

August 11, 1999

The Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: Environment.Reps@aph.gov.au

Re: Catchment Management Inquiry.

Catchment management in Australia is at somewhat of a crossroads. Our understanding of degradation issues and the impact of those issues both on- and off-site is substantial, and our knowledge base about the cause of those issues; their potential and the necessary amelioration strategies continues to expand. Investment in natural resource management is perhaps at an all time high via the Natural Heritage Trust. Yet, some of the fundamental challenges are yet to be resolved:

- How do we successfully integrate natural resource management with sustainable agriculture in the broadacre and intensive land use zones of Australia;
- How can we ensure natural resources are protected at the same time as maintaining viable agricultural industries, particularly in rural areas where social decline is ongoing;
- How can agricultural industries adapt to changing attitudes and market forces which place a premium of “clean and green” produce and protection of resources; and
- How can we facilitate change at a scale meaningful to address complex and diffuse issues such as salinity and acidity.

Catchment management is at the heart of each of these questions. Whilst itself a relatively recent development in natural resource management, catchment management holds the potential to play a significant role in the management of Australia's land, water and vegetation resources, for economic, social and environmental outcomes.

The value of a catchment approach is well documented, and well demonstrated in approaches undertaken in all states of Australia, in both small and large catchments. The work of the Murray Darling Basin Commission is in essence about managing the catchments of the Murray and Darling rivers.

One word of concern. The terms of inquiry noted "to continue its investigation of water resource issues through an inquiry into catchment management". A significant concern is the focus of catchment management on water resources to the exclusion of dryland resources. This has been identified in the work of the MDBC which has only very recently ensured an equal focus on dryland areas. No issue demonstrates this need for a truly catchment approach than dryland salinity.

I spent 2 years working in dryland regions of the South Australian part of the Murray Darling Basin for the CARE Program (a proactive catchment management program). When the South Australian government created the River Murray Catchment Water Management Board they chose a boundary and focus which is 90% water dominated. Logical arguments from dryland representatives, including the fact that the Murray Darling Basin Commission recognises the whole of the SA region as a "catchment" for funding purposes still fall on deaf ears. As part of the Murray Groundwater system, the future water quality of the Murray River is inextricably linked to salinity and groundwater processes in dryland areas. This well established fact is overshadowed by the apparent political weight of water and irrigation interests.

I urge this inquiry to ensure that recommendations for "catchments" reflect all aspects of the catchment - otherwise it is doomed not to achieve its potential.

Different models for catchment management are being promoted and implemented in each state of Australia, with some differences within states (again the influence of the Murray Darling Basin means the approach in Basin catchments in NSW for example, is very different to that of catchments outside the Basin). No one model has got it all right, however if the best features of each model were to be defined and established as some sort of "best practice" then significant improvements can be made. NSW presents somewhat of a difficulty due to the apparent reluctance of the government to extend the powers of Catchment Management Committees from advisory to action, including rating capacity. Whilst the Victorian model for catchment management is commendable, with its clear link to "who pays" through the ratings system, it is not without its faults. Once again, many of the faults can be related to politics - both government and within and between catchment organisations.

Successful catchment management requires five key foundations:

1. **Clear, concise and user-friendly technical information on the issues affecting a catchment** - what they are, causes and impacts within and external to the catchment, biophysical processes, and some sort of risk analysis or modelling to consider possible future scenarios. This requires strong links and inputs from state governments, research organisations and other experts. In most catchments and for most issues this information exists, though efforts at presenting it in useable forms often require significant improvement. This provides the foundation for discussion, awareness and decision making.
2. **Sound organisational relationships** - including a representative group to drive the process, but with essential links to local, state and federal governments, industry, community groups and other stakeholders. Unfortunately many catchment management efforts are bogged down in "the committee" without the strong links to the other organisations. Not only does this burden the committee with all issues and actions, but deprives it of one of the key aspects to catchment management - the diversity of inputs.
3. **Strategic, innovative and accountable planning and action** - all information, ideas and inputs need to be consolidated into a useable format. Fundamental to good planning is to know what the question is which the plan is trying to answer. Too often plans are produced for planning's sake. There needs to be a clear, community owned question which the plan needs to answer as best it can. And, the plan must lead to action. Once again, many catchment management initiatives bog down in years of planning and no action. There are however, strong arguments, and good examples, of how planning and action can proceed in a synergistic relationship. The majority of the community would much rather participate in an active catchment management process rather than a passive planning one. Well targeted actions can be designed and implemented (and supported by investors) as part of a strategic planning process. The Coorong & Districts Local Action Plan is a good example.

4. **An investment focus** - all catchment management initiatives require some sort of investment, whether it be human, technical or financial, local, state, federal or industry. Sorting out the cost sharing arrangements for catchment management, and then developing a plan which clearly identifies the benefits of investment, and targets all potential investors is essential. Too often catchment management is driven by what Natural Heritage Trust will provide. More attention needs to be given to leveraging industry, state government and other investments. There is a substantial opportunity to link catchment management to, for example, the investments of CSIRO and Research and Development Corporations. Unfortunately, much of this government investment is not linked to on-ground needs. Government can play a role in facilitating and strengthening these links. The proposed CSIRO Heartlands project is perhaps a good example of links with R&D, however this project may be too caught up in politics, and perhaps not far-reaching enough to achieve all it could. Time will tell.
5. **The final foundation is process.** This cannot be emphasised enough. A strong investment in the process of involving a community and stakeholders in catchment management will provide the building block for realising the benefits of catchment management. Time and people resources are always the limiting factor, and there seems to be a preference for funding technical specialists over process initiatives. Involving 10 people in a catchment management process is a big enough job - let alone catchments of one, ten or a hundred thousand people. As in all democratic processes, catchment management is obligated to involve and inform all stakeholders. This is not easy, and 100 years of agricultural extension is perhaps a guide to the challenges involved in rural communities, but more effort needs to be made. Only recently, for example, has the Land and Water Resources R&D Corporation initiated a Social (and Institutional) R&D Program. This is to be commended, however it will be several years before the benefits are realised.

Catchment management is not about land, water and vegetation resources. It is about working with a community and stakeholder group to enhance how the natural resources of that catchment are managed. Whilst ever the focus is on how to fix that erosion problem, and not on how can we work together, catchment management will be limited. Engineering solutions always are the first on the list as they are easy to identify, cost, implement and monitor. Building the capacity of a community to value, protect and repair natural resources is much more "organic"! Hence, the fifth foundation - process.

The jigsaw puzzle of catchment management across Australia is very confusing. In addition, the jigsaw is often drawing a 1980's picture, rather than a 2000 one, let alone 2100! There are fundamental changes required in most if not all catchments across a range of issues. Some may be more high profile eg greenhouse, some more pressing eg salinity, and some undervalued eg biodiversity. Catchment management must be the conduit for all activities in natural resource management. It must also be flexible and innovative to take account of new initiatives which are certain to arise. But more than that it needs to be strong enough to make and implement some of the hard decisions. For example, there are areas which should be taken out of production and put to some sort of conservation use, for biodiversity, watertable management or erosion considerations for example. We have a reasonably clear understanding that this has to occur in many catchments, although we may not know how much land use change needs to occur. But rather than wait till we have definitive answers, we need to start the change process immediately.

There are no easy answers to land use change. Whilst ever we ignore it however, we are not truly being serious about catchment management. Land use change requires a whole of community and whole of government approach. There will always be vested interests in resisting that change,

even in the face of scientific evidence, however it is inevitable, and it is fundamental to managing many of the complex issues faced in catchment management.

Catchment management is not only about the bush. It needs to spread to the cities and towns. Whilst there are Catchment Management Committees, for example in greater Sydney, the spread needs to include greater involvement of city people in managing not only their own natural resources, but the resources of their bioregion, state and nation. Only then can we hope to make effective use of economic instruments for catchment management. And, whilst this is difficult in a price taking export dominated relatively small economy like Australia, there must be opportunities within Australia. Should Australians pay a price for water, bread, recreation ("free" in many natural areas outside of National Parks, etc which not only is based on an incomplete inclusion of the cost of its supply or production, but which does nothing to facilitate any changes which may be required for catchment management?

Once again, there has been some effort made in the economic area of catchment management, but where is it being brought together into a clear, concise and user friendly format, with participation of all stakeholders, a focus on strategic planning and implementation, and with a process that will make a real difference? One of the big challenges to say the least!

Australia needs national leadership on catchment management. It needs to extend from the philosophy to the planning and the practicality. We need to take stock of what works and what doesn't; what is feasible and what is not; how best to use our limited resources; and, where we want to get to. The vision statement is contained within each and every catchment management plan, yet few I believe, and I include myself, have a clear picture of what the vision is for natural resource management in Australia. Whilst there is a whole lot of kerfuffle about constitutional amendments to deal with heads of state, I wonder what the constitution says or should say, about how we value, use and protect our natural resources.

Finally, a question to this inquiry. I have read the terms of reference. But what is the question this inquiry hopes to answer? And how will it assist catchment management throughout Australia (and not be a shelf-sitter)? The ball is very much in the Committee's court to ensure that something useful comes out of this inquiry. I look forward to your work and wish you well.

Yours faithfully,

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