



4 August 2005

Ms Louise Gell  
Secretary  
Senate Committee for Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts  
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 26 July 2005 in which you invite regional bodies such as ours to make a submission to the Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity. I am pleased to take this opportunity and will focus my observations on reference (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.*

The Tasmanian priority region established for the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) spans two natural resource management regions in Tasmania: Southern region and Northern region. By agreement between the Tasmanian and Australian Governments, a NAP regional strategy was not required, as this would have placed undue stress on the membership and staff of the relevant regional bodies and the salinity and water quality issues are clearly identified and strategic directions established within the Southern and Northern regional strategies. However, separate Regional Investment Proposals are required. A Joint NAP Working Group has been established to plan for implementation of the NAP in Tasmania. Membership of this Working Group comprises representatives of both NRM North and NRM South (the two relevant regional bodies), and it is supported by the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment both technically and in terms of secretariat. The Joint NAP Working Group has no separate authority but makes recommendations to the two regional committees. In practice this has worked quite smoothly, with both regional committees accepting directions recommended by the Joint NAP Working Group.

I wish to raise four issues relevant to Reference (b).

1. the boundaries of the Tasmanian NAP region, being unaligned with other natural resource management planning boundaries, have caused a number of difficulties:
  - a. Although ostensibly reflecting those catchments in Tasmania that combine both salinity and water quality issues, they are essentially arbitrary. A number of areas with quite severe salinity problems (many parts of the Derwent Valley and King Island) are excluded. Tasmania's catchment profile is very complex and, for

example, the Derwent Catchment as a whole has not been included, though sub-catchments have been. In the development of the NAP, the Tasmanian Government and Tasmanian community requested that the whole of Tasmania be considered a NAP region. This would have eliminated the present anomalies. Alternatively, it may have been more appropriate to allocate the whole of the settled parts of Tasmania to the NAP region.

- b. The arbitrary nature of the boundary means there are potentially arbitrary eligibility, anomalous outcomes, incomplete work and potentially dysfunctional focus for activities with regard to what is included and what is not. It makes it harder to raise awareness about the extent of salinity and its potential economic impacts. Flexibility in interpretation of the boundary by governments needs to be able to be made public.
  - c. The involvement of two regions in planning for implementation of NAP in Tasmania has put additional pressures on the regions. The cross-regional collaboration is useful but systems need to be sensitive to the additional time that this requires.
2. The operation of the 'glass jar' has proved very difficult in Tasmania, with Tasmanian regions now likely to lose the full NAP resource allocation potentially available. The different politics between Australian and Tasmanian Governments have rendered this unnecessarily complex and politics appears to have got in the way of good regional outcomes. As the Tasmanian regional bodies are NGOs, they have not had the bargaining power with the Tasmanian Government that might have been possible in at least some other states. Recognition of investment in NAP by other investors than the Tasmanian Government would be helpful for regions.
3. We understand the NAP has been of concern for the Australian Government because of the slowness of implementation and roll-out of funds. As the Tasmanian regional bodies were only established in early 2003, and there was no prior regional history of regional NRM planning in Tasmania and therefore only limited regional information and planning available, the Tasmanian NAP region has been slow to access NAP funds, with the initial funds being allocated before the relevant regional bodies were fully operational, in 2003. In the first round administered there was no mechanism for a strategic process that was community owned and community driven. The need was for substantial information and data gathering and research, rather than on-ground implementation. The administrative and legislative requirements were unsuited to the newness of the Tasmanian regional NRM planning context. With both Northern and Southern regions now having accredited regional NRM strategies this has now been overcome. However, in designing government programs it is important to ensure there is sufficient flexibility to capture state and regional needs and circumstances. Programs must build on and develop regional capacity, both on-ground and institutional. Without this, effective on-ground outcomes are impossible to achieve.
4. Salinity and its manifestation in the landscape are complex issues and require long-term and regionally relevant solutions. NAP is an important program, which should be extended if it is to achieve its potential. Indeed, it is probable that in Tasmania, the real



benefits from investment in salinity mitigation will only be felt during a second term for the program.

These issues have undoubtedly reduced the capacity of the Tasmanian NAP region to deal effectively with the extent of salinity in the Tasmanian environment. It is premature for us to know the economic impact of salinity in Tasmania – actual or potential – but it is probable that it will be severe. On-going attention to and support for salinity research and mitigation will be vital.

We look forward to hearing the outcomes of this inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Vanessa Elwell-Gavins'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Vanessa Elwell-Gavins  
Director