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

Dear Mr Causley

## INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

The Swan Catchment Council WA (Inc) is pleased to make the following submission to the Inquiry into Catchment Management.

The Swan Catchment Council is an incorporated body whose interest is in the natural resource management of the Swan sub catchment of the Swan-Avon catchment. The Swan-Avon catchment covers an area larger than the area of Tasmania. The Swan catchment or Swan region covers most of the metropolitan region of Perth and has a population of over a million people.

The Council is an Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) group which acts as an overall co-ordinating group for the whole of the Swan region where there are a number of individual Swan ICM groups, based on natural surface water catchments, working in sub catchments of the Swan. In addition the Swan region includes the Swan Coastal Plain areas to the north (up to the Moore River catchment boundary) and south (to the boundary of the Peel-Harvey catchment) of the Swan natural surface water catchments. See enclosed map showing area of interest.

Our submission is as follows:

### **Recognition and support for ICM**

- There is an urgent requirement for official recognition of ICM in WA. Swan ICM groups themselves recognise the value of a catchment approach to major environmental issues but often feel that they are the only ones taking a 'big picture' approach.
- The above lack of recognition means there is a lack of support for ICM groups, especially in the urban context. Whilst support has increased markedly in recent years through the Commonwealth's Natural Heritage Trust Program, the local level of support needed for groups has come in only very slowly and at a low level. There needs to be a large increase in support from State and local government to make a difference.
- Without legislation which defines ICM groups and their roles and powers, upper levels of government and agencies as whole entities do not formally recognise or 'see' ICM groups as part of their business. They are often reluctant to allocate an officer to attend regular meetings of ICM groups where requested. They are however usually very happy to send along guest speakers or technical advisors for specific issues on a once off basis.

- Swan ICM groups may have the power of moral persuasion with decision makers, and at times some political influence, but too often their interests are ignored or put aside as ‘too hard’ or ‘not part of our legal responsibilities’ or ‘not a priority at this stage’.
- Now that a network of ICM groups is established over most of the Swan River sub catchments and some major projects are underway, there is a need for the provision of adequate resources for administrative support. Community volunteers are the driving force and faithful watchdogs behind these projects, and their ongoing support over the longer term is needed. There is money around for on-ground projects, but little for the administrative infrastructure to manage and support them. We believe that this should be the role of government.

### **Lack of Integration**

- The lack of integration amongst natural resource management and planning agencies is probably the biggest ICM issue in this region. For most issues there is no real integration between the relevant agencies. It is true however that agencies are starting to co-operate for example with the State Weed Plan, Bushplan, and the Salinity Action Plan. Usually there has been considerable community pressure to get such initiatives underway or in the public forum. Another positive initiative is that natural resource management is being addressed at CEO and at the level of the Regional Chairs of catchment management groupings. Refer to the attached chart of Regional Structure of community groups (in ICM).
- There is a sad lack of integration between local government and state agencies on natural resource management.
- Thus for progress of ICM, integration by the relevant agencies is too slow and is a limiting factor. This is wearing and frustrating for community people who tend to have more vision about what is needed for the future.
- At the senior officer level, natural resource agencies appear to be somewhat territorial.
- Time and time again there is community concern expressed about the lack of integration of natural resource initiatives into the land use planning process and decisions made by the WA Planning Commission. In urban ICM the headstrong development ethic seen here in WA is implemented at the expense of the natural environment, of community aspirations for environmental amenity values, and of future generations.

### **Partnership agreements**

- There is concern that partnership agreements are not enough on their own to address natural resource issues. Agencies can withdraw from partnership agreements if other priorities take higher precedence and where agency budgets are increasingly restricted. What is required is legislation to support natural resource management as well.

### **Legislation**

- Unlike the situation in most other states, there is no legislation in WA for integration of natural resource management through ICM. It is much needed.
- There is no legislation which recognises ICM or ICM groups. The only exception is for Landcare District Committees (LCDC’s) which mainly operate in rural areas. There are 2-3 LCDC’s operating in the Swan region. Their role is similar to that of the Swan ICM groups.
- Agencies are constrained by their legislation and the lack of resources to venture into more complex interagency co-operation to manage the environment on a catchment scale. In too many cases there are very few resources allocated to actually manage natural areas (eg:

foreshores, bushland, stormwater quality). This may apply to local government authorities, and agencies such as Water Corporation, Homeswest, Swan River Trust, Main Roads, Westrail.

- Environmental weeds are one of the major catchment management issues. There are probably more volunteers working to control environmental weeds in bushland, wetlands and riparian zones than on other issues put together. There is no legislation in place for the recognition and control of environmental weeds in WA and this is urgently needed. Legislation once in place will need a lead agency and resources of both technical expertise and dollars for implementation.
- A *State Environmental Weed Strategy* is in the process of being produced by CALM now. An integrated *State Weed Plan* (covering agricultural, environmental and other weeds) is being produced now and should be finished this year 1999. WA has been slower than other states to develop these but at least a good process is in place now, a statement which could not have been made only two to three years ago.

### **Regulation and best practice**

- Legislation and regulation by government is not always supporting what ICM groups are doing. For example, turf farms, nurseries, market gardens, golf courses are not licensed under existing licensing provisions of the Environmental Protection Act.
- There are no regulations in place aiming to prevent the propagation and sale of bush regeneration and revegetation stocks which are environmental weeds. For example if a seed collector and seedling supplier incorrectly identifies a plant species and collects seed from a species or variety which is a serious weed rather than the local species ordered, then these may be planted out and fully grown before the mistake is recognised. This situation has occurred here with costly and disheartening results on the ground.
- There are no best practice guidelines in place for bushland regeneration in the Swan region. Yet there are relatively large funds available now for weed control, planting and regeneration works. The baseline research for this region which is biophysically unique has simply not been done. Most 'research' is being done by community groups by a process of trial and error as they go, but with little support if any from either local or state government authorities.
- Various natural resource management plans and proposals by government need to be taken seriously at the political level and fully implemented. Some examples in our region are: Perth's Bushplan, the Middle Canning Catchment Study, the Swan-Canning Cleanup Action Plan (SCCP), the State Environmental Weed Strategy, (impending) State Weed Plan and State Weed Action Plan, Statement of Planning Policy (SPP No.6) for land use on the Jandakot Mound. Also the Salinity Action Plan which covers the wheatbelt will have major implications for the Swan catchment when salinity breaks through to the Swan region.
- Whilst it is acknowledged that the COAG water reform legislation is going through parliament now, there is concern as to how the allocations for environmental flows will be determined and managed. The process has recently commenced for development of a flow management plan for the Canning and Southern River/Wungong Brook and this is a major step forward. It is felt amongst catchment group members that much more could be done to control and regulate the use of scarce flow by riparian landholders.
- Excessive nutrient loads on our catchments is another key catchment issue. There is a lack of standards of best practice and regulations for industries and land uses which use or contribute high nutrient loads to our catchments. Examples are the turf industry, golf courses, nurseries, orchards, vegetable growing and other horticultural industries. The government needs to get

serious about regulation (amongst other strategies) for nutrient reduction in inflows to the Swan and Canning Rivers. Licensing provisions and provisions under the Swan-Canning Environmental Protection Policy need to be applied to the above land uses to control nutrient discharges to waterways and groundwater. The Swan-Canning Management Plan which goes to parliament in December will only be stage one of the process. The State government should make ongoing financial commitment to forward the Management Plan and its implementation.

- Jandakot Mound and Gnangara Mound: Planning proposals to control land uses on the Mounds need to be taken more seriously by government in line with the Upper House Select Committee's report and recommendations on the protection of groundwater.

### **Environmental accreditation**

- We recognise the need for environmental accreditation by industries. However this is too slow to develop here in WA in our very fragile environment. For example the Nursery Industry Association does not yet have an industry accreditation system in place which prevents the sale of environmental weeds or dieback infected plants or soils, although we are advised that the process is beginning. Such systems are in place elsewhere.
- Environmental weeds are a major catchment problem in the Swan region (as in all other regions) but we still have the nursery industry selling serious environmental weeds such as Arum Lily, Acacia iteaphylla, Freesias, Sparaxis.
- Environmental accreditation of the nursery industry should also include nutrient controls on wastewater discharges, and fertiliser and pesticide practices.
- Hopefully the sale of 'local plants for gardens' will also attract a star rating for retail nurseries one day. However garden practices in the Perth region are still primarily based on European and other exotic plants and lawns, without any fundamental recognition of the local natural environment. The landscaping and nursery industry has not yet seriously taken up the opportunities for making gardens using selections from our own flora. The increasing pace of globalisation will make a 'local gardening and landscaping' ethos even less likely. If we are serious about catchment management, the current ethos needs to change to one based on knowledge, understanding, use, and respect for our unique and beautiful local flora and fauna. Government has a role to lead in this process with support from key community interest groups such as the Australian Society for Growing Australian Plants (ASGAP) at the national level, and relevant local groups such as the Wildflower Society of WA.
- Detergent labelling: Environmental accreditation could extend to the mandatory labelling with 'P' or 'NP' for all household, industrial and commercial detergents and cleaning agents. This is a voluntary code for labelling detergents with details of phosphorus (P) content. It needs to be reviewed for use in WA in the light of the vulnerability of our region for accumulation of excess phosphorus in our environment. A pilot project (funded by NHT) for raising community awareness of the P issue is currently underway in the Canning catchment.

### **Local government**

- Local government makes most of the land use planning decisions which have environmental impacts or potential impacts. Conditions may be set on developments but where environmental control conditions are set, there is a problem with compliance and there is no adequate process for auditing and enforcement. This is a major issue of concern as developers are well aware of the situation.

- Local government needs to be much more seriously involved in management of their local environment. Many urban councils still do not even employ environmental officers, and most do not have environmental management sections within their organisations. Many councils use their 'Environmental Health' officers (whose role is in human health issues) for environmental management which means that most issues are simply ignored. For example councils need to be concerned with stormwater quality and best practices in management of chemicals used in industrial and commercial areas. In other words, local government needs to be heavily involved in doing catchment management. And the community needs to be on board for catchment management to work.
- Local government needs to find ways of funding catchment management. An environmental levy with specified outcomes is one suggestion being considered by the WA Municipal Association. With a levy councils and the community will want a 'product' and this may force groups to be more efficient.
- Many local governments are still not actively managing their bushland reserves as bushland, have no in-house bushland management expertise, and have no budget allocation to bushland management. However this is changing slowly and is expected to improve greatly with the implementation of Perth's Bushplan. To hasten the process, there needs to be some State and/or Federal government initiative which puts bushland management on the agenda for local government, because it is being demanded by urban communities.

### **Community involvement**

- ICM in the Swan region is strongly community driven. Community involvement in ICM is essential for the extent and long term commitment needed. Politicians, governments and officers of departments come and go but the community remains and their interests remain. They are the drivers of environmental management over the long term and must be kept informed, be supported and recognised for the contribution they make. It is the community which has to make the major environmental decisions or choices in the long term and at the whole catchment scale. To do this effectively the community must be in the process from the start and actively participate as a partner with government.

We hope that these comments are useful to your inquiry. We would be happy to further discuss the issues raised at any time.

Yours sincerely

Pat Hart  
Chairperson