

Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges

Submitting Organisation:

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Background

The Northern Gulf Resource Management Group (NGRMG) is a not-for-profit, community-owned company whose mission is to:

“facilitate community owned outcomes, which balance economic activity, social and cultural interest and environmental values, within the context of maintaining and managing healthy ecosystem functions.”

The company has a Board consisting of a Chair, Deputy-Chair and 5 Directors representing local government, Indigenous, conservation, communities and industry sectors. The Board members include 2 women and 2 Indigenous people.

NGRMG is a “bottom up” organization, in that our ideas and projects emanate from ordinary residents and community members of our region and are carried out by the company.

The Northern Gulf Region is large in area, covering 194 000 square kilometers, but small in population with only 9000 people living in the local shires of the region. To place the size of the region in perspective, the entire state of Victoria, Australia, occupies 227 420 square kilometers, and supports a population of approximately five million people. The boundaries of the region are based on the aggregate catchments of four rivers: the Mitchell River, the Staaten River, the Gilbert River and the Norman River.

Today, the main land tenures of the Northern Gulf Region according to area of land occupied include pastoral leases, Aboriginal land tenures and nature reserves. Mining is a growing industry within the region, along with other industries such as tourism, cropping and fishing are increasing. Overwhelmingly, the major land use of the region is extensive grazing of native pastures, with approximately ninety-two per cent of the region being used for pastoral land management on pastoral leases, freehold land or Aboriginal land.

The Northern Gulf is a large, diverse and biologically significant region. It lies within Australia’s tropical savannas, considered one of the most intact and best condition tropical savanna regions in the world. The Northern Gulf also encompasses the Gulf Plains, a significant tropical savanna landscape, and the Einasleigh Uplands, a biodiversity hotspot in Australia.

Set out below is the NGRMG's response to issues outlined in the terms of reference

- **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 have been numerous reviews, evaluations, audits etc of both the first and second tranches of the National Heritage Trust (NHT1 and NHT2) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) as well as the National Landcare Program and EnviroFund.

NRM & Environmental issues are highly complex – “wicked problems”

One of the key learnings from the first round of the NHT was that the natural resource and environmental management issues in Australia are complex – they are “wicked problems” that need to be addressed at a landscape scale, in a strategic, holistic and integrated way. They need to be attacked with long-term and not short-term thinking. Key shortcomings of NHT1 include its lack of a strategic framework to direct activities resulting in some on-ground works not being undertaken where they would achieve the greatest benefit; lack of scientific knowledge in some cases; focus on on-ground outcomes which limited the scope for community development; and insufficient resources for the magnitude of the problems (Hassall & Associates, 2005).

Some of the positive outcomes of the NHT1 included the development of cooperative partnerships and the leveraging of funds. Unintended outcomes included development and maintenance of social and community networks (a positive); cost shifting by State Governments (a negative) and competition between stakeholders including State Governments (a negative outcome) (Hassall & Associates, 2005).

Need for a planned strategic Regional approach

The learnings from NHT1 led to the approach taken in NHT2 which involved taking a far more strategic approach, with the country being divided into 56 regions and NRM plans and investment strategies being prepared for all but 1 of these regions. Over half of the funding of NHT2 and NAP was provided to the regional NRM bodies to develop and implement the plans. These plans were approved by both State and Commonwealth Ministers and in Queensland (and certainly in the NGRMG) incorporated the priorities of the State and Commonwealth.

In the Northern Gulf the development of the initial NRM plan and Regional Investment Strategy and the recent review process provided a targeted strategic approach to NRM which could be integrated into other planning processes, i.e. local and State government plans. NGRMG has a comprehensive and integrated Regional Investment Strategy that has been developed in consultation with all our stakeholders over an extended period of time which is the only document of its kind in our region. It pulls together all the

planning processes in our region and has identified all the drivers to deliver on the projects. Any changes in priorities under the new CfoC program can and have been incorporated into our new Regional Investment Strategy.

There is grave concern that the CfoC program is not building on these existing NRM planning processes and is likely to fund regionally delivered projects (through its suite of open grant programs) which may not be priorities under the plans.

Regional Delivery

In preparation for a possible third tranche of the NHT the previous Australian Government undertook a number of evaluations of NHT2 and NAP. One of these, the Keogh report found that there was “overwhelming support for the regional delivery model across Australia” with stakeholders emphasizing the need for the Australian Government to maintain its commitment (Keogh et al, 2006). The Report also found consistent support for regional delivery as the best means for achieving integrated natural resource outcomes at a landscape scale. It stressed as a key finding that the Australian Government must persist with regional NRM arrangements or be prepared to risk losing community backing and on-ground support.

The Keogh report also concluded there should be some refinement of the model, but any change should be based on the principle of ‘evolution rather than revolution’. The concern with the new CfoC program is that without fully considering what has gone before, it is coming up with a new **delivery** approach that threatens to undermine the gains that have been made particularly in community and stakeholder engagement and participation.

Involvement of Local and State Governments, Indigenous Groups and Industry

As regional NRM bodies have matured in Queensland, they have increasingly taken on the role of brokering partnerships and outcomes across various stakeholders. This is one of their key values to government. Because the Queensland regional NRM bodies are community owned, they have been able to develop the trust of landholders (something which neither the State or Commonwealth Governments have been able to do). Increasingly Queensland regional NRM bodies have developed effective partnerships and trust with local governments. Most regional bodies in Queensland (including NGRMG) have local government elected representatives on their Boards and many programs, particularly weed and pest species programs are done as collaborative projects. It is essential that these programs be built upon and not undermined through a “contestable” approach.

Similarly all regional NRM bodies in Queensland have an Indigenous involvement program and most have Indigenous members on their Boards. In the case of NGRMG, there are 2 Indigenous Board members including the Deputy-Chair. It is an evolving process to build trust and capacity with Indigenous groups to ensure that they are fully

involved in the planning and management programs and that their Traditional knowledge is valued and used toward sustainable resource management.

The new CfoC program puts Indigenous issues as a priority but the current changes in the funding regime is having perverse, unintended outcomes. For example, in Northern Gulf, by reducing funding to the regional NRM body and “cherry picking” projects, funding to Indigenous capacity building and cultural mapping projects other than the Ghost Nets Project has been reduced. Indigenous groups generally have less capacity than other groups – less capacity to be involved and to undertake projects (because of costs, protocols, distances and educational and health disadvantages). Therefore the unit cost to involve Indigenous groups is higher than the unit cost to involve other groups and they have proportionally been hit harder by funding reductions.

Involvement of community – particularly landholders

The community-based regional delivery model adopted under NHT2 and NAP has resulted in a significant mobilisation of landholders to recognise the need for and to implement changed land management practices. Within the Northern Gulf region, this has meant (and is supported through surveys) that landowners feel they have ownership of projects that deliver change management tools and assistance to them. Over the past decade, agricultural landowners have become very distrustful of both State and Commonwealth Governments as a range of programs impacted on them directly. The Queensland model of community-owned regional NRM bodies has been able to rebuild the trust of landowners to become involved and share information about their properties to enable improved property, sub catchment and catchment level approaches to managing assets particularly biodiversity, weeds and pest species and water quality.

- **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,**
 - 1) To deliver the degree and scale of changed land management that is required to address the NRM issues facing Australia, **mobilisation of the community, particularly landholders is essential.** This mobilization has escalated in the last couple of years of full implementation of NHT2 and needs to be built upon. Queensland regional NRM bodies are ideally placed within the community to deliver this. In an independent survey of the engagement and public participation practices of our regional NRM body found wide-spread support by the community for our bottom up approach to involving the community (Vella K., and Nursey-Bray M., 2005). Further the report found that “the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group was identified by all respondents as the forum through which community issues could be heard and advanced into government arenas.”
 - 2) NGRMG and the other Queensland regional NRM bodies play an important role in translating the plethora of “languages” that are spoken in the NRM field, e.g. the language of different levels of governments and different government

agencies, scientists etc into a language that resonates with and is understood by landholders.

- 3) NGRMG has targeted the youth and progressive managers of our community and has delivered training and in some cases employment opportunities to these people. They are now critical drivers in our community. This needs to continue or we will lose all the gains we have made.
 - 4) One of the shortcomings of NHT2 and NAP was the failure to develop a coherent **evaluation and monitoring program** that would operate at various scales, national, state and regional. The development of the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) framework is a good first step and needs to be implemented as a priority in order that changes in the condition of resource assets can be measured at the various scales. It is essential that the Commonwealth Government drives this process and sets national indicators.
- **the overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources,**
 - 1) A key benefit of the regional approach has been the bringing together of all the stakeholders/players around the one table and over time the development of trust, constructive working partnerships and more effective and efficient use of resources. Regional NRM bodies in Queensland, because they are not owned by Government, have been able to effectively play this brokering role. The building of a common vision and agreed targets and actions through the planning process had enabled the mobilisation of people and resources which could not have been done otherwise. In our region the Carpentaria Ghost Nets project is a good example. It involves 18 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around the Gulf of Carpentaria, Arnhem Land and the Torres Straits working together to remove the discarded fishing nets that are drowning dugong, turtles, dolphins, sharks and fish. Other partners include three regional NRM bodies, Clean Up Australia and Oceanwatch Australia. Over 32 months, 74,757 metres of netting was removed.
 - 2) Some benefits the regional approach has provided, have been unintended. These include the social and community benefits that extend well beyond NRM. Within Northern Gulf, these include:
 - 1 Skills and resources that now reside within regional NRM bodies are being used for wider community benefits. As an example, the spatial imagery purchased and processed for NRM management is also of considerable value to Emergency Services and the Police. The data and skills of the GIS officer in NGRMG were used by Emergency Services in the immediate response to Cyclone Larry and by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) and the Qld Police in the recent fatal survey plane crash near Georgetown. Additionally the SPOT imagery has been used for terrain and topography interpretation planning, monitoring and coordination in 3 successful air and land searches for missing persons in the last 6 months.

- 2 Regional NRM body staff and operations such as NGRMG's are located in remote and regional Australia (ours are in Karumba, Georgetown, and Mareeba). They are important contributors to the social and economic capital of these communities. Staff and their families live in the communities, their children go to the school, and they join volunteer and other community groups. The staff are generally young and well educated and are valuable assets to these small communities. Additionally most regional NRM bodies in Queensland such as NGRMG have a "shop locally" wherever possible policy to ensure that the funds provided by the Australian Government for NRM have the maximum multiplier economic benefits to these communities.

- **the need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level,**

In response, NGRMG would like to endorse the response provided by the Queensland Regional Groups Collective of which we are a member, i.e.

What is required-

- **Reporting** would link regional, state and national State of Environment (SOE) reporting. For this to work a set of national environmental accounts supported by institutional structures and frameworks (as per the 2020 Summit recommendations and the Wentworth Group proposals) is required.
- An integrated national, state and regional **framework** required and to include:
 1. National priorities, targets and budgets;
 2. State plans, targets and budgets (reflecting national priorities and adding state priorities and investment); and
 3. Regional plans (reflecting federal, state and regional priorities).
- **Accountability** – addressing the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) concerns:
 1. Vertically integrated monitoring, evaluation and reporting (MER) ranging from Management Action Targets (MATs) at the regional level to Resource Condition Targets (RCTs) at the state and national level;
 2. RCTs to be the responsibility of Australian Government and State;
 3. MATs to be the responsibility of Regional NRM Bodies; and
 4. Establish an integrated, publicly accessible national remote sensing and data capture system.

- **Partnerships and bilaterals**
 1. Investment built around CfoC recurrent funding integrating with other programmes (e.g. climate and water);
 2. Bilateral agreement with states encompassing roles and responsibilities of Australian, State and Local Governments and Regional NRM Bodies;
 3. State plans to meet Australian Government targets to receive funds;
 4. Regional plans (jointly funded by the Australian and State Governments, community and corporate organizations) to be accredited and to meet standards of governance, reporting, accountability and community engagement in order to receive funds;
 5. Leverage, community engagement, on ground delivery, volunteer coordination, local government/Non Government Organisations partnerships and enviro auctions to occur at regional level;
 6. States to be funded/engaged to unlock expertise, data bases and align agencies enabling full and open participation across federal, state, regional and local levels.
- **Process**
 1. COAG proposal from Australian Government to establish a National Environmental Accord built on the principle of cooperative federalism;
 2. Accord creates a national, integrated environment programme that (ultimately - may take time);
 - a. Links current Federal and state programmes (CfoC, water, climate etc);
 - b. Addresses biodiversity, sustainable production, ecosystem services (and stewardship payments) water quality and quantity, waste and pollution, national icons, community engagement;
 - c. Is underpinned by a set of national environmental accounts with independent reporting to Parliament (as is finance);
 - d. Reports to the public through regional, state and national SOE reports against resource condition targets;
 - e. Consistent definition of best practice farming across all jurisdictions and production systems coupled with green labeling for sustainable production; and
 - f. Recognition that farmers and landowners can play a major role in carbon sequestration through good practice (soils, rehabilitation, ground cover, etc).
 3. In the interim continue to fund national state and regional plans and priorities;

4. Set aside a portion for “Contestable Innovation” bids to drive new ideas and innovation; and
 5. Establish an ongoing national roundtable engaging principal stakeholders (regional bodies, primary production, conservation, local government, Traditional Owners...) to negotiate targets and engage over delivery, reporting and governance.
- **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, and**

In 2008 the key changes to funding under the CfoC program have been a reduction in funding to regional NRM bodies and open contestable grants. Since the beginning of 2008 there have been a number of contestable grant rounds including the National Reserve System, National Landcare Program, Coastcare and the CfoC Open Grants.

These changes to the funding arrangements have been a retrograde step from the previous funding arrangements under NHT2. In particular:

1. The reduction in funding to regional NRM bodies has resulted in the cutting of programs which were in full implementation phases resulting in both the loss of momentum and staff. In particular, the cutting of funds for all the Regional Landcare Facilitators and Strategic Regional Facilitators over and above the reduction in funding for regional investment strategies has exacerbated the loss of momentum and increased the impact on delivery. NGRMG lost 4 full-time-equivalent staff out of a total staff of 17.

Attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff has been an issue over the past 5 years. The CfoC funding has made this situation worse. With the uncertainty of funding and its current short term nature, i.e. maximum length of any funding currently is 30 June 2009, it is difficult to attract and retain staff. This is particularly the case in remote areas such as the Northern Gulf where staff can readily obtain employment with more attractive remuneration packages in locations with more facilities. If NGRMG is forced to terminate staff, then it is unlikely to be able to get them back if funding becomes available. The Open Grant programs only exacerbate the problem because it is not possible to undertake workforce planning on even a 12 month basis as all the programs open, close and announce successful projects at different times. These funding programs then expect that projects will start immediately which is not possible if staff or consultants have to be employed to deliver them.

2. The evaluation of the NHT2 and NAP programs recommended simplifying and streamlining the funding and contracting processes. In Queensland there was a move toward following the Tasmanian approach of providing 3 year block funding. To date the new CfoC approach is proving more administratively complex than the NHT2 approach. There are more contracting processes and more reporting processes. A recent example are the contracts for the successful National Landcare Program projects. These contracts are now being handled directly from Canberra and are requiring separate bank accounts.
3. Although the data are not available, it is likely these separate grants programs are more costly to administer (higher transaction costs) due to each having to have separate application processes, separate assessment panels and processes, separate contracting as opposed to being included within 3 year regional investment strategies which get assessed at most annually by State and AG officers familiar with regions. They are certainly more costly for regional NRM bodies that have to develop numerous individual applications each tailored to a specific funding programs. The recent CfoC Open Grants resulted in over 150 separate applications from Queensland and we have been advised that more than 3000 have been received across Australia. The cost in staff time to pull all these applications together would be considerable: time that could have been put to a better use. NGRMG decided against applying because of the time required to prepare an application, the short time frame to get partners together to fully develop projects and that successful projects will need to be completed in less than 9 months at best. (Six months is a more realistic estimate given the number of applications the Commonwealth has received and the amount of time that will be required to assess them all).
4. The Open Grant contestable bid approach is the antithesis of a strategic approach. It is the approach which was taken in NHT1 and which was found to be fundamentally flawed in the evaluations done of that program (Hassall and Associates 2007). It is flawed for the following reasons:
 - It is not based on strategic NRM plans operating at various levels from (National – State- Regional) and thus it is piecemeal. What should happen is that the Australian and State Governments should further develop NRM plans/frameworks at the national and state level which then dovetail with the regional plans. Funding should then be directed at investment strategies that deliver on these plans;
 - It is the antithesis of further development of cooperative partnerships (which commenced under NHT 1 and were further developed under NHT2). Development of partnerships amongst all the players should be further encouraged and supported and the deficiencies noted in the evaluations of NHT1 and NHT2 (particularly of local government, industry and conservation groups) further developed. Setting stakeholders against each other in a “contestable” approach should not be used when trying to tackle “wicked problems”. Additionally, the open grants approach is the antithesis of what is needed which is to continue to develop trust and partnerships between all the stakeholders. The regional

NRM delivery approach saw significant improvements in the development of trust and working partnerships between stakeholders. One of the key values of Queensland regional NRM bodies (which are community-owned) to the Australian and State Government is the role they play in brokering outcomes between people on the ground and the various stakeholders from government, peak bodies, Indigenous groups and scientific providers.

- It leaves the decisions to Ministers through **assessment panels**. The Assessment panel approach has a number of shortcomings –
 1. each grant program has a different assessment panel with different members making it difficult for the panel to understand the totality of what is being funded;
 2. It is very difficult to assess applications without considerable on-ground, local knowledge and considerable knowledge of what activities should cost and this differs widely across Australia. People who have this knowledge are generally already fully involved in NRM and thus not independent. Australian and State Government officers do not generally have sufficient on-ground delivery understanding to know what will and won't work.
 3. It is extremely difficult for the assessment panel to know if projects are duplications of work already being done.
- 5. Beyond July 2009 the NGRMG, like all regional NRM bodies across Australia has no certainty of funding. This is particularly concerning for Regional Bodies in Queensland where they are not underpinned by State Government legislation and are independent legal entities which need to conform to State and Australian Government Business legal requirements around issues of solvency and governance. There is a need for secure, longer term core regional allocations to allow Regional Bodies to
 - undertake good business practices as well as NRM delivery
 - undertake forward planning
 - maintain trust and credibility among stakeholders
 - attract quality staff.

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

- 1) Currently *the CfoC program does not represent a comprehensive approach*. The 6 priorities are supported but there is as yet little substance to how these priorities can be effectively delivered and little evidence of how the evaluations of previous NRM programs have been used to refine delivery. *What is needed is “evolution” not “revolution” as the Keogh report concluded*. What is of great concern is the adoption of open grant style delivery mechanisms that were shown very clearly in the

evaluation of NHT 1 to be of limited value. This is a retrograde step and should be ceased.

- 2) It is difficult to assess the CfoC program development as there is *little consultation* being undertaken with regional NRM groups. NGRMG has not been involved in the development of the Business Plan which is scheduled for release in September.
- 3) This lack of involvement is symptomatic of the *“top-down”, “command driven”* secretive approach being adopted by the Australian Government in developing the CfoC program. Studies undertaken worldwide, from the United Nations to the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, have demonstrated the benefits of active public participation in environmental planning and implementation. Conacher and Conacher (2000), states ‘...involvement must be an effective one, not merely window dressing or a one-way transfer of information from an agency [or other organization] to the community.

The World Resources Institute (2003) states *“Governance [the involvement of community in decision making] is the essential human element of ecosystem management, with the task of interpreting the needs of all stakeholders within the biological realities of the ecosystem itself. It sets the larger context that either enables or constrains management...it [governance] requires us to focus on the social dimensions of natural resource use and ecosystem management, in addition to the technical details of how to manage. This includes how we value ecosystems, how we set management goals, how we negotiate trade-offs between conflicting uses or goals, and finally how we make sure the costs and benefits of our decisions are equitably shared. In fact, a focus on governance adds an explicit consideration of fairness to the goals of ecosystem management...involving the balance of ethical and moral concerns, social and economic goals, and the capacities of natural systems.”*

Veggeland (2003) states *‘Good governance depends on bottom-up arrangements creating space for political government and action, involving of the civil society, public discourses and transparent institutions of accountability in order to make democracy work’*. As the NHT2 & NAP programs developed in Queensland, the Australian and State Governments NRM teams moved steadily toward a partnership approach. This has now ceased with the CfoC program returning to the past top down command driven approach”.

- 4) The justification for the new CfoC program appears to be as a response to the Auditor General’s report. The Auditor General was asked to address the administration of the NHT2 and NAP programs not the relative merits of various delivery models. The issues raised in the Auditor General’s report are recognised as needing attention, particularly the need to accounting for outcomes. However, they can be best addressed through an iterative, “adaptive management approach” rather than a return to approaches that have been shown in the past to be deficient as appears to be occurring with CfoC.
- 5) The top down delivery *of the CfoC program will disenfranchise the public, especially the Traditional Owners, of the Northern Gulf region and could lead to*

significant loss of momentum and motivation to participate in meeting the CfoC priorities. At the end of the day, it is the land holder and the community who live in the region who make or break country. The top down approaches of the CfoC program *does not allow the voice of average Australians to determine priorities and practice for their own sustainable futures*. The regional planning and implementation processes have strong local ownership and present solutions to achieving targets in a practical manner, and that the local communities have ownership and desire to implement.

- 6) The open grants approach significantly disadvantages remote communities who cannot compete in the written application processes due to a low literacy rate. Thus it will result in outside organisations rubber stamping and undertaking projects that have no local ownership, and thus lead to no change or improvements in the health of country.
- 7) *In summary we believe the new program lacks a strategic approach, does not allow the voice and effort of average Australians to be heard or valued, and does not provide approaches that delivers long term outcomes.*

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