



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

### **Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide some comments on the Natural Resource Management Program and the conservation challenges faced by Australia. The Northern Agricultural Catchments Council has been instrumental in delivery of the NHT and NAP programs in the Midwest of Western Australia since 2003.

Natural Resource Management issues have become of growing importance to stakeholders in the region over the last decades, as the impacts of environmental issues have hit home, for example rising groundwater and salinity are now creating significant management issues for the whole community. To reverse or arrest these issues, which have been caused by the implementation of Government policy, eg land clearing requirements for land grants, will take significant investment and timeframes to reduce the rate of decline or bring it to a halt.

However, it would appear that some policy makers expect the problems that stems from 200 years of poor policy and practice to be solved within short timeframes. This does not mean that changes to programs cannot be made to deal with processes and policy, but that these changes will require suitable timeframes to allow for adjustments in strategy to deal with the ongoing environmental issues.

The ongoing commitment to reducing the rate of decline requires environmental issues are funded in the same light as Health, Education and Capital programs.

In specific response to the questions raised in the terms of reference I offer the following comments:

- o ***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;***





- As the vast majority of land under threat is in private ownership, any program requires the support and action from the landowner to undertake required actions to reduce the decline in Australia's natural assets. This requires significant time to develop trust and understanding of the issues and provide education and incentives to produce the desired outcomes. We need to change the community attitude to how they manage their land and processes. This cannot be achieved with short timeframes and constant changes to the processes. Undoubtedly, a lack of continuity disrupts and frustrates the community that have been building long term visions. Significant changes in processes without long lead-in times also cause loss of momentum and staff dissatisfaction (and loss).
  - Having communities work together to examine the issues and decide what would be the best approach for them to tackle the huge challenges allows them to build the trust that is needed for the work to be initiated, often with large contributions from their own resources (cash, equipment, fuel and manpower). Without the community onside and access to the land that they own the natural resource issues will continue to decline.
  - As part of the process of the community need to decide which are the most important issues to tackle first – prioritisation. Without this strategic and coordinated approach to dealing with the issues, significant efforts can be undertaken without the gains required in the right areas. The asset based management approach provides the opportunity to deliver tangible outcomes against targets, for all stakeholders.
- ***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;***
- A network of regions across Australia has been developed. Regions are now starting to share ideas and resources to raise the capacity of all communities across Australia, sharing both success and failures allows for continual improvement in the delivery of the changes required. Providing some ongoing capacity across Australia will see continued growth in delivery as the trust and relationships have been developed.
  - A long term vision and funding commitment is essential to ensure that community commitment is maintained, the ongoing commitment to reducing the rate of decline will require that environmental issues are funded in the same light as Health, Education and capital programs.





- ***The overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources;***
  - A significant outcome of the previous program is that community will provide their own resources to deliver onground outcomes, provided there is the support and encouragement provided to assist. Further, some of the tougher issues require incentives to assist, this reduces the risk, especially if failure may occur. As an example of what has been achieved For example, in one project area, public funding of \$267,000 has attracted private investment of \$361,000. This includes significant investment in plantings; with perennial pastures, tagasaste, tree planting and salt bush all attracting land holders to almost double the amount invested through public funding. The figures include: \$122,740 on perennial pastures, attracting almost a quarter of a million in private investment; a \$23,000 investment in tagasaste being doubled; \$30,000 of tree planting resulting in \$45,000 of private funding injection and saltbush investment worth \$2550 being doubled by local farmers. Native vegetation management, the most difficult area in which to attract landholder investment has attracted some \$25,000 investment for a \$90,000 outlay. Given that many land managers are yet to see the value of investing in bio-diversity, this is a great outcome which can only continue to improve.
  - The Regional Delivery Model has allowed for the creation of strategic partnerships, facilitating integration and cooperation in the delivery of national and state priorities. This has proven to be cost effective and avoids duplication, as the community has a one stop shop for NRM information and linkages across Australian and State programs.
  
- ***The need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level;***
  - Previous comments have alluded to this as a major issue of any program that cuts across the issues in Australia and the States. The problems that stems from 200 years of poor policy and practice cannot be solved within short timeframes and hence funding needs to be a long term commitment (30 years) and strategic directions need long lead-in times to change the strategy.
  - The program should include agreed commitments from all levels of government such that the program can avoid duplication of effort, uncertainty and confusion on responsibilities.





- ***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***
  - Regional groups have continued to deliver programs through the new Caring for Our Country (CFOC) Program. The new priorities have been taken onboard and adjustments to programs made to ensure we are meeting the expectations of the Australian Government. However, the untied nature of funds with State governments has left WA processes unresolved and subject to delays. We look forward to a greater understanding and association with the CFOC program into the future.
  - However, previous partnerships could now be wavering because of the competitive nature of the different funding programs. Some groups could now 'go it alone'. This could again lead to silos, duplication being established again and a lack of strategic direction.
  - The Regional groups process has allowed the community to be empowered and by managing the delivery, control of the strategic direction within the community.

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

- Current understanding is limited, we will need to see how the business plan rolls out, Regions are already working with the new six national priorities and would like to see regional strategies playing a pivotal role in the program. However, without an integrated commitment from the State, the program will be diluted.

I trust the above comments are of assistance to you, should you wish any further information, please feel free to call myself on (08) 99649774.

Yours sincerely

Alan Bradley  
NACC CEO

