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Evaluation of the Biological Diversity Outcomes of Regional Investment

Context

The conservation of biodiversity is one of the primary objectives of the Natural Heritage Trust. While the Standards and Targets Framework has established the resource condition matters for target to focus regional investment, these matters do not simply aggregate into biodiversity outcomes. There is a need to evaluate the likely effectiveness of regional investment in bringing about the biological diversity outcomes of the Trust.

Focus

Issues related to biodiversity will include:

- Issues identified in *National Objectives and Targets for Biodiversity Conservation 2002-05*
- All matters for targets identified in the *National Framework for NRM Standards and Targets*
- Items of national environmental significance under the *EPBC Act*
- Elements of Australian Government environmental policy relevant to biodiversity conservation (e.g. coastal policy, biodiversity hotspots, IBRA)

Biological diversity outcomes may be set, prioritised and achieved through regional investments made through funding for:

- Priority activities; and
- Regional investments based on accredited regional plans.

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Evaluation of the Significant Invasive Vegetation Species (Weeds) Outcomes of Regional Investment

Context

Preventing or controlling the introduction and spread of weeds and other biological threats to biodiversity is one of the areas of activity that define the scope of Trust investment. Weeds are also a significant threat to sustainable agriculture. The Standards and Targets Framework specifies ecologically significant invasive species as one of its resource condition matters for target. Weed management is identified as a high priority in many regional NRM strategies. It is estimated that some \$50 million is being invested currently through the NHT in weeds control and management projects, including through the Envirofund. Investment in weed management needs to be strategic if it is to achieve long-term outcomes in terms of preventing new occurrences, reducing the spread of existing weeds and ensuring control and eradication work is effective and supported by ongoing management.

Increasingly, regional NRM planning and investment arrangements have drawn Commonwealth investment and effort into aspects of weed management which have been the primary responsibility of other levels of government. Without sound weed investment strategies, there is potential for costly, local and regional weed management actions to produce only limited and short-term benefits.

Focus

Issues relevant to the effectiveness of regional investments related to significant invasive vegetation species (weeds) reducing biological threats to biodiversity and sustainable agricultural production include:

- The purpose of the activity such as on-ground weed control, awareness raising, and where projects involve related activities, such as riparian revegetation, the proportion of the project attributable to weed management;
- The support provided by the investment for the required resources including people, chemicals, fencing, publications;
- Other resource support including contributions from state/community;
- Consistency and alignment with national, state or local strategies for the target weed- are they well planned, extent to which experts such as weed coordinators, state agency, researchers involved;
- Arrangements for ongoing management to provide lasting weed control outcomes at a local, catchment or regional level;
- Application of best practice management guidelines for WONS and other weeds where guidelines exist;
- Adequacy of monitoring and reporting project results; and
- Alignment to regional or catchment objectives including to other NRM outcomes (such as water quality, vegetation condition) and better-coordinated responses between public and private lands.

An evaluation of investment outcomes related to weeds may be the first of a series of evaluations on this theme.

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Evaluation of the Current Governance Arrangements to support Regional Investment

Context

Community capacity building and institutional reform is one of the primary objectives of the Natural Heritage Trust. The Trust has provided significant support to the establishment of regional bodies to plan and manage regional investments. The recent ANAO audit of the National Action Plan noted that some regional bodies lacked skills and capacity for financial management and management systems including mechanisms to deal with conflicts of interest.

Focus

Issues related to current governance arrangements include:

- The current skill and capacity within regions for financial management and management systems
- The project management structures and processes
- The potential for conflicts of interest and the capacity for regions to manage this risk
- The quality of financial and performance data and the capacity of the regions to provide appropriate reports
- Risk management

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Evaluation of the Salinity Outcomes of Regional Investment

Addressing salinity and related water quality issues are core elements of the goal of the National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality. The Standards and Targets Framework established both Land Salinity and Surface Water Salinity in Freshwater Aquatic Environments as resource condition matters for target. These matters are a significant focus of National Action Plan investment.

There is a need to take stock of past and current investments to ensure that there is adequate focus on solutions which are likely to achieve significant improvements in salinity outcomes for the nation. The evaluation will examine the adequacy of targets to effectively direct investment and the appropriateness of current investments related to accredited NRM regional plans and approved investment strategies.

Key issues which the evaluation will address include:

The content of plans

- What is the nature of the specific actions that are being identified in regional plans and funded through investment strategies?
- Are targets adequate to effectively direct and measure investment?
- How are funding priorities decided?
- Are investments meeting the needs of particular regions?

Capacity building

- What kinds of capacity building activities are being identified in plans and funded through investment strategies?
- Are they providing communities with the knowledge and skills that are required to promote the achievement of regional targets?

Institutional reforms

- To what extent are policy reforms agreed in bilateral agreements being implemented?
- To what extent are improved governance measures such as issues relating to property rights and pricing, land clearing and market based systems contributing (or likely to contribute) to the achievement of targets in regional plans?

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Evaluation of the Sustainable Agriculture Outcomes of Regional Investment

Context

The sustainable use of natural resources and sustainable agriculture is a key outcome of the Natural Heritage Trust and is also being influenced by the NAP. Salinity processes are significant threats to sustainable agriculture. The Standards and Targets Framework establishes a management action target for the adoption of improved land and water management practices. There is a need to evaluate the likely effectiveness of regional investment in addressing changes brought about by regional investments, which may lead to the sustainable use of natural resources and sustainable agriculture. This evaluation will be supported through Trust funding.

Focus

Issues related to sustainable agriculture will include:

- those identified in the National Framework for the Extension of the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality;
- All relevant matters for target identified in the *National Framework for NRM Standards and Targets*;
- Measures of social/attitudinal awareness and change in relation to uptake of sustainable agricultural practices identified in regional plans;
- Linkages/synergies between regional investment and sustainable agriculture investment under the National Component of the Trust and the National Action Plan (eg Climate Variability, EMS, forestry for salinity activities, Market Based Instruments investment);
- The support provided by the investment for the required resources including people, incentive payments, field days, publications etc;
- Extent to which regions/CMAs engage with agricultural industries to inform, guide and work towards sustainable agriculture objectives, including recognition of industries' importance in investing in and delivering outcomes.
- Other financial and non-financial support including contributions from state/community;
- Application of best practice management guidelines for sustainable agriculture (eg EBMP, codes of practice etc) and where guidelines exist;
- Other elements of Australian Government policy relevant to sustainable agriculture (e.g. research and development investments through RDCs, NLP investments).

Sustainable agriculture outcomes may be set, prioritised and achieved through regional investments made through funding for:

- Priority actions, foundation funding or capacity building prior to the accreditation of regional plans; and
- Regional investments based on accredited regional plans.

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Evaluation of Coastal, Estuarine and Marine Outcomes of Regional investment

Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the likely effectiveness of regional investment in coastal, estuarine and marine conservation, sustainable use and management to meeting the objectives and outcomes of the Natural Heritage Trust (the Trust) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (the NAP).

As it is still too early to assess the extent to which coastal, estuarine and marine conservation, sustainable use and management objectives and outcomes have actually been achieved, the evaluation will focus on assessing whether regional delivery of the Trust and NAP supports the achievement of coastal, estuarine and marine conservation, sustainable use and management outcomes.

Objectives

The objectives of the evaluation are to identify:

- the extent to which coastal, estuarine and marine conservation, sustainable use and management priorities, including national coastal, estuarine and marine conservation objectives, are being integrated effectively into natural resource management regional plans and investment strategies, and the likely effectiveness of investments;
- the extent to which the other elements of the regional delivery model (that is, the priority project funding, regional competitive component, statewide and multiregional activities) are contributing to meeting coastal, estuarine and marine conservation and sustainable use objectives, including national coastal, estuarine and marine conservation and sustainable use objectives; and the likely effectiveness of investments; and
- lessons learned that might inform future regional planning and investment arrangements.

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Review of the effectiveness of Bilateral Agreements between the Australian Government and state/territory governments for the regional component of the Natural Heritage Trust Extension

Context

Bilateral Agreements have been reached between the Australian and state/territory governments to manage operational arrangements for the regional component of the Trust Extension. A key responsibility of the Natural Heritage Trust Advisory Committee under Section 31(b) of the *Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997* is:

to advise the Natural Heritage Ministerial Board about the effectiveness of agreements entered into under subsection 19(2) in achieving integrated outcomes for the operations of the Reserve.

Focus

The review will examine the following aspects of the Bilateral Agreements:

- ***Administrative Arrangements***

This will focus on the establishment and operations of Joint Steering Committees in each jurisdiction, and the operation of financial management arrangements.

- ***Institutional reforms***

The review will examine progress toward and achievement of institutional reforms specified in the Bilateral Agreements. The Committee will also advise on the effectiveness of the Bilateral Agreements as a vehicle for achieving such reforms.

- ***Compliance with Nationally Agreed Frameworks***

The review will examine the implementation through the Bilateral Agreements of national frameworks established by the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council. These include: criteria for accrediting regional NRM plans; the Standards and Targets Framework; and the National NRM Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.

- ***Information management***

This will focus on the nature of information required for good decision making and monitoring and how well this is being generated and made available to those who need it.

- ***Capacity Building***

This will examine how well partners of all levels are equipped to develop and implement NRM programs.

In particular, the review will examine the extent to which compliance with these elements of the Bilaterals is achieving the Australian Government's objectives under the Trust

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Evaluation of the NRM Facilitators Network

Context

Community capacity building and institutional reform are one of the primary objectives of the Natural Heritage Trust. The Trust is making a substantial investment in a national Natural Resource Management (NRM) Facilitator Network (Network) of \$12 million per annum over three years, which contributes towards this, and the other primary objectives of the Trust and National Action Plan programs. The Network was established in October 2003 because direct human support is recognised as a key driver to achieve social/behavioural change and therefore on-the-ground NRM outcomes.

A Monitoring and Evaluation Plan has been developed for the NRM Facilitator Network. The intent of the Plan is to assess the contribution of the Network to its agreed outcomes. The Network is funded principally through the national component of the Natural Heritage Trust and comprises the Australian Government NRM Facilitators; the Strategic Regional Facilitators; the Indigenous Land Management Facilitators and the Local Government NRM Facilitators across the country.

Under the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan six-monthly self-reporting by facilitators in the Network will be used to obtain qualitative and quantitative data on the contributions the Network is making. This self-assessment information is to be complemented by an independent evaluation.

Focus

The independent evaluation of the impact of the NRM Facilitator Network would be conducted using data from a range of sources. The primary source of information will be through interviews with regional delivery stakeholders including the Australian Government, regional bodies, community groups, industry organisations and non-Government organisations. The independent evaluation would focus on the following performance issues as a means to assess enhancements to capacity and behavioural change in relevant stakeholders:

- have facilitators contributed to awareness and understanding of government policies and programs to the relevant context and how to access and use tools, resources and information among key organisations, stakeholders and community where relevant;
- have facilitators contributed to their knowledge of how to access funding sources among key organisations, stakeholders and community where relevant;
- have facilitators effectively communicated to Government and non-Government stakeholders issues related to the relevance and effectiveness of NRM policy and programs;
- that facilitators have provided useful guidance, support and information to regional NRM bodies on effective approaches to better engagement with key stakeholders;
- that facilitators have improved the awareness and increased the participation of key stakeholders in the regional NRM planning processes;

[NRM 01 attachment]

- that facilitators have enhanced their own capacity to contribute to Network outcomes as a result of communication and collaboration with other facilitators within the Network; and
- that the Network provides benefits of effective communication and collaboration with other targeted NRM networks.

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Evaluation of the Australian Government Envirofund

Through the evaluation the Australian Government wishes to:

- Determine the extent to which the Envirofund is meeting its two objectives:
 - providing the opportunity and means for community groups to undertake small on-ground projects tackling important local problems; and
 - providing a mechanism through which community groups (in particular those that have had little or no previous engagement with the Natural Heritage Trust) can move towards effective engagement in broader regional approaches to natural resource management.
- Identify the extent to which coastal and marine interest groups and indigenous community groups are engaging in the Envirofund and broader objectives of the Trust;
- Analyse and provide advice on the effectiveness of the Facilitator Network in assisting community groups with Envirofund activities;
- Review the effectiveness of Envirofund communication and publicity processes in contributing to achievement of the program objectives.

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Evaluation of the National Investment Stream

This evaluation's intention is to provide an assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of the NIS in the achievement of Trust outcomes and objectives with the following focus

- effectiveness
 - how well the NIS delivers on the Trusts three primary objectives,
- efficiency
 - how efficiently the NIS achieves its outcomes, and
- appropriateness
 - whether the national stream mechanism is an appropriate mechanism for the achievement of Natural Heritage Trust high level objectives.

The objectives of the evaluation are to:

- assess the NIS management processes;
- assess the achievement of outcomes of the NIS to date; and
- make recommendations on improving NIS implementation.

The evaluation will review progress of NIS implementation and will address the following broad issues:

- the financial management systems used;
- the project management structures and processes;
- the quality of financial and performance information;
- the extent that NIS investments have achieved their objectives; and
- the extent to which NIS investments address other Australian Government objectives.

The methodology for the consultancy will include:

- i) desk-top study of NIS investments, including financial and program performance reporting information;
- ii) set of evaluation questions, drawing on the above objectives; and
- iii) methodology to answer the questions (review of documentation, surveys, interviews with program managers, etc) structured along the following themes:
 - 1) National component: biodiversity (NHT Areas of activity: i, ii and v);
 - 2) National component: coasts and marine (NHT Area of activity: iii);
 - 3) National component: pests and weeds (NHT Area of activity: iv);
 - 4) National component: sustainable resource use (NHT Areas of activity: vi, vii and viii);
 - 5) National component: capacity building and institutional support (NHT Areas of activity: ix and x); and
 - 6) Other national components: National Competitive, National Statewide, and Regional Competitive.