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To Louise Gell, Secretary
References, Legislation Committees

From Elizabeth Eaton, Chair, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, managing natural resources in WA's mid-west

The following brief response to the inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity in the Australian environment outlines the scope of our views on this matter.

a) goals attained

Clearly the goals of the program are laudable and long-term. Attainment of these goals can only be over a long time frame. WA, with its huge broad acreage of (potentially) saline land with its commensurate impact on water quality has a long way to go to leave this land available for future generations to use. We consider that any expectation of delivery of improved resources through a single program to be unrealistic. The program has however served to highlight the importance of its goals, to increase community involvement in delivery of improved natural resource management, and to begin the challenging task of integrating whole of community (including agency) action towards achievement of these goals. These goals underpin on-ground change and would not have been achieved without the program.

b) role of regional groups

WA has chosen to remain with the elected model to date, and regional chairs have been strongly supportive of the merits of inclusion of the elected component in any change to a statutory structure. It has taken a while to realize the different system needs under this approach, and to implement the appropriate response. We are still working toward a fully integrated delivery of natural resource management (NRM).

c) Both strategy development and investment planning have included technical assessment. Involvement of science into implementation of our investment plan is anticipated. We are at an early stage of delivery.

WA in particular

There are two overarching concerns in regional WA (and in at least SA and QLD in my personal observation). One is the potential for economic growth, and the other the impact(s) of climate change. There is scope for scientific and policy approaches to ensure that NRM policy, planning and on-ground delivery can address likely consequences of optimistic, pessimistic and probable scenarios.

Natural resources is essentially about people. Regional WA has experienced little change in recent decades and cannot make on-ground change speedily. Many towns are experiencing decline. For farmers the question is: at what point do you turn off land? For towns people it is: what now? Farmers are more mobile than townspeople. There is scope for consideration on structural reform.

The regional groups have so far delivered community agreement on the strategy and on commencement of implementation. We have done this through informed community debate and input. We plan to continue in this way to deliver agreed and integrated courses of action.