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20 May 2005

Ms Louise Gell
Secretary
Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
Australian Senate
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Gell

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

Thank you for your letter of 1 April 2005 inviting the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) to make a submission to the above inquiry. ALGA has responded to all three questions.

a) whether goals of national programs to address salinity have been attained, including those stated in the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP), National Heritage Trust (NHT) and National Landcare programs?

Councils have a role

Councils have a significant role to play to assist with the achievement of national salinity goals. Councils have influence over salinity management through local planning and land use controls, conservation of biodiversity and the management of the water cycle. Councils are also directly impacted upon by salinity, particularly by urban salinity. Urban salinity has significant costs for both councils and their communities, in terms of salt affected infrastructure such as roads, housing and drainage, and hence local government welcomes programs aimed at reducing the impact of salinity across Australia.

Lack of implementation of regional strategies

To date, the focus of the NAP and NHT has been in planning and the development of investment strategies. Comparatively little funding has been provided for on-ground works. For instance, at the time of writing, none of the Western Australian regional strategies or investment plans had been approved. Regional arrangements in other states have taken a considerable length of time to be established and operational. As such, it is very difficult to determine if the goals of the programs are being met. Effective and practical solutions are still being developed and it will take a number of years before any positive outcomes are realised. Once implementation is further advanced, a better analysis of the success of the programs may be possible. However, this is a long term issue.

Increasing economic impact on local government

An Appraisal of Infrastructure Under Threat from salinity, undertaken by a group headed up by Mike Young of CSIRO (2002), noted that future increases in the occurrence of salinity will result in increasing costs borne not by landholders, but by many others in the community. Salinity causes significant damage to infrastructure, degrades water quality which can increase the cost to councils and others of providing high quality potable water to their community and damages the environment and biodiversity. Young et al estimated that damage to local infrastructure could rise by around 70 per cent over the next 20 years.

Salinity has economic costs to councils in terms of the costs of repair and maintenance, replacement and shortened lifespans of assets. Salinity causes damage to a whole range of urban infrastructure, including housing, playing fields, footpaths, parks, gardens and trees, piping (gas, water and electricity), stormwater systems, roads and bridges. This can have a significant impact on council planning activities and can restrict funding available for other essential services provided by councils.

For instance, in the Lachlan region of NSW, dryland salinity is estimated to cost local governments $6.35m per annum. This increases to $12.25m per annum in the Murrumbidgee region, although $2.95m of this was for implementing preventative works and education, research and extension programs (National Dryland Salinity Program case studies).

The economic impact from salinity is still a substantial burden on local governments and in all liklihood is increasing. For this reason, local government is keen to see faster progress made on achieving national salinity goals.

b) the role that regional catchment management authorities are required to play in management of salinity-affected areas, and the legislative and financial support available to assist them in achieving national goals.

Lack of coordination between local governments and catchment organisations

To date there has been a lack of effective local government involvement in the regional arrangements. A recent ALGA Natural Resource Management (NRM) survey of councils suggested that while 73 per cent of councils had attended briefings by their regional organisations, only 12 per cent had actually contributed to their regional plan. This is not effective engagement and will not result in local and regional plans being compatible. As a result, optimal environmental outcomes can not be achieved.

We would anticipate that as the regions move from a planning phase into an implementation phase, greater consultation with local governments will occur. This will reduce duplication and will result in good partnership projects to reduce salinity levels. Catchment management authorities need to understand the role councils play in environmental management and the benefits of working with councils to achieve environmental goals, such as reduced salinity.

The aim for any salinity projects should be for all levels of government, community groups, regional groups, individual landholders and local businesses to work together to

manage salinity. Coordination processes between these groups could be improved. Projects are not always well integrated, either between regions or between players in each region.

Whilst councils have the tools to manage salinity, they are not always adequately resourced. As such, their potential to manage salinity is not fully realised. This provides an opportunity for councils and their regional organisations to form a partnership to improve environmental outcomes. With resources and knowledge, councils can assist the regions to meet their targets which in turn contribute to the national goals of addressing salinity.

Local government already has legislative responsibilities

In a recent ALGA survey of coastal councils, many respondents noted that the regional organisations do not seem to understand the issues or roles of councils. This may also be true in inland areas. Councils are able to use a mix of voluntary, market based and regulatory measures to achieve environmental outcomes, yet the regional organisations are unable to do this. This provides an opportunity to strengthen the relationships between regional organisations and local governments.

Unlike regional organisations, local governments have regulatory responsibilities in terms of land use planning. As such, local governments and the catchment authorities should work together to achieve environmental outcomes. ALGA rejects any proposal to grant catchment management authorities legislative powers.

There is already concern in the community that the catchment organisations are just another form of government, and providing them with legislative powers is likely to increase that criticism. In addition, one of the guiding principles of the NAP is to have clear and defined roles and responsibilities of all parties. Granting legislative powers to regional organisations will blur these lines further.

ALGA considers the potential benefits that local government can bring to the table have not been effectively tapped into. Local government has primary responsibility for land use planning in most states. Land use and development activities can have an impact on salinity – for example through vegetation removal, by earthworks that may alter local drainage patterns, or by land uses that may affect the amount of water entering the watertable. In addition, urban development can exacerbate salinity through increasing groundwater recharge from run off, increased watering of gardens and altering drainage flows and levels. Having local governments and catchment organisations working together means there is no need to introduce legislative powers to catchment organisations, which are not a level of government.

Councils undertaking planning and initiatives to reduce salinity impacts

Councils can assist regions to meet their salinity targets in numerous ways, including by reducing the amount of saline discharge and recharge due to over watering of parklands, reserves and other open space areas. Councils can give preference to deep-rooting evergreen vegetation and grasses with lower water requirements in the local catchment, and salt tolerant species in discharge areas. In the development of new open space areas, or installation of new irrigation systems, councils can use moisture sensors to manage irrigation, instead of set timers should be considered. Local government can also assist the regions to provide information and education activities to the community on salinity.

These initiative can assist to meet regional goals and regions should know what activities councils in their region undertake and the resulting effect of these activities. It may be possible to leverage better environmental outcomes by working together.

Recent surveys undertaken by ALGA have indicated that many councils are developing environmental management plans to address specific environmental issues. There are many examples of councils developing plans and policies to address salinity issues and reduce the costs to council and the community. Improved outcomes can be achieved if these plans are not developed in isolation to regional plans.

One such council that has developed an extensive salinity and groundwater management policy is Tamworth City Council in NSW. Their policy sets out how salinity is to be considered in land use planning and highlights the impacts salinity can have on council infrastructure. The policy highlights a number of strategies to reduce these impacts.

c) what action has been taken as a result of recommendations made by the House of Representatives' Science and Innovation Committee's inquiry 'Science overcoming salinity: Coordinating and extending the science to address the nation's salinity problem', and how those recommendations may be furthered to assist land-holders, regional managers and affected communities to address and reduce the problems presented by salinity.

Further activities are required to communicate the results of science to those responsible for implementing findings through on-ground activities. Extension services are required. The inquiry noted that 'local governments are important conduits for delivering information on salinity management options at the local level'.

Increasingly, councils are being asked to provide a whole range of environmental extension services without additional funding, due to the demise of state agency extension staff. Some councils already provide their community with education and extension services in relation to salinity. The Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils conducted an urban salinity conference in February this year and has produced a number of pamphlets for residents, highlighting what salinity is and what can be done by the householder to minimise it. Also Wagga Wagga Council in NSW has employed staff to explain 'salinity science' to the community. Councils understand the importance of providing the information and this may be an area where local governments can have a significant impact on managing salinity.

The inquiry also noted that 'local governments were often not supported by other tiers of government'. It noted councils significant ability to influence change through planning at the local scale and suggested that 'local government perhaps is a more effective instrument of bringing about change than Catchment Management Authorities'. There is no evidence to date to suggest that any action has occurred to improve the support provided to local government since the release of the report.

At the same time, the regions, research agencies and other spheres of government should provide assistance to local governments seeking information on better managing salinity. The House of Representatives inquiry found that not enough science information was flowing through to councils. An example of where this is starting to occur is in the

Wimmera region of Victoria where the catchment organisation has provided a guide for local government on the causes of salinity and how to manage it.

Summary

In summary, the economic impact of salinity continues to be felt by local governments. This impact has been the driving force behind many councils undertaking a range of salinity abatement and management activities. Better coordination and funding of local government and catchment organisation activities could lead to improved environmental outcomes. Local governments need access to the latest science in a user-friendly format. Information is required to both assist councils with their decision making and for councils to educate their community. Finally, it needs to be remembered that councils have limited financial resources, so as activities undertaken by local government increase, funding must do likewise.

Yours sincerely

Ian Chalmers
Chief Executive