

#### **Recommendation 19**

The Committee recommends that the Government expand the operation and purpose of the rural transaction centres to include, but not be limited to:

- Providing ready access to information and expertise on the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems, and access to education and advice services;
- Acting as a shopfront for regional management authority offices; and
- A base for catchment management extension officers and program co-ordinators.

#### **Recommendation 20**

The Committee recommends that the Government, in co-operation with the states:

- establish a network of local people who can act as local area co-ordinators and catchment management extension officers who will advocate for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems;
- provide appropriate training to these people; and
- encourage, with the states, the re-establishment of a system of extension officers whose duty will be to facilitate the development and implementation of local catchment programs.

## **4**

### **Funding and Resources**

#### **Recommendation 21**

The Committee recommends that funding systems be open, understandable and accountable and that any allocations made under a system be reported in the annual report of the Department that administers the funds.

#### **Recommendation 22**

The Committee recommends that an audit of policies be conducted to identify counter-productive incentives in respect of promoting ecologically sustainable land use that are contained in Commonwealth, state and territory programs and that proposals be developed for their removal.

**Recommendation 23**

The Committee recommends that all Commonwealth funding for programs for ecologically sustainable land use, be aggregated and co-ordinated for performance monitoring and reporting purposes, and be aligned with national plans.

**Recommendation 24**

The Committee recommends that the Government develop options for increasing the taxation incentives to participate in landcare activities for landholders on low incomes.

**Recommendation 25**

The Committee recommends that the Government conduct a public inquiry into the disincentives for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's landscape contained in the present taxation arrangements at all levels of government, and make recommendations for change, including costings.

**Recommendation 26**

The Committee recommends that the Government examine the feasibility of introducing an environment levy to pay for the public contribution to implementing the policy of the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

The Committee further recommends that such a the levy:

- remain in place for no less than 25 years; and
- be clearly marked on each taxpayer's taxation assessment notice.