



Bass Coast Landcare Network Submission Senate Standing Committee Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges

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The Bass Coast Landcare Network formed in 2003 as an affiliation of 10 Landcare Groups, in two CMA regions (Port Phillip and Western Port and West Gippsland) to best position themselves for government and corporate investment. 65% of the 1,400 rural properties in the Network area are members, involved in and supported by BCLN.

The aim of the Bass Coast Landcare Network is to promote land use and management that ensures integrity and sustainability of land, water and biodiversity. The Network's core purpose is to provide support and resources to the groups within the Network to assist them achieving their aims and objectives.

The Network manages 13 Landcare staff to directly assist landholders and the main objectives are:

- To promote productive and sustainable use of land
- Protect biodiversity by retaining existing vegetation
- Protect remnant and riparian vegetation
- Increase indigenous vegetation by facilitating the planting of suitable species
- Control erosion and salinity
- Encourage landholders to increase indigenous vegetation on their properties
- Promote Landcare and Landcare activities
- To enhance and strengthen rural communities
- Encourage community ownership and involvement
- Promote skills development and education across the Network
- To maintain a close association with the Victorian Farmers Federation
- Carry out the purposes for which grants are given

The key theme of our submission is the importance of the development of capability in our human resources and the need for longer time frames of notice on changes to funding arrangements and opportunities.

The Bass Coast Landcare Network is an ideal model for what can be achieved with a well managed active network.

Lessons learned from the successes and failures of three decades of Commonwealth investment in resource management including Landcare

1.1 Community based NRM is extremely strong in many parts of Australia (Victorian examples include Bass Coast Landcare Network, Port Phillip and Westernport CMA, West Gippsland CMA and Wimmera CMA and Corangamite CMA) as a result of strong partnership arrangements, sound funding programs and knowledgeable staff.

The evolution of Landcare in Bass Coast has seen individual Landcare groups form alignments into Landcare Networks. The move towards networks has many drivers but they include;

- Larger scale Network-wide Landcare planning.
- Greater opportunity of attracting funds for network-wide projects.
- Easier maintenance of relationships with government, agencies and sponsors.
- Better Coordinated larger scale projects and on-ground works.
- Coordinating discussion/advice on, policies, strategies and plans affecting Landcare



- Managing employees who assist community to achieve NRM outcomes

ADVICE: Continue to invest in areas where community based NRM and partnerships are strong to ensure the community will continue to be empowered and have ready access to well connected local and regional level NRM staff. **Ensure investment is enhanced in areas that are not as strong with an emphasis on regional peer support, cross border learning and secondment programs.**

1.2 The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of projects and programs is crucial to enabling community based activism and stewardship. Investment programs that lack direction and accountability with regard to M&E have in the past, been the missing element in obtaining a better understanding of the causal relationships between community based NRM outputs and priority outcomes as described in Regional Catchment Strategies and other management plans. The Bass Coast Landcare Network has developed a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation framework for all projects undertaken.

The following outlines the indicators and specific attributes that a well managed Landcare Network is capable of:

- Community Capacity -Attendance at field days, training events, • No of community groups involved in project • Reflection process used by landholders to consolidate knew knowledge and skills derived from field days and education events. Collecting reflections on learning will document changes in attitude, behavior and management practices • Interviews with participating landholders to collect data using program logic evaluation questions • Benchmarking of landholder practices using Land management Practices Score Card
- Flora and fauna - Total area protected in Ha's for each Ecological Vegetation Class • Vegetation Quality Assessment using standards from Victorian Native Vegetation Framework • Photo point records for revegetation works before and after establishment • Pest Plant and Animal control - Area in Ha •Seasonal Bird counts •Other wildlife records
- Salinity, Soil health and pasture - • Depth to groundwater using Electro-magnetic Induction to five metre depth (EM31) • Groundwater salinity levels • Location and size of salt affected areas • Soil health and fertility and and soil carbon levels • Management practices that support soil fertility • 80% pasture cover at the end of March • % weed cover in pastures at the end of March
- Water quality and quantity - • Analysis of Nitrogen, phosphorus, pH, EC, chemical pollutants • Sediment using silt traps • Macroinvertebrates • Photopoints and spotting records of vegetation quality and presence of wildlife in riparian zones, • On farm catchment and storage capacity matching farm water needs, leading to the identification and protection of environmental flows
- Greenhouse abatement and waste reduction - • Emissions audits and targets • Waste produced and targets

ADVICE: We need to have more accountability in funding programs with regard to M&E. It is imperative that a greater responsibility is placed (with provision for adequate resources) on NRM agencies to **provide robust M&E programs that enable better decision making and sound investment**, while ensuring that investment is well placed to enable scientific process to underpin such M&E.

1.3 There is a real danger that by devolving federal level funding programs and reducing investment in community based NRM through well established investment streams such as Catchment Management Authorities' (CMAs) Regional Catchment Investment Plans (RCIPs), a loss in proactive partnership development and integrated approaches to local level NRM will occur.

While there are most definitely shortfalls within some; there are also many authorities, such as West Gippsland and Port Phillip and Westernport that are responsibly, professionally and effectively providing community groups with ease of access to partnership programs and strategic planning opportunities that would ordinarily evade them. Such agencies are often solely charged with taking forward priority community based NRM outcomes such as building stewardship and capacity through opportunities including representation on Agency Steering Committees and Forums, thus providing community with a key avenue to the provision of regional and state level strategic direction. A key by-product from this partnership is of ease of access to local and regional level community for agencies such as CMAs, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE).

ADVICE: Continue to build on the investment that CMAs provide for community based NRM and conservation through RCIP programs. These investment programs may take many forms, however it is absolutely crucial to recognise that **priorities at any level simply will not be taken forward without adequate levels of staff on the ground.**

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

2.1 Continuity in traditional Landcare, Coastcare and community based NRM and conservation investment has enabled many Networks to sustain a level of growth rarely experienced in NRM. Medium term investment in capacity building has led to community resilience, increased levels of stewardship, higher levels of education and awareness and higher levels of governance which has resulted in community leading the way and providing direction for agencies and partner organisations alike.

This continuity in investment has resulted in growth for Organisations, Projects, Programs and Networks. In many areas of Victoria, Landcare Networks and Friends Groups are the “One Stop Shop” for anyone in the community interested in becoming involved in environmental protection and conservation work, while also providing a base for expert advice, environmental education, project development and funding sources. This is evident through the success of the Powlett Project within Bass Coast, the GippsLandcare model in West Gippsland and the simple fact that many local authorities and agencies view these community organisations as a “one stop shop” for community engagement and stream much funding through well developed organisations, partnerships and networks.

ADVICE: Continue to provide continuity of investment for well established and strong community based NRM and Conservation organisations, projects and programs. Provide increased strategic support for weaker or less evolved community based NRM and conservation organisations, projects and programs to enable growth to the levels seen elsewhere in Victoria. **Reduce duplication by using experienced existing community networks and programs to deliver real on ground results.**

2.2 Many capacity building programs have achieved much success (see West Gippsland CMA’s Landcare Support Strategy). Having faith that well connected and developed community based NRM organisations can deliver sound on ground outcomes, is paramount to building a groundswell on which community and agencies alike are able to help achieve strategic visions, catchment strategies and management plans.

ADVICE: Look to Community based NRM organisations and agencies that have been supported in capacity building programs and are leading the way in achieving real on ground results backed with robust M&E, ensure they are well supported and that they can be used to publicise the public good that stems from environmental stewardship.

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

The Bass Coast Landcare Network has an annual budget of \$2.5 million dollars annually, all Landcare project are met dollar for dollars by the Landholder which equates to \$5 million annually being spent on strategic delivery of Natural resource management outcomes within the Bass Coast region.

From this investment in 2006/07 the following outcomes were achieved

Project Area	Erosion Area Stabilised	Steep Land Retired	Riparian Area Fenced	Other Revegetation	Remnant Area Fenced	Perennial Pasture Area	Direct Seeding Area	Total Ha
Total Ha	48.89	17.15	47.7	241.9	99.6	100	27.75	582.99

- 30 Landholders undertaken entry level EMS training through EBMP and DairySat self assessment and action planning processes. This is an essential tool for engaging primary producers into the Landcare ethos and delivering landscape scale change via whole farm planning and implementation.

- 20 landholders trained in the use of eFARMER (a web based farm and catchment planning tool). Landholders across Bass Coast found EFarmer to be one of the most useful tools to date to undertake planning and mapping at a farm and a catchment scale through the aggregation of results. It is envisaged that eFarmer will be utilised by our Network to track how we are delivering the resource condition targets of our two CMA's.
- Delivery of Net Gain offsets for Vic Roads, Origin Energy and Alinta Gas
- 5 Landholders established demonstration properties through Greenhouse Ag emissions project
- 1000 ha saline group mapped and managed
- Over 12 field days and information sessions with over 600 participants on a range of topics such as managing revegetation sites, nutrient management, effluent management, Pest plant and animal control, ecosystem services, reducing agricultural greenhouse emissions, soil and pasture management, managing remnant vegetation, managing indigenous gardens, water efficiency, wetland and frog habitat management, sustainability.
- Land Stewardship Training – 40 landholders
- Leadership Training – 5 landholders

Costs

Investment is often spread thin by the time it arrives on ground; Project follow up and M&E for regional level projects tends to get lost in the system; some regional catchment strategies and regional management plans lack actions and targets, and contain very little accountability; regional agencies too often rely on community engagement strategies that do not align with local level strategic planning; local level community often cannot relate to regional priorities.

Benefits

A regional level approach can benefit some community organisations that have evolved to take advantage of cross border engagement and multi-pronged strategic approaches and partnerships (e.g. the 6 Landcare Networks in West Gippsland, South Gippsland and Bass Coast, Victoria that underpin the regional GippsLandcare funding program); regional planning can result in a more integrated approach to cover multiple catchments, thus providing strategic approaches at a realistic geographical scale (i.e. surface water flow does not take a line on a map into consideration) with meaningful research driving such planning; Investment can be dispersed across multiple partners to achieve a more integrated outcome (e.g. On any given farm, Greening Australia may target remnant vegetation, Landcare targets farming systems, fencing and revegetation while Trust for Nature targets covenants, thus integrating key local level environmental / agricultural priorities); Marketing and communications strategies can target a wider audience and have greater impact when delivered at a regional scale.

ADVICE: *Emphasis should be placed on the development of local level strategic plans which should then feed back up to the regional level*, thus indicating where community are able and willing to engage in certain priority activities. This approach is a targeted, proactive and a sensible way to guide regional planning as it provides a low cost to high output ratio for regional investment. Specific intervention programs can then be put in place to achieve those outputs where there is a lack of community support and willingness.

<h3>The need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level</h3>

Any national level planning needs to be guided through state level planning; one would hope that state level planning is guided through regional level planning which in turn is guided through local level planning. While local level planning will let the NRM manager know where community based investment is best placed, it rarely allows insight into the more technical aspects of NRM planning such as flow tube modelling for salinity or geomorphological flow studies for the determination of sediment sources. This data must be gathered at the local and regional level through agencies and organisations skilled in the collection of such data (e.g. CMAs). Combined, a regional level plan should provide the state with priorities for that region, thus informing national level planners.

ADVICE: Very rarely will we bear witness to the halt of local level environmental degradation over the course of a traditional investment program (~3 years), therefore it is essential that recommendations are taken from regional level planning and ***investment provided to ensure continuity of programs (inc' M&E)***

for the long term health of, and reinvestment in the outcome that the outputs are designed to improve.

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

Remove the complexity from funding programs that are targeted to community groups. Additionally, ensure that when they are rolled out (i.e. Caring for our Country - Open Grants) that the underpinning programs (Adobe Reader) actually work properly. It is crucial to ensure that community groups have the capacity to apply for these funding programs in the first place as regardless of where National Priority areas exist, if the community do not have access to well educated or resourced staff who are skilled in project development and funding applications, it is likely that such community groups will even apply.

ADVICE: Either *remove the complexity from funding programs targeted at community groups* or realise that most investment will need to be channelled through NRM agencies to help achieve a targeted outcome. It must also be reiterated that **adequate levels of experienced staff are crucial to the development, implementation, management and M&E of any on ground project.**

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

Advantages

Cost effective method of delivery; empowers those community groups who are evolved enough to be able to develop, manage, monitor and evaluate projects; ease of access for community based staff (e.g. Landcare and Coastcare) as the application forms are more simple than others; good support at Canberra so far.

Disadvantages

A national level approach is likely to cause the alienation of community from regional bodies, leading to a disintegration of partnerships and causing a reversal in integrated approaches to NRM; where staff are unavailable it is highly likely that communities do not have the capacity to strategically plan and incorporate current best practice into on-ground projects; there is likely to be a complete lack of robust M&E if agencies are not involved; it is likely that there will be difficulties for a team in Canberra to keep track of the nuances in M&E and project management at a ground level across the nation; there are dangers in placing large sums of money where there may be a lack of accountability or poor governance structures – many projects may never be acquitted; high risk of community burn out and disinterest in the management of long term projects; where staff are employed by community groups there is a serious risk of inadequate HR and personnel management, associated risk and health management, a lack of adequate resourcing and access to policy and procedure that all employees should have fair and reasonable access to; risk of disinterest and ridicule of Australian Government if online forms are not tested before being put into the public domain as per the issues with the Caring for our Country – Open Grants online forms.

ADVICE: *While a comprehensive national approach has some great advantages with regard to cost reduction and simplicity, it is easily outweighed by the disadvantages* with regard to integrated project design and M&E, and *it is difficult to see how such an approach could improve on a more coordinated and integrated approach such as CMAs RCIP* which has provided a secure funding base for community groups for the past 5 years. The implementation of a robust and accountable M&E system must be mandatory, which will be extremely difficult to oversee at a federal level. **A reinvestment in the established CMAs RCIP should be a priority with the addition of the above M&E concerns.** Ensure that a minimum of **30% of project budgets can be spent in project management costs.** This is a realistic percentage of any project and should be adopted to attract professionals into the community based NRM sector given current rates of employment and the lack of competition for jobs.