

Senate Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity in the Australian environment – Preliminary submission by Greening Australia.

Greening Australia has pleasure in presenting this preliminary submission to the Senate Committee on environment, communications and the arts' inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity in the Australian environment.

1. Introducing Greening Australia

- 1.1 Greening Australia is a non-government, apolitical organisation that engages the community in practical actions to protect and enhance the productivity of Australia's unique landscapes. It is a respected leader in native vegetation management and brings the latest scientific, technical and practical knowledge to communities and land managers to achieve better outcomes for native vegetation and biodiversity. It has pioneered techniques in revegetation, sustainable land management, facilitation and adult education.
- 1.2 Since its formation in 1982, Greening Australia has made a sustained contribution to the environment, particularly through the delivery of major programs on behalf of the Commonwealth and most State/Territory Governments.
- 1.3 Greening Australia has a demonstrated track record of providing and developing local and regional commitment and expertise - built on our understanding of local conditions, local challenges and local people.

2. Salinity

- 2.1 Salinity is undoubtedly one of the most serious and visible environmental challenges facing Australia. In the span of a single generation, landholders are finding that lands their forebears worked are no longer as productive. Its impact is widespread across the nation and its causes are complex. These include changed land use, clearing of native vegetation, grazing by introduced animals, use of shallow rooting annual plant species such as crops, climate change, changes to groundwater hydrology from irrigation and inappropriate land management practices.
- 2.2 The biophysical effects are also complex – for example, it can be difficult to demonstrate that the land use practices on a property upstream can result in increased saline groundwater discharge further down a catchment. Furthermore, if that occurs outside the boundary of your property so that you do not suffer directly the consequences, where is the incentive to try and ameliorate the problem? It is clear market mechanisms have not been effective and other policy interventions are required.
- 2.3 The issues and hence solutions are not just biophysical: social and economic elements must be incorporated into the policy response.

3. A Framework for Action

- 3.1 As an organisation with a proud history of twenty-three years successful environmental intervention rooted in community action, Greening Australia has

always been guided by a framework for action which is underpinned by the following core principles:

- i. **An adaptive approach:** strategy should be guided by achievable on-ground action. Action should be taken whenever there is a reasonable degree of confidence that a substantial contribution to beneficial environmental outcomes can be achieved. This can then be adjusted over time through monitoring and feedback. Simply put, this could be termed 'action learning by focussing on the '80/20' rule: 80% of the resources to targeted action with 20% of resources targeted to continuous improvement.
- ii. **Integrated outcomes for multiple benefits:** the most enduring and effective approaches are those that deliver benefits on a number of fronts, eg salinity abatement, enhanced biodiversity, erosion control and stock shelter. This also recognises that native vegetation can be used as the basis for commercial enterprises, such as agroforestry, fodder plantations and perennial pastures, that tackle land degradation problems while still maintaining productivity from the land.
- iii. **Community empowerment:** inclusive approaches are required whereby community members feel that there is a valuable role they can play on a personal level and those individuals who wish to can make a worthwhile contribution. In short, a role for all land managers needs to be defined.

3.2 These principles recognise that successful, enduring approaches to environmental management are complex and hence require time to develop, secure resources, implement and gain community acceptance and uptake.

3.3 Against this framework, an effective model for a program should have the following characteristics:

- i. Realistic budgets and target outcomes
- ii. Learning by doing
- iii. Robust linkages to R & D
- iv. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

These attributes provide the capacity to relate on-ground action to strategic outcomes. Hence, strategic planning is coupled to a compelling call to action whereby land managers can act in the confidence they can make a difference.

4. National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP)

4.1 The NAP should be seen in the context of the first round of funding of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT 1), which preceded it. Under NHT 1, communities were encouraged to undertake action and numerous community-scale projects were supported. While well intentioned, the role of this activity in underpinning strategic or regional outcomes was missing, so higher-level catchment or system-wide outcomes were difficult to measure.

4.2 Under the second round of the NHT, the focus has been on establishing catchment scale strategies developed by regional catchment management authorities (CMA) charged with articulating clear priority actions, prior to implementing those actions.

This would ensure that any investments made under the Plan would be directed to identified strategic priorities. Such an approach is entirely consistent with best-practice models.

- 4.3 In practice, it would be fair to say the planning process overall has taken longer than hoped. The challenge for NAP and the CMAs is to find the balance between planning and engaging in on-ground action.

5. Role of regional catchment management authorities

- 5.1 The concept of CMAs is a good one. In practice, their performance to date has been varied:
- Some have made good progress and developed well-founded strategic plans and commenced implementation.
 - Others have struggled with the analytical phase and found it difficult to avoid the danger of over-planning and consequential inaction.
 - Yet others have developed strategic plans that function at a very high level but do not give good guidance to practical on-ground actions that might be undertaken, thus making the task of implementation difficult and alienating local community members.
 - Some CMAs have made good progress by capitalising on the extensive 'local knowledge', skills and experience of individuals and organisations that were developed as a result of NHT 1. Other CMAs have returned to first principles resulting in lengthy planning periods as those responsible familiarised themselves with the issues.
 - All have been engaged in the necessary tasks of establishing staffing and other infrastructure to support their activities, which create unavoidable delays. It could be observed that some were nevertheless able to make progress far more speedily than others. Furthermore, there have been some marked disparities in the staffing arrangements adopted by otherwise apparently similar CMAs.
- 5.2 The greatest concern is that time taken for some CMAs to prepare their catchment strategies. It is an undeniably difficult and complex task. Our core submission is that the tasks of strategic planning and on-ground action need to be more effectively linked. This requires a framework for empowering action and then learning from the results. This will require increased devolution of budgets and decision-making and improved monitoring and evaluation to assess the effectiveness of alternative approaches.

6. Desirability of Multiple Benefits

- 6.1 Projects in the environmental arena that focus on a single objective are fraught. It would be far more desirable to require projects to deliver across a range of benefits, especially as these can be readily achievable. In this context, efforts to mitigate salinity can also have benefits on water quality, biodiversity and even reducing greenhouse gases by establishing carbon sinks. If these multiple benefits are actively sought, the return on investment will be significantly enhanced. Designing for multiple outcomes can be complex and requires an open-minded, inclusive process. It needs to be carried out at the regional scale rather than at the scale of

individual patch or property. The desire to achieve multiple benefits, and hence greater value for money, should be a fundamental principle of the NAP.

- 6.2 In funding on-ground activities, insufficient emphasis so far has been given to the benefits of biodiversity plantings in revegetation works. Indeed, the criteria should limit funding for plantings of exotic species such as radiata pine. When selecting native species, every effort should be made to source seed and seedlings from provenance species rather than native species from a different region.
- 6.3 Apart from aiming to encourage biodiversity, the introduction of non-provenance plants runs the real risk of unintentionally introducing new weeds to an area. In specific instances, such as saline discharge zones, non-local salt tolerant species and provenances should be used where local species would not survive or thrive.
- 6.4 The selection of species for revegetation works can be a complex task and greater guidance should be given under the NAP. Greening Australia will propose a decision-making model that could be helpful.