

Sarah Moles

The Secretary,  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
PO Box 6100 Parliament House,  
CANBERRA  
ACT 2600

By email to: [rrat.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:rrat.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear sir/ ~~madam,~~ \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on NRM and conservation challenges.

I have been active in a local landcare group, a catchment management committee, and 3 different regional NRM groups (CMAs) over about the last 15 years. I've also been a project officer employed under Natural Heritage Trust funding.

My submission addresses ToR 1-5.

**ToR 1. 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,**

From my perspective, the biggest constraint to continued engagement with rural landholders is the interruptions caused by lack of certainty in project funding. On average, it takes 12 months for a new project officer to get to know the local community and the job, and for the local community to get to know him or her. The next 12 months are typically spent doing the job, while the final year of a 3 year project is more often than not spent worrying about continued funding or looking for a new job. The lack of continuity impacts on all aspects of on-ground NRM projects. In particular, it destroys momentum that takes time to build up in the first instance, but which is quickly destroyed, along with the trusting relationships that develop in concert with engagement processes. Individual landholders get very tired of having to go back to square one time and time again and many eventually give up altogether.

Within a typical 3 year project, there is a bit of a hiatus after each 12 months while an application for continued funding is prepared for the Commonwealth. I'm all in favour of accountability and meeting milestones and targets but the uncertainty about whether a project will continue is another waste of time and resources that could otherwise be directed at on-ground works and maintaining important local relationships.

**ToR 2. 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,**

Certainty of continued funding would be the biggest improvement the funding framework could make to ensure continuity of action and improvement in NRM.

I also believe we have much to learn from indigenous NRM knowledge and that more emphasis needs to be placed on respectful engagement with traditional owners *on their terms* and appropriately valuing their knowledge and expertise.

**ToR 3. the overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources,**

The regional approach is generally the appropriate one but account must be taken of the time involved in building and managing partnerships, particularly those involving funding. I understand that my regional body has to manage and account for 30 different sources of funding.

The current state-based bilateral approach to funding fails to ensure a coherent and consistent approach at river basin scales. The Murray Darling Basin Commission and its successor need to be in the funding stream to ensure that on ground works in NRM regions within the MDB contribute to Basin wide targets and plans.

**ToR 4. the need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level,**

I believe the need for a long term strategic approach is obvious and agree that a nationally consistent approach is required – where funding is concerned. However, my view is that for planning and on-ground works, ecologically defined units – ideally catchments – provide the appropriate framework.

Long term certainty of funding would go a long way to ensuring continuity.

**ToR 5. 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,**

Regional NRM groups in Qld are far better placed to engage with landholders and resource users in delivering on-ground outcomes than the Commonwealth. However, inconsistent approaches from state governments hinder and in some cases prevent achievement of planned goals and objectives. Mining and coal seam gas developments are a case in point.

This industry has expanded rapidly in southern inland Queensland, most of this in a policy vacuum. Now there is a policy, albeit a weak one, to deal with the potentially

huge issue of managing 'associated water'. Many of the pre-existing developments do not comply with the desired standards and there is no requirement for them to do so in the future.

These types of developments are often deemed to be of 'state significance' and are therefore exempt from the regulations anyway. The industry is allowed to undertake activities that private landholders are not allowed to do: to clear remnant native vegetation; mobilise literally millions of tonnes of salt currently held in the soil; dispose of (often saline) wastewater in to streams, build evaporation ponds close to streams, inject wastewater into aquifers below Great Artesian Basin sediments –the potential risks and effects of which are not known and to divert freshwater streams.

While the industry attempts to be a good corporate citizen, its activities work against achieving the targets set out in endorsed NRM plans. A consistent approach, in which all players abide by the same set of rules, is desperately needed.

If the Caring For Country program is able to ensure all players work towards desired goals, much more could be achieved than is currently possible

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Moles