



Submission to: **Senate Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges**

Submitting Organisation: **Fitzroy Basin Association Inc.**

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Summary

- Previous funding programs had significant success in raising awareness and mobilizing action.
- The regional approach is working, and delivering real and measurable outcomes.
- Governments have a high degree of influence on the content of regional plans and investment strategies through designation of regional bodies, accreditation of regional plans, and approval of regional investment strategies. They also enjoy a high degree of influence on the ability to report on outcomes, as they set reporting requirements.
- The regional scale allows for integration of top down and bottom up planning, realizing the aspirations of communities and reflecting national and state priorities.
- The regional approach maximizes leverage, community commitment, integration and coordination.
- A long term commitment to NRM outside of political cycles and funding programs is required.
- A National framework, including state and regional plans is required. Caring for our Country is a funding program, not a national framework, and does not even consider climate change or water management.
- Long term monitoring and evaluation that drives review of planning and action is essential. Monitoring of resource condition at the national scale, such as through the National Land and Water Resources Audit and State of Environment reports is essential, underpinned by such assessment at the state and regional scale. Monitoring of actions driven by the planning that this resource condition monitoring drives should occur in parallel.
- This inquiry should consider the extensive reviews that have been taken in the past to be fully informed.
- Perverse incentives should be removed from the system



Comments against terms of reference

- i. *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,*

The National Soil Conservation Program, followed by the National Landcare program supported what began as a community movement to raise awareness of the need for improved management of our natural resources. These programs stimulated a groundswell of activity and interest by farmers and graziers, environmentalists and agencies, who began to recognize that human activity was having long term deleterious effects on the very basis for our existence – our natural environment. The success was increased community awareness, desire for improvement and some on-ground action. **(The 2003 review of the National Landcare program should be reviewed and form part of this inquiry).** It was recognized, however, that real change was hard to measure (both at a local and program level) and that the link between awareness and attitudinal change, while probable, was hard to quantify.

The Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) continued this support, fostered Integrated Catchment Management, and also began to facilitate a more strategic approach to nrm investment through funding development of regional strategies. This regional strategies involved community participation to determine regional priorities, based on best available science. They began to be used to guide investment into strategic activities. However, Commonwealth funding decisions were still made outside the bodies with carriage of these plans, through regional and state assessment panels. Community groups were challenged by the amount of paperwork and administration required to fill out application forms, and prepare reports. State agencies and other professional organisations had a much greater capacity to write applications, and a managed to fund core business through NHT. Secondly, funding was usually received by recipients late – up to 6 months or more, and groups were then required to reapply for continuing funds. Precious resources were applied to positions to help groups facilitate their actions, but these local level coordinators and facilitators spent a disproportionate amount of time on administration. Reporting achievements and outcomes had really not improved. The success of this phase was the recognition that a more strategic, coordinated, integrated approach was required.

Learning from the successes and failures of these two programs, the Commonwealth government released a discussion paper for developing a national policy, called “Managing Natural Resources in Rural Australia for a Sustainable Future”. **This document should be reviewed and form part of the current senate inquiry, particularly the principles espoused as part of that framework.** That framework was quite possibly the greatest outcome of the Commonwealth’s three decades of investment. It led to the National Action Plan (NAP) and NHT extension being driven through regional plans. However, many of the principles and recommendations are only just starting to be realized, or have not been achieved largely because such a fundamental change requires much more time than has been allowed to fully materialize.

Successes under the NHT extension and NAP include the continued mobilization of communities, landholders, conservation and indigenous sectors, commonwealth and state agencies and local government towards an integrated and strategic approach at the regional level. Partnerships between the relevant players are well established, and the regional planning process well accepted. The plans



developed through 56 regional bodies are in place as a framework to guide future natural resource management. Investment has produced real and measurable outcomes towards targets. A plethora of reporting against these plans, targets and actions occurred. It is a tragedy that regional bodies were required to report against outputs rather than outcomes through this phase, and that regional reporting once scaled up to a state then national level has failed to reflect these achievements to the satisfaction of the Australian National Audit Office. This does not mean that outcomes were not achieved. Toward the end of NAP and NHT2, all partners recognised the shortfall of output reporting and moved toward a program logic MERI system that will enable measurable outcomes to be seen in the long term. **The ANAO report should be reviewed as part of this inquiry**, as it reports many positive outcomes of the regional approach, which were not reflected in the popular press. It also pointed towards improvements, many of which should be made to the Commonwealth and State governments administration of the program. It does not actually recommend disbanding the regional model in any way shape or form.

Another move forward under NAP and NHT extension was up front indicative funding allocations, and three year rolling investment strategies. While the regional bodies still had no more than a year's total security, they began to be able to invest more strategically, better leverage that investment, and importantly begin to be able to offer up to three-year rather than annual contracts for staff. Natural resource management funding programs should not be employment programs; however, facilitation of change cannot occur without people, and in the current incredibly tight employment market, recruitment and retention is not enhanced by one year contracts. It is important to recognize that this statement is not about keeping people employed, it is about finding, building, growing and retaining the skills required to deliver outcomes. When the government announces a commitment to improving education standards, or reducing hospital waiting times, there is never any question that this will require teachers and doctors – nrm is no different. The most important learning to take away from the past is that short term program based funding is not an efficient or effective way to improve the health of our natural resources.

It appears that the new government does not feel that the existing system will deliver on national priorities. This organisation has heard comments to the effect that the commonwealth government feels they have been “project takers, rather than project makers”. **The process for development of regional plans should be reviewed and form part of this inquiry**, particularly with respect to:

- Designation mechanism for regional bodies
- Guidelines provided to regional bodies
- Requirements for reflecting commonwealth and state priorities
- Plans being based on best available science
- Requirements for community engagement
- Requirements for targets and desired outcomes to be stated
- Prioritisation processes
- Accreditation process by Commonwealth and State ministers.

Upon review, it should be quite clear that the Commonwealth has an existing framework to allow as much or as little influence as it desires on what happens at the regional level towards meeting national priorities.

- ii. 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,*



Firstly, value the learnings of the plethora of previous reviews. Secondly, invest in them in the long term. Landholders become cynical and withdraw from processes which have a stop start approach, and are frustrated by staff turnover.

Overall there needs to be a much stronger emphasis on the value of knowledge itself, the diversity of that knowledge including experiential and traditional, and support for mechanisms to share and broker knowledge at all levels. Bottom-up regional and inter-regional activities facilitate learning, while Canberra-driven exercises have less success. One of the constraints to knowledge management and sharing is that the regional bodies and their staff are largely under-resourced and overworked. The government expectation of producing immediate on-ground outcomes with exceptional value for money does not drive time spent reflecting, recording learnings, or sharing information.

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

The data required to fully answer this term of reference is not available to the author, and should be subject to an independent assessment as part of this inquiry, however benefits include:

- Integration and coordination of a top-down bottom-up approach that occurs at a regional scale allows for national and state priorities to be reflected, while community aspirations are being met
- The regional approach is strategic, and regional bodies play an important role in coordinating effort, avoiding duplication, integrating outcomes and fostering communication
- People engage in change processes if they feel involved and have a level of ownership of the issues and a mechanism to feel they are part of the solution. Regional processes allow for this
- The regional approach has generated significant leverage through partnerships and collaboration

To fully answer the above, the question needs to be answered “as opposed to what”. A comparison with a nationally driven competitive approach would expect to find that transaction costs are less in a regional approach, communities are more engaged, and outcomes are more measurable and strategic. Other approaches to compare include Envirofund – it is not clear that any results can be measured or have been reported, it is not clear what impact the program had at a regional or national scale, nor whether the quality control and accountability of the program was adequate. The recent Open Grant round of Caring for our Country resulted in a completely disorganized debacle. If the Commonwealth were to investigate the hours which were put into developing the 1200 applications, and the hours which will be required by departmental officers to assess these applications, it would be evident that the cost of this approach was well in excess of the \$25 million available. It may also indicate the level of duplication of proposed activities, and the level of proposed cost-shifting by state and Commonwealth agencies. Thus, as a part of this inquiry, full costs and full benefits of all available options should be investigated.

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



A quote comes to mind: “If you don’t know where you’re going, pretty much any road will get you there”. It seems almost unimaginable that any modern organisation would undertake activities without a strategic plan of some description. The proposed business plan for Caring for our Country will help to target investment from a single five year program, but is unlikely to represent a comprehensive approach to NRM.

With the impacts of climate change, rising energy costs and peak oil, global markets driving Australian agriculture, ongoing development and growth in our precious coastal areas, and the mining boom we are relying on, it is imperative that governments, business and community alike recognize that our whole future depends on the natural resource base. We are facing unprecedented levels of extinctions, an inability to feed ourselves or provide water for people let alone the environment or industry, and destruction of many of our greatest natural assets such as the Great Barrier Reef. The legacy we are leaving our children is a life with much lower standard than the one we enjoy. These impacts will cut across health and social policy, and are not being adequately addressed. We are currently spending \$10 billion dollars annually on defending our nation against the outside world, while worrying about the \$2 billion over five years on the environment. One wonders whether there’ll be anything left worth defending in another ten or twenty years. So, yes, we need a long term strategic approach to NRM at the national level.

The Queensland Regional Groups Collective has produced a Horizons document that should be reviewed as part of this inquiry.

- v. *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,*

Members of the Board and management of the Fitzroy Basin Association have many years of collective experience and involvement with Commonwealth funding programs, including NLP, NAP and NHT. As part of our risk management plan, and based on past experience, the transition from NHT2 to NHT3 and the potential for a change of government was seen as the most significant risk we faced in the last two years. As a result, an active and targeted retention strategy was put in place, along with financial and business management initiatives that have enabled us to retain the skills and capacity developed over the past years. Our ongoing performance excellence approach at the Board level, combined with staff training and development leaves us confident in our capacity to remain one of the leading regional bodies in Australia.

In addition, this approach has enabled us to retain the same capacity with our delivery partners and contractor, including catchment groups, Landcare groups, indigenous and conservation groups and local governments. In short we survived the transition through good management.

The recent Open Grants process however has been a great distraction, potentially divisive and if an annual competitive process remains FBA will not be in a position to continue to retain and grow this capacity. A higher level of regional allocation is required, with a longer horizon of secure investment.



As a Reef Rescue regional body, FBA is confident that it can deliver outcomes on ground. The principles and process behind the submission by regional bodies, industry and conservation that resulted in Reef Rescue being announced as an election commitment should be investigated by this inquiry as a positive outcome of the regional approach.

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

There needs to be strong recognition that the Caring for our Country program is **NOT** a comprehensive approach to meeting Australia's future NRM needs. It is but one part of the system required; it is a funding program, not an approach nor a framework. The fact that climate change and water management rest outside the program and are even under another department and minister should be clear evidence of this. A comprehensive approach requires:

- A national framework, supported by state frameworks and underpinned by regional plans. It should be inclusive of:
 - Recognition of and commitment to the value of a regional planning and management system
 - Long term investment in NRM, divorced from political cycles and program based funding rounds.
 - Integration of community based NRM and statutory planning.
 - A review of conflicting and overlapping legislation at the state and commonwealth levels
 - Removing of perverse incentives, for example drought EC payments to long term poor managers, replaced by incentives such as stewardship payments for good managers.
 - Investigation of the taxation system as a lever for change with land managers, and the potential for an hypothecated tax to fund NRM (much like the current medicare levy).
 - A tiered approach to monitoring and reporting from local, to regional, state and national levels. The MERI framework must drive review of planning at each of these scale to enable continued improvement. State of Environment reporting already exists that should enable this, however it sits outside a long term planning system. The National Land and Water Resources Audit also attempted to measure resource condition at the regional scale, however it is not clear how this influenced planning and action.
 - The national framework should incorporate and integrate conservation and production uses of our natural resources
 - Monitoring of both program achievements and long term resource condition at all scales. Not all change is as a result of program funding – in fact if it was the public purse would never afford it. The ‘flow on effect’ of public investment is largely not measured. Nor is the negative impacts caused by continued unsustainable development and growth – in many cases the results of funding programs for NRM are obliterated by the effects of such development



- Drivers for NRM science and research funding to reflect how it will make a difference to on-ground action, not how many publications may be achieved. The academic reward system is not geared towards achievement of outcomes.
- Research questions need to address and identify required practice changes in order to achieve improved condition of natural resources

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