

25 June 2005

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

Dear Louise

**INQUIRY INTO THE EXTENT AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF SALINITY IN THE AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENT**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the inquiry noted above. The Avon Catchment Council (ACC) would like to offer specific comment in reference to point (b) of the Committee's terms of reference:

*"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".*

ACC comments are as follows.

*1. Role that catchment management authorities are required to play in management of salinity affected areas.*

Due to the nature of legislative responsibility in Western Australia, Regional NRM Groups are expected to coordinate across a range of organisations including all levels of government, non-government organisations, interest and pressure groups and the broader community with responsibility for, or an interest in, salinity management. This is a task that requires identification of issues and responsibility for management and the coordination of responses and as such is a difficult and complex task. Recognition of Regional NRM Group responsibility for this coordination by the broader community is often difficult for a number of reasons:

- Mixed messages can be sent by various primary stakeholders with an interest in salinity management issues, without consulting or in some cases informing the Regional NRM Group. This process has the potential to reduce the influence and effectiveness of the Regional Group and may serve to undermine ongoing salinity management processes identified and prioritised by Regional Groups.

- There appears to be a lack of recognition in many instances of the role of Regional NRM Groups by programs and agencies with a responsibility for salinity management. While partner organisations work effectively in communicating with Regional Groups, organisations not directly represented often establish programs (including funding programs) that support salinity management without addressing or acknowledging the goals and aims of the Regional NRM Group. Regional Groups should be considered a first point of reference for such organisations and programs, to ensure that ongoing work or investment is complimentary rather than contradictory to regional NRM priorities.
- Salinity management often requires that Regional Groups take a lead in salinity management on land that is either privately or publicly owned. This requires different responses to different land managers and land tenure arrangements. Ongoing investment programs and their administrators need to recognise that a “one size fits all” approach may not apply when different land tenure is considered. This factor also applies to the nature of salinity and its impacts across Australia and NRM Regions. Dryland salinity and in particular its scale and impacts are naturally different from region to region and management responses need to be able to reflect this heterogeneity.

*2. The legislative and financial support available to assist them in achieving national goals.*

The financial support available through the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) is highly effective and highly targeted at regional priorities for salinity management. Both programs are integrated with the regional strategic and investment planning process and have enough scope to enable effective salinity management programs to be developed and implemented. The true cost of managing salinity is not and cannot be effectively met by such investment, however, the targeted nature of these programs enables regional asset management to be carried out. Unfortunately the National Landcare Program (NLP) does not integrate effectively with regional strategic and investment planning.

It is recognised that economic driver identification and industry development will be effective levers in encouraging the vast majority of land managers to tackle salinity and as such the NLP has significant opportunities to assist in this process. Utilisation of the existing focus of the NLP would be highly valuable in assisting salinity management, if the Program’s investment timeline and priorities were integrated with NAP and NHT and regional investment planning. Examples of effective NLP investment in regards to salinity management would be to identify genuine market drivers for Environmental Management Systems adoption and development of effective and integrated salinity management systems at the farm scale.

There is also an ongoing need to build the capacity of land managers to deal with salinity on private land. While some of this will occur via demonstration of salinity

mitigation actions in regards to asset management a large majority of land managers may not be directly influenced by such investment. This is not re-investment in standard procedures and demonstration exercises but a genuine review of effective adoption methods in regards to salinity management. Outcomes of such a process would enable ongoing improvement in salinity extension messages and real long-term benefits to the majority of land managers.

Legislative recognition of Regional NRM Groups in Western Australia is an ongoing issue that is currently under review. In the interim it would be useful if environmental legislation review or development recognises the role and function of Regional Groups. This is not creating a role for NRM Groups in the delivery or coordination of legislation but is ensuring that a level of consultation is sought with NRM Groups in the decision making process.

Yours sincerely

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Avon Catchment Council