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Submission to the “Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges”

The Blackwood Basin Group (BBG) makes this submission as a “Nested” organisation on behalf of 40 000 people, over 2000 farming businesses, 150 catchment groups, 17 Land Conservation District Committees, 18 local government authorities and a range of conservation and interest groups.

The BBG’s core belief is that Community ownership of catchment problems will produce appropriate solutions given adequate resources and expertise. We make submission from that view and 15yrs of expertise through our experiences.

TOR i: the lessons learned from the successes and failures of three decades of Commonwealth investment in resource management including Landcare, the National Heritage Trust, The National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality, and other national programs

There are many lessons from previous years, but the current Federal Government does not seem to have learned from them. The way in which the Caring for our Country interim funding was thrown out, with very little guidance or forethought, goes against everything that we have been attempting to build over the last few years. In order to spend \$80 - \$400K in 6 months, the projects submitted will either be unachievable, or an inefficient use of resources. The only opportunity for this period is to do the groundwork for future, larger projects to be rolled out. If this is not the government’s aim, then this \$25 million will be wasted and will just provide another stick for us to be beaten with.

The major lesson from past investment is that using the financial year, rather than the calendar year, as a project timeline basis is not feasible. In addition, the length of projects is 12-18 months. This is not adequate to ensure that on-ground works projects have been implemented properly or are having the desired impacts. It also provides very little job security or opportunity for community engagement and trust building. It takes a long time for meaningful relationships in NRM to be built and very little time to tear them down.

Another lesson that should be headed is that the top down approach doesn’t work. In order for projects to be successful and to achieve real results, the community has to be engaged

and want the project to succeed. Time and time again we see projects fail, not because of bad management, but because of lack of enthusiasm. The policy makers need to consider what will happen on the ground as a result of their decisions, because ultimately, that's what all top level decisions should be driving towards. If they aren't, then they shouldn't be happening.

Other points to consider are:

- People work in their own defined groups, whether that be based on social, geographic or some other delineation, and we should try to work within these boundaries rather than trying to impose new boundaries.

- Staff capacity throughout the NRM network needs to be valued and maintained.

Maintaining momentum is critical, it is very difficult to ramp communities and projects up again after periods of inactivity.

- Programs like Envirofund (small local on-ground grants) are important to keep farm level implementation going and communities engaged.

- On-ground implementation and community engagement works best when done at the local level, utilising trust and local knowledge that has to be built on a personal / local scale.

- To encourage sustainability requires acknowledgement and support of production (private benefit) systems alongside environmental (public benefit) outcomes.

- Interim years in funding programs do a lot of damage and should be avoided at all costs.

- Always seeking "innovation" isn't always the answer. It is also important to support the "standard" items that we know to work

- Partnerships only work when they are formed for a good reason, not just to "tick a box". -

- More partners does not necessarily mean a better outcome.

TOR ii: how we can best build on the knowledge and experience gained from these programs to capitalise on existing networks and projects, and maintain commitment and momentum among land-holders

Points to consider are:

- Maintaining local landholder engagement depends on having a local NRMO present and the continuity of funding programs that can be assessed by landholders for farm scale works eg. Envirofund

- Retaining the people who carry the skills and knowledge is crucial, both staff and community champions

- There is a need for formal training and career development programs for staff, including an accredited training program, and transferability of employment benefits between employers in the NRM industry. This helps to encourage skilled people to stay in the industry, by giving them good career pathways.

- It is important that there are staff who are not entirely project based, available to respond to day to day community landcare needs as they arise

- Need to respect the knowledge already housed in a community - each funding program etc shouldn't assume that the locals know very little and need constant re-educating

- When you've got something that works, stick to it, regardless of Government changes, new funding programs etc. ie. Envirofund. It works, it's critical and it's been scrapped because of a change in Federal programs.

- Acknowledge that local groups have their own tried and tested methods of community engagement and project management, many systems which have been running longer than the regional system has. Projects and programs should not be too restrictive in their

requirements in these areas, giving flexibility for current local working systems to still be used. One size doesn't fit all.

- Data and knowledge collected and collated through all NRM projects is lost when a new funding round is created. Inter agency, industry, community and cross regional data sharing is paramount to moving forward with effective economical projects. I believe highly competitive funding situations have created a disabling non sharing attitude between agencies, regional NRM bodies and community group deliverers of projects.

- There absolutely needs to be at least a statewide Monitoring and Evaluation which should then be fed into a national M & E program to maximize data and information sharing and to eliminate massive uneconomic doubling up over national funding programs. For example – there are many thousands of bores and peizometres that have been drilled over the past 30 years that are now not monitored despite money invested to drill them in the first place. There are a few local community run monitoring programs but no commitment from programs run by agencies or regional bodies as far as following and evaluating monies spent in the past.

- Existing networks and projects constantly at risk of being lost through short term planning and funding. In turn recommendations made from dedicated groups and steering committees are ignored as new government priorities are outlined and bodies trying to position themselves in the best position to receive permission. When recommendations are ignored or not followed through with momentum is instantly lost with all parties involved. Commitment from landholders will be gained when there is a long term commitment in adequate planning including following recommendations made from the past 3 decades and long term funding arrangements (longer than 1-3 years) from federal, state and regional funding bodies.

- Commitment and momentum from landholders is best maintained local sub regional and catchment bodies, not through regional funding bodies. Local landcare groups have historically had the capacity to continue momentum with landholders so it is only through a strong workforce and support to on the ground people that this can be maintained.

- By communicating and having adequate M&E from past projects, to gauge their success. There is no point in continuing with projects that don't work and by the same token, there is no point in funding 'options papers' or 'scoping documents' when a tried and true method already exists, such as BestFarms EMS.

- By valuing people as vital on-ground resources, particularly sub-regional groups, catchment groups and NRM officers. These people are the link between the policy level and the 'making it happen' level. Without them to support and guide the community to undertake work (*that is usually voluntary and would cost the Government a lot to pay for!*) and to represent them, they would not get involved. Projects can't happen without these people.

TOR iii: the overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources

If the groups involved in the regional approach to NRM all stick to their roles and responsibilities, it can work very well. The regions were intended to provide support and administrative assistance to the sub-regions and other local groups and they provide the link between the State and Federal level and the grassroots level.

Unfortunately, this role is not being filled. Instead, it is just another layer of bureaucracy that makes the jobs of local groups involved more difficult and a rubber stamp for state

decisions and policy making. Rather than representing the sub-regions and local NRM groups, the regions are currently competing with us for funding. Rather than providing the support role they were designed to, they are attempting to get funding to undertake the work that we should be doing. Rather than build capacity of the regions by building community and local NRM capacity, they are building their internal capacity. This has the overall effect of making the smaller groups deeply mistrustful of the regional bodies and is not conducive to a healthy future working relationship. The communication between the regions and the groups it represents is terrible and when we are contacted, it is more in a 'checking up' sense than a collaborative one. The roles of the regions need to be very well defined, to ensure that they don't hijack the roles of the groups they are supposed to represent.

While smaller groups are currently laying staff off, the regions are hiring staff. They are not targeting outgoing staff from other groups, but rather advertising publically. This is a good example of the lack of support and lack of foresight in the regions at the moment.

TOR iv: the need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level

A long-term approach to NRM is crucial, as NRM issues are long term and don't just go away after throwing a heap of money at them in one investment plan. The current system means that projects are undertaken quickly and can't be monitored to see if they have been successful. At the moment, success is measured by spending all of the allocated money in the allocated time and not by the long-term environmental and social benefits of that money. The end result is that we go round and round in circles and do work that has already been done. There is no potential to move forward and build on past work. A minimum of 5 years monitoring is required to see if NRM work is having appositve impact on the environment and to enable projects to be undertaken properly and with sufficient community engagement and technical components.

The term 'strategic' gets thrown around a lot and can mean very different things to different people. At the moment, it tends to mean that some assets/NRM issues get the majority of funding at the expense of less important areas, however this money isn't necessarily spent well. In many cases, local NRM groups are encouraged to spend their funds on strategic areas, which are often State assets and receive considerable state funding and resources already. It also means that a lot of decisions are made at the policy level, without consulting communities that are required to drive the process. You need to deliver projects that people will want to be involved in, rather than force-feeding them what the policy makers want. I believe accessing local communities and NRM groups to facilitate this process is the best way to be 'strategic'. The term 'vegemite' is used to describe work that is undertaken in a non-strategic way, but it is also often used in a derogatory way to describe community Landcare activities. We need to find a common language in NRM that everyone can understand and respect the roles of different groups in NRM at different levels. This will enable us to be truly strategic and stop the overlap.

TOR v: the capacity of regional NRM groups, catchment management organisations and other national conservation networks to engage land managers, resource users and the wider community to deliver on-the-ground NRM outcomes as a result of the recent changes to funding arrangements under the Caring for our Country program

Points to consider are:

- Regional NRM Groups do NOT have the role of engaging land managers and delivering on-ground outcomes. Regional NRM groups job is to manage project deliverers (who do

the on-ground delivery and engagement) and co-ordinate regional processes such as priority setting

- Local level groups eg Landcare Centres, NRMOs are responsible for on-ground delivery and engagement
- Regional NRM Groups role should be to deal with the paperwork, govt. liaison, reporting etc so that the local on-ground groups are freed up to do the actual project implementation.
- It has been greatly reduced, as the program has not provided any surety, or support in carrying out community engagement. There is an overwhelming feeling of confusion and apprehension at the moment. We don't feel that we will have the capacity to fulfill the roles we want to. This process has forced us to become more insular, while we try to jump on the CfoC bandwagon, at the expense of our roles in the community. We have built an enormous amount of trust in our local communities over the last few years and this process will bring that to a standstill. To re-establish once funding is attained will bring us back full-circle, rather than allowing us to pick up where we left off.
- Capacity of regional NRM bodies lies in the collaboration, promotion, co-ordination and support of capacity that already exists in sub-regional and local landcare groups. Any attempt by regional funding bodies to engage land managers should be through supporting local landcare groups, otherwise if they take over these outputs in project delivery too many layers are being created and a lack of trust and momentum towards NRM will be the end result.
- Utilising and supporting existing capacity is the key to economic effective project delivery. Too much money is being thrown at the process – not enough money to on ground action now from lessons already learnt and recommendations made through 3 decades of funding programs.
- NRMOs are constantly under increasing pressure and workload to maintain forgotten funded programs by the community as NRMOs are often the deliverers of the project and creators of the momentum towards the projects in the first place, but financial or technical support towards NRMOs is only offered until the end of the project. This results in too much work to do, not enough time to do it in and losing valuable programs which considerable investment has been made.
- Innovative research and development is paramount to creating sustainable communities.

TOR vi: the extent to which the Caring for our Country program represents a comprehensive approach to meeting Australia's future NRM needs.

Caring for our Country does not represent a comprehensive approach to meeting Australia's future NRM needs. It has effectively halted any momentum with the community, stifled capacity and created confusion about the direction of NRM. The Federal government does not seem to understand what we need and doesn't seem to know what it wants. The priorities, themes and language that is being used in the CfoC program is the same stuff that has happened before, it just has a different title. It does not inspire confidence that the future direction of NRM will be measured and meaningful.

The way in which the funding was announced and released was far too rushed and will force a lot of 'impulse purchases'. Rather than just providing funding for groups to maintain capacity for the interim period in a more equitable fashion, this process has forced groups

to go out on a limb and apply for projects they have little or no chance of implementing successfully. It is setting up groups to fail and it is not 'strategic', it does not have a 'long term' focus and it does not learn from any past NRM lessons.

Conclusion

The Blackwood Basin Group (Inc) is very grateful for the opportunity to make comment on the inquiry into Natural Resource Management and will always endorse a continual cycle of improvement in land stewardship as this is having grave impacts on many of its members. There are fundamental flaws in Natural Resource Management in many states of Australia and this need to be addressed urgently.

In short, the BBG believe:

- Regional NRM Groups role should be to deal with the paperwork, govt. liaison, reporting etc so that the local on-ground groups are freed up to do the actual project implementation.
- Utilising and supporting existing capacity is the key to economic effective project delivery. Too much money is being thrown at the process – not enough money to on ground action now from lessons already learnt and recommendations made through 3 decades of funding programs.
- We need to find a common language in NRM that everyone can understand and respect the roles of different groups in NRM at different levels. This will enable us to be truly strategic and stop the overlap.
- The roles of the regions need to be very well defined, to ensure that they don't hijack the roles of the groups they are supposed to represent. Rather than representing the sub-regions and local NRM groups, the regions are currently competing with us for funding. Rather than providing the support role they were designed to, they are attempting to get funding to undertake the work that we should be doing. Rather than build capacity of the regions by building community and local NRM capacity, they are building their internal capacity.
- No attempt has been made to continue the successful NRM projects where Federal Government surety is required. Eg Environmental Management Systems and Capacity in Market Based Instruments.

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