

Response to the Senate inquiry into NRM and Conservation Challenges

August 2008

1. Lessons learned from Commonwealth Investment in NRM.

1.1 The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of projects and programs is crucial to enabling community based activism and stewardship. Investment programs that lack direction and accountability with regard to M&E have in the past, been the missing element in obtaining a better understanding of the causal relationships between community based NRM outputs and priority outcomes as described in Regional Catchment Strategies and other management plans.

ADVICE: We need to have more accountability in funding programs with regard to M&E. It is imperative that a greater responsibility is placed (with provision for adequate resources) on NRM agencies to **provide robust M&E programs that enable better decision making and sound investment**, while ensuring that investment is well placed to enable scientific process to underpin such M&E.

1.2 Community based NRM is extremely strong in many parts of Australia (Victorian examples include Wimmera, Corangamite and West Gippsland regions) as a result of strong partnership arrangements, sound funding programs and knowledgeable staff.

ADVICE: **Continue to invest in areas where community based NRM and partnerships are strong** to ensure the community will continue to be empowered and have ready access to well connected local and regional level NRM staff. **Ensure investment is enhanced in areas that are not as strong with an emphasis on regional peer support, cross border learning and secondment programs.**

1.3 There is a real danger that by devolving federal level funding programs and reducing investment in community based NRM through well established investment streams such as Catchment Management Authorities' (CMAs) Regional Catchment Investment Plans (RCIPs), a loss in proactive partnership development and integrated approaches to local level NRM will occur.

While there are most definitely shortfalls within some; there are also many agencies that are responsibly, professionally and effectively providing community groups with ease of access to partnership programs and strategic planning opportunities that would ordinarily evade them. Such agencies are often solely charged with taking forward priority community based NRM outcomes such as building stewardship and capacity through opportunities including representation on Agency Steering Committees and Forums, thus providing community with a key avenue to the provision of regional and state level strategic direction. A key by-product from this partnership is of ease of access to local and regional level community for agencies such as CMAs, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE).

ADVICE: **Continue to build on the investment that CMAs provide for community based NRM and conservation through RCIP programs.** These investment programs may take many forms, however it is absolutely crucial to recognise that **priorities at any level simply will not be taken forward without adequate levels of staff on the ground.**

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2. Building on knowledge and experience, and capitalising on existing networks and programs

2.1 Continuity in traditional Landcare, Coastcare and community based NRM and conservation investment has enabled many Networks to sustain a level of growth rarely experienced in NRM. Medium term investment in capacity building has led to community resilience, increased levels of stewardship, higher levels of education and awareness and higher levels of governance which has resulted in community leading the way and providing direction for agencies and partner organisations alike.

This continuity in investment has resulted in growth for Organisations, Projects, Programs and Networks. In many areas of Victoria, Landcare Networks and Friends Groups are the “Go To” centres for anyone in the community interested in becoming involved in environmental protection and conservation work, while also providing a base for expert advice, environmental education, project development and funding sources. This is evident through the success of Project Platypus in the Wimmera, the GippsLandcare model in West Gippsland and the simple fact that many local authorities and agencies view these community organisations as a “one stop shop” for community engagement and stream much funding through well developed organisations, partnerships and networks.

ADVICE: Continue to provide **continuity of investment** for well established and strong community based NRM and Conservation organisations, projects and programs. Provide increased strategic support for weaker or less evolved community based NRM and conservation organisations, projects and programs to enable growth to the levels seen elsewhere in Victoria. **Reduce duplication by using experienced existing networks and programs to deliver real on ground results.**

2.2 Many capacity building programs have achieved much success (see West Gippsland CMA’s Landcare Support Strategy). Having faith that well connected and developed community based NRM organisations can deliver sound on ground outcomes, is paramount to building a groundswell on which community and agencies alike are able to help achieve strategic visions, catchment strategies and management plans.

ADVICE: Look to Community based NRM organisations and agencies that have been supported in capacity building programs and are leading the way in achieving real on ground results backed with robust M&E, ensure they are well supported and that they can be used to **publicise the public good that stems from environmental stewardship.**

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3. A regional approach to Planning and Management

Costs

Investment is often spread thin by the time it arrives on ground; Project follow up and M&E for regional level projects tends to get lost in the system; some regional catchment strategies and regional management plans lack actions and targets, and contain very little accountability; regional agencies too often rely on community engagement strategies that do not align with local level strategic planning; local level community often cannot relate to regional priorities.

Benefits

A regional level approach can benefit some community organisations that have evolved to take advantage of cross border engagement and multi-pronged strategic approaches and partnerships (e.g. the 6 Landcare Networks in West Gippsland, South Gippsland and Bass Coast, Victoria that underpin the regional GippsLandcare funding program); regional planning can result in a more integrated approach to cover multiple catchments, thus providing strategic approaches at a realistic geographical scale (i.e. surface water flow does not take a line on a map into consideration) with meaningful research driving such planning; Investment can be dispersed across multiple partners to achieve a more integrated outcome (e.g. On any given farm, Greening Australia may target remnant vegetation, Landcare targets farming systems, fencing and revegetation while Trust for Nature targets covenants, thus integrating key local level environmental / agricultural priorities); Marketing and communications strategies can target a wider audience and have greater impact when delivered at a regional scale.

ADVICE: *Emphasis should be placed on the development of local level strategic plans which should then feed back up to the regional level,* thus indicating where community are able and willing to engage in certain priority activities. This approach is a targeted, proactive and a sensible way to guide regional planning as it provides a low cost to high output ratio for regional investment. Specific intervention programs can then be put in place to achieve those outputs where there is a lack of community support and willingness.

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4. A long term strategic approach to NRM at the national level

Any national level planning needs to be guided through state level planning; one would hope that state level planning is guided through regional level planning which in turn is guided through local level planning. While local level planning will let the NRM manager know where community based investment is best placed, it rarely allows insight into the more technical aspects of NRM planning such as flow tube modelling for salinity or geomorphological flow studies for the determination of sediment sources. This data must be gathered at the local and regional level through agencies and organisations skilled in the collection of such data (e.g. CMAs). Combined, a regional level plan should provide the state with priorities for that region, thus informing national level planners.

ADVICE: Very rarely will we bear witness to the halt of local level environmental degradation over the course of a traditional investment program (~3 years), therefore it is essential that recommendations are taken from regional level planning and ***investment provided to ensure continuity of programs (inc' M&E) for the long term health of, and reinvestment in the outcome that the outputs are designed to improve.***

5. Capacity of regional NRM groups, Catchment Management Organisations etc, to engage land managers etc, for the delivery of on ground NRM outcomes

Remove the complexity from funding programs that are targeted to community groups. Additionally, ensure that when they are rolled out (i.e. Caring for our Country - Open Grants) that the underpinning programs (Adobe Reader) actually work properly. It is crucial to ensure that community groups have the capacity to apply for these funding programs in the first place as regardless of where National Priority areas exist, if the community do not have access to well educated or resourced staff who are skilled in project development and funding applications, it is likely that such community groups will even apply.

ADVICE: Either ***remove the complexity from funding programs targeted at community groups*** or realise that most investment will need to be channelled through NRM agencies to help achieve a targeted outcome. It must also be reiterated that ***adequate levels of experienced staff are crucial to the development, implementation, management and M&E of any on ground project.***

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6. A comprehensive approach to NRM via Caring for our Country?

Advantages

Cost effective method of delivery; empowers those community groups who are evolved enough to be able to develop, manage, monitor and evaluate projects; ease of access for community based staff (e.g. Landcare and Coastcare) as the application forms are more simple than others; good support at Canberra so far.

Disadvantages

A national level approach is likely to cause the alienation of community from regional bodies, leading to a disintegration of partnerships and causing a reversal in integrated approaches to NRM; where staff are unavailable it is highly likely that communities do not have the capacity to strategically plan and incorporate current best practice into on-ground projects; there is likely to be a complete lack of robust M&E if agencies are not involved; it is likely that there will be difficulties for a team in Canberra to keep track of the nuances in M&E and project management at a ground level across the nation; there are dangers in placing large sums of money where there may be a lack of accountability or poor governance structures – many projects may never be acquitted; high risk of community burn out and disinterest in the management of long term projects; where staff are employed by community groups there is a serious risk of inadequate HR and personnel management, associated risk and health management, a lack of adequate resourcing and access to policy and procedure that all employees should have fair and reasonable access to; risk of disinterest and ridicule of Australian Government if online forms are not tested before being put into the public domain as per the issues with the Caring for our Country – Open Grants online forms.

ADVICE: While a comprehensive national approach has some great advantages with regard to cost reduction and simplicity, it is easily outweighed by the disadvantages with regard to integrated project design and M&E, and it is difficult to see how such an approach could improve on a more coordinated and integrated approach such as CMAs RCIP which has provided a secure funding base for community groups for the past 5 years. The implementation of a robust and accountable M&E system must be mandatory, which will be extremely difficult to oversee at a federal level. **A reinvestment in the established CMAs RCIP should be a priority with the addition of the above M&E concerns.** Ensure that a minimum of **30% of project budgets can be spent in project management costs.** This is a realistic percentage of any project and should be adopted to attract professionals into the community based NRM sector given current rates of employment and the lack of competition for jobs.