



Our Ref: WPSL012

The Secretary
Environment, Communications, Information Technology
and Arts References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA 2600

Attention: Louise Gell

Dear Louise

Ref: Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity in the Australian environment

I refer to a letter dated 15 April 2005 inviting the Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority (CMA) to make a submission to the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and Arts References Committee inquiry into the long-term success of federal programs that seek to reduce the extent of and economic impact of salinity.

The CMA supports federal program initiatives that strive to reduce salinity and its impact on the environment and the economic worth of the local region. Salinity in the CMA region is recognised as a key natural resource management issue by local natural resource managers.

As an overall comment to the Committee, the CMA finds it difficult to comprehend why the CMA region, and specifically the Hunter catchment, does not warrant listing as a priority catchment in the NAP. Salinity data for the Hunter and its economic impact on rural industries, including mining, power generation, viticulture, and beef and dairy production is well documented. Salinity levels in the Hunter are already in excess of future target levels in most of the priority areas identified by the NAP and there is evidence that they are continuing to rise.

Despite this growing body of evidence, the significance of the salinity problem in the Hunter continues not to be fully recognised by the Commonwealth in its response to salinity. As a result the federal investment in salinity actions in the CMA region has been minimal when compared to other saline catchments.

As another general comment, the CMA suggests there has been insufficient time since the issue of salinity gained national significance to implement a significant number of on-ground actions to address salinity. Whether the strategies will have 'long-term success' once they are implemented may also take many years to assess. The CMA suggests that the major progress to date has been in the area of improving longer term planning processes.

With respect to the specific inquiry areas raised in your letter, we make the following comments:

(a) Goals of the NAP, NHT and NLP programs:

- Regional catchment plans have been produced and are currently being produced in another 'format' in this State - Catchment Action Plans. Whilst the process has been at times resource intensive and tedious, it has focussed catchment groups on setting priorities for investment through NAP, NHT and NLP. The plans have (or will) have objectives and targets consistent with the goals of these programs as well as management actions to

improve capacity building opportunities, provide good information and direction, introduce market based systems for investment, and to ensure accountability. As the CMA will also manage vegetation consent issues in this State there is potential for legislation (ie smarter regulation) as well as investment to directly support these plans.

- As there are no NAP investment opportunities in the CMA region, it has been extremely difficult to focus a significant effort on actions to address salinity impacts at a sub-catchment scale. Where they have been addressed it has usually been through actions on other natural resource issues or on a small scale. The implementation of significant actions at a sub-catchment level will require considerable future investment, but there appears to be limited investment opportunities as the CMA region is not a priority NAP area.
- Salinity in the Hunter catchment is strongly influenced by geology and land management practices, including historical clearing for agriculture and industry such as coal mining and power generation. The future extent and potential impact of salinity for the Hunter catchment is not well understood, especially the longer term impact of the interference of subsurface geological structures by past, current and future wide-scale land disturbance. The national economic worth of production from these land disturbance industries is very significant, but there is little long-term federal investment in understanding the future impacts on the environment and Hunter rural industries.
- Investment funding provided through NHT and NLP to individuals, groups, industries and spheres of government has been driven by the principles in the agreements supporting the federal programs.

(b) Role of CMAs:

- This State has established the CMA to develop catchment action plans that have scope for addressing salinity on a catchment basis. As well, legislative support has been given to the CMA to protect and enhance vegetation that may be significant for salinity - through the Native Vegetation Act and specifically through property vegetation plans. However, the effectiveness of these tools could only be assessed some time after they are implemented in 2005. It is likely under the current salinity investment options at a federal level that implementation opportunities will remain limited for the CMA area.
- This State has also assigned the CMA the significant role of informing the community on natural resource issues including salinity. Again because of investment opportunities the level of information provided on salinity alone will compete with other natural resource issues. The CMA communicates regularly with adjacent CMAs on natural resource issues and suggests that improved information and use of investment may come from a framework that facilitates exchange of salinity information between CMAs.

(c) Science and Innovation Committee:

- The CMA understands that the main goal of this Committee was to determine whether the best and most up-to-date science was being applied to individual problems, and whether effective coordination was in place so that the science made it 'down to the ground'.
- Local government provides the leadership for urban development in rural areas. There are examples in the CMA region where local government is re-zoning saline impacted or potentially saline areas for urban development. This action is undertaken sometimes without knowledge of the salinity issue and sometimes with knowledge, where land availability is limited. Whilst the longer-term impacts of salinity on the built and natural

environment as a result of urbanisation are generally understood, there appears to be little regulatory will to limit this future impact.

- As well as the above comment on sharing of information on salinity between CMAs, there is generally not one single database or awareness of sources of salinity information available to local land managers and users.
- The ability to provide some overall co-ordination of salinity management in the CMA region is limited by financial constraints. For example, the CMA is aware that there is only one extension officer for all coastal NSW employed by the State to 'co-ordinate' salinity action.
- NHT investments are currently driven by a formula that is biased towards on-ground actions so under the current federal agreements there is little investment available for research at the catchment level.
- There are currently no mechanisms to investigate large-scale salinity sources and transportation issues in the CMA region. For example, there is no investment in large-scale aerial electromagnetic surveys of saline catchments in the Hunter. Investigations therefore tend to be small scale and concentrate on areas where saline impacts are currently observable. It would be beneficial if there were research mechanisms available, possibly in partnership with the large Hunter industry base, to gain a scientific assessment of the overall salinity processes.
- The CMA region provides a unique opportunity for industry partnerships in salinity management especially with the coal and power industries. However, as there is no NAP investment in the CMA region the partnership investment opportunities for salinity are limited. As such information tends to be gathered on a case by case basis, eg. through an EIS process for each development. Data from salinity monitoring undertaken as part of a development consent is often 'lost' to the natural resource managers because of the standard of the data, how it is reported, or just that it is not collected into a single land management system database.

I trust these comments are of assistance to you in your inquiry. Should you have any questions on the above, please contact me on phone (02) 4930 1030.

Yours faithfully



Sharon Vernon
for Glenn Evans
General Manager

29 April 2005