



14 August 2008

Ms Jeanette Radcliffe  
Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and  
Regional Affairs and Transport  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Radcliffe

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

The ACT Natural Resource Management (NRM) Council is one of 56 regional NRM bodies that provide comprehensive, complete coverage of the Australia for the purposes of natural resource target setting and investment delivery.

The Council submits the following views in relation to the matters under inquiry:

#### ***1. The Lessons Learned***

There have been significant learnings both in Government and the community about how to efficiently and effectively deliver natural resource management investment programs in Australia. Through the experience of the first and second phases of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) as well as the support of the National Landcare Program, we have learnt that integrated approaches are best. Integration needs to occur both at the institutional level (within and between governments) as well as between communities of interest in addressing natural resource management issues.

Collaborative rather than competitive approaches, promoted through regional NRM investment promote integration and in the Council's view, achieve the best NRM outcomes.

Regional NRM organisations operate across Australia focussed on achieving the best NRM outcomes for their regions. Whilst varying in capacity, regional organisations are rapidly maturing and well placed to mobilise community and other investor support to address on-ground NRM issues.

Regional organisations provide a national framework for NRM delivery, quickly able to respond to national issues, whilst working closely with state and local governments and land managers.

Regional organisations have also learnt to develop strategic integrated NRM plans with targets for different asset areas that reflect regional aspirations in the context of national standards. It is clear that State Governments continue to value this approach and will continue to invest in these structures. What is lacking from the Australian Government is any formal recognition of the role of regional NRM plans as a continuing framework and basis for investment.

Rather, the Australian Government has retreated to a position of being simply another investor in natural resource outcomes particularly those relating to a set of national priorities and yet to be defined targets.

## ***2. Building on the Knowledge and Experience Gained***

Whilst Australian Government Ministers Garrett and Burke have recognised the need to continue to provide some support to regional NRM organisations, this is at significantly reduced levels from that provided previously with the intention of making the competition for funding keener. Whilst regional organisations may be well placed to compete for Australian Government funds, it remains to be seen whether the significant effort in applying for grants will be outweighed by the benefits of more targeted, better developed and better value for money proposals.

We can best build on the knowledge and experience gained from regional NRM delivery by the Australian Government firstly by recognising the value of regional plans and the experience and collective wisdom they contain. Secondly, the Australian Government needs to work with the States and Territories under the auspice of COAG to mobilise continuing co-investment in shared national priorities, rather than singular Australian Government priorities.

Demonstrating achievement of results needs to continue to focus on bringing together quantitative and qualitative data in an adaptive management framework. This framework needs to recognise the need to demonstrate achievements in 3-5 year intervals coinciding with investment cycles. National leadership is required to establish an appropriate reporting framework to data on agreed focal points in every region of Australia that can demonstrate trends in resource condition over time. Benchmark data from these sites could be complemented by regional monitoring of investment outcomes into an aggregated database.

## ***3. Costs and Benefits of the Regional Approach***

Whilst there are some transaction costs in regional delivery, these costs are outweighed by the value-added of community involvement and collaboration as well as the strategic targeting of investment through regional plans.

## ***4. A Long Term Strategic Approach***

A long term national approach to NRM needs to be developed through collaboration between the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, regional NRM organisations as well as the peak conservation and resource manager NGOs. Such an approach needs to find an agreed set of priorities the nation shares for its natural resources, rather than one that reflects a particular level of government. These shared aspirations for our resources can then drive collaborative efforts.

**5. *Capacity of Regional Groups to Deliver and Demonstrate On-Ground Outcomes***

Regions are demonstrating that they can deliver NRM outcomes. The April 2008 NRM Knowledge Conference in Melbourne, convened by regional NRM Chairs and held in conjunction with the NRM Ministerial Council meeting and regional NRM Chairs meeting, providing clear evidence of the maturing capacity of regions to address NRM issues within their regions and in collaboration with others. NRM regions are becoming sophisticated NRM investment brokers and agents of change.

The regions continue to address the challenge of communicating the achievement of on-ground outcomes to investors and other stakeholders. The evidence is there about results, the issue is more about how these results are communicated.

**6. *Caring for our Country as a Comprehensive Approach***

Caring for our Country is not a comprehensive approach to addressing natural resource management issues in Australia. It is rather a set of selective investments in particular natural resource areas against a set of priorities determined solely by the Australian Government. The program addresses biodiversity, land and community capacity, whilst most issues to do with water are excluded. It remains a challenge for the Australian Government to integrate the delivery of their investment programs.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sarah Ryan  
Chair

Cc Mr Jon Stanhope MLA, Chief Minister and Minister for the Environment, Water and Climate Change