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House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage
Inquiry into Catchment Management

Submission by the Blackwood Basin Group (Inc.)

The Blackwood River is the largest river in the South West of Western Australia and has a catchment of 22,000 square kilometres and a population of 35,000 people. It stretches from rural farmland near Dumbleyung in the east to forested and tourist areas in the south near Augusta. The Blackwood is facing major environmental, social and economic problems due to increasing salinity and land degradation.

The Blackwood Basin Group is a community based catchment management group based in the South West of Western Australia. It is community managed and owned, with members being democratically elected from Shires, Land Conservation District Committees, Farmer organisations, industry and the community. Government agencies also have representatives on the Group and provide technical input and assistance.

The Group evolved from community concern in 1992 with what was happening to the Blackwood. A public meeting was held in Bridgetown and attended by 250 people, and this resulted in the formation of the Blackwood Catchment Coordinating Group. The Group consists of twelve members drawn from nominating bodies, each elected for a two year period. The Group was renamed the Blackwood Basin Group in 1998, to reflect changes in national and regional catchment terminology.

The Group has seven years experience in catchment management over a very large and diverse catchment. It has received funding from the National Heritage Trust for two Regional Initiatives, the first in 1995 for $3.1 million to identify and scope the issues, and the second, for $5.2 million to implement on the ground works to address the issues on a priority basis. Both of these Initiatives have used a Community Partnership Grants scheme for funding on ground works, identifying issues and priorities at a local level. The current Regional Initiative is further implementing this approach through the use of nine "zones" across the catchment.

Zones have been developed as the most effective land management unit for planning and implementation of landcare activities. The zone management system is a structure

that will allow communities to identify, target and manage important landcare issues in their area. The zones were developed by overlaying information on surface hydrology, soils, vegetation, topography, land use and social information. Each of the nine zones has a single water exit point making these areas effectively sub-catchments of the Blackwood Basin. A zone action plan or business plan will be developed for each zone. This will include a state of the environment report for each zone, identification and quantification of issues and solutions, a benefit cost analysis of proposed solutions conducted over a 20-30 year period and finally an investment structure to facilitate resourcing of the actions recommended. The zone system will enable efficient allocation of resources and will further localise and empower community groups to work together and address the problems.

Regarding the terms of reference of the inquiry, the Group would like to address the following specific issues. Regrettably, we must be brief due to limited time and resources, however we would be pleased to provide any additional information should you request it.

1. The development of catchment management in Australia.

   The Blackwood Basin Group has used the concept of Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) as a key structure for its operations since the group's inception in 1992. One of the key aspects of ICM is community involvement and participation and a "bottom up" approach. There are hundreds of catchment groups across the Blackwood Basin, and more are forming. The community generally recognises the logic in working together as catchment groups.

   With the development of zone concept, the Blackwood Basin Group has continued its commitment to managing according to catchment boundaries and ICM principles. Within these zones, sub-catchment groups provide the communication network and the implementation structure, managing and organising on ground action.

   Whilst in many cases it is too early to quantify the impacts of the ICM model on the environment, there is no doubt that a focus on catchments has facilitated many landholders working together where they may have not been interested in working with single issue or other landcare groups. A catchment focus allows people to recognise the impact that their actions may have on downstream neighbours and vice versa. In the Blackwood basin this has facilitated significant social cohesiveness and joint commitment to improve the environment.

   The Blackwood Basin Group is building on the ICM model and recognises the benefit of ICM, as opposed to single issue Natural Resource Management.

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

   The Blackwood Basin Group is committed to monitoring and evaluation on a catchment scale to detect and assess environmental changes occurring due to catchment management. Changes to groundwater hydrology are not detectable for 10-20 years in the basin, depending on the rainfall zone. As part of its monitoring

program, the Blackwood Basin Group has been involved with collecting baseline data for the past 5 years. This will allow changes to be measured in the future. Baseline data collected includes area of vegetation, surface water quality parameters and bore monitoring information.

The value of the catchment management approach to the environment can be demonstrated by on-ground outcomes that have occurred as a result of catchment groups working together. Whilst this is not quantified presently, a recent attitudinal survey showed that over 90 % of farmers surveyed maintained or increased their landcare efforts in 98/99 and 79% of respondents had more awareness or involvement in landcare activities than they did ten years ago. Much of this can be attributed to the impact of Catchment and sub-catchment groups occurring in the Blackwood basin.

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

   The Group has drawn together technical expertise from government agencies and landcare groups to identify best practice solutions which are the best suited for a particular sub-catchment or zone. The acceptance of different solutions for different catchments, based on sound hydro-geological and technical information, is a key to the solution(s) working. There is no 'catchment wide' solution to land degradation.

   The need for greater information on the effects of landcare options remains, especially in regard to perennial vegetation for recharge reduction and the effects of surface and deep drainage. The Blackwood Basin Group is going some way to addressing these information gaps through initiating and supporting monitoring projects that will deliver this information.

   An attitude survey conducted by the Blackwood Basin Group in 1998 showed that 50% of respondents did not have enough technical information to know what was happening to their own land and water resources. Landholders have consistently requested better-directed information on effective landcare measures, requesting especially increased onground extension support.

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

   The Group is a community based catchment management organisation. The Group has always taken a whole of community (including government) approach to landcare, as the whole of community must be involved in the solution if it is to be successful. The Group's success had also been due to its seeking consensus on problems, realising there is no perfect solution. The priority has always what has been best for the Blackwood.

   The Group has always maintained an independent position, being not part of or wholly funded by any government agency or statutory authority. This has placed significant financial strains on the Group at times, however its success has been due to the hard work and talents of its members.

The Group's development is therefore unique when looking at how catchment management has evolved in Western Australia. As a catchment, the Blackwood is a large and diverse system, with many serious and long term problems, with no quick fix. This requires a long term view to solutions, one which government is traditionally not good at.

A community catchment group, focussed on a large and diverse catchment, is an interesting approach to implementing effective catchment management. In 1994, the Group commenced developing an Integrated Catchment Management Plan. This led to development of a Land Conservation Strategy, and the first of the Blackwood Regional Initiatives thrust was to scope and identify the problems facing the catchment. This led to the development of the second Regional Initiative, to implement the on-ground works.

This work has involved local landcare groups and organisations, local and state government agencies, federal departments, industry and the community, in an extensive consultation and review process. There is a role for all parties in catchment management, if it is to be successful in the long term. The issue is it must be driven from the community (bottom upwards), or government must have a lot of money (top down). A whole of community approach is essential if the solution is to be sustainable.

Landholders have the greatest potential to influence and change the landscape, as they hold most of it and are dependent on it. Regulation has been tried in the past and had limited success and created much resentment.

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

   Integrated catchment management must be 'integrated' across the community to achieve long term success. There is a role for government at all levels in providing policy, guidelines, technical expertise and direction, in co-operation with the community and local landcare groups to develop a strategy and then implement it.

   The Blackwood has achieved a high level of co-operation across the board in the catchment management due to the whole of community approach.

   Resourcing of catchment groups is a continuing problem, with volunteer burnout becoming a common problem. There must be more funding directed at the grass roots level to resource and support this volunteer base, or there will be an on going cycle of groups becoming established and achieving change, only to then collapse.

6. Mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on catchment management programs.

   The BBG has committed itself to implementing a detailed monitoring and evaluation program to measure progress towards achieving specified objectives and targets.

   The routine reporting component of this monitoring and evaluation program involves state of zone and basin reporting. State of zone and basin reporting can

be defined as a method of communicating the condition and changes in environmental condition of the zones and basin.

A state of zone reporting framework has been developed and is currently being applied to the Dumbleyung Landcare Zone, the first of the Zones to be developed. The framework utilises the Condition-Pressure-Response model to present and organise information in a manner suitable for addressing the following questions about the environmental condition of the zone:

- What do we know about the current condition of the environment? (condition)
- Why are changes occurring? (pressure)
- What are we doing about it? (response)

The framework identified and developed state of environment reporting indicators relevant to environmental issues of concern in the upper Blackwood Basin. Attempts were made to select indicators that were also relevant to other scales of reporting. In particular indicators for reporting on the status of the environment are consistent with those proposed in the Western Australia state of environment report and the monitoring and evaluation framework of the WA Salinity Action Plan.

Surface water and groundwater monitoring programs are being established according to catchment boundaries.