



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

Dear Ms Radcliffe,

Re: Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges

The Molonglo Catchment Group (MCG) is grateful for the opportunity to provide a submission to above inquiry. MCG believes that the ANAO Audit Report No.21 2007–08 more than adequately covers the first three matters addressed in the terms of reference.

We therefore restrict our submission the following matters:

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

The overwhelming size of natural resource management issues requires a truly long-term commitment to be adopted, with a base level budget commensurate with those problems. NRM funding should be elevated to the same standing as Defence, Education, Health and Social Security spending. It is unreasonable to expect long-term problems caused by over 200 years of ill-advised management to be resolved with short-term budgets. The problem demands strong leadership.

The silos around climate change, water, agricultural sustainability and biodiversity need to be broken down. For too long, there have been conflicting and often competing approaches to these areas; water, in particular, suffers where there seems to be a distinction between water availability (quantity), water quality and, more recently, water use. The apparent competition between urban drinking water, environmental water and water for agricultural purposes draws the issue into sharper contrast.

An integrated national, cross-jurisdictional and cross-portfolio approach to NRM is required to minimise the potential for policies in areas such as transport and development to conflict with or discourage sound environmental practice.

(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 new Caring for our Country program.

The extent of natural resource management problems is such that they cannot be reasonably expected to be managed by Government alone. The community needs to be convinced that it can and should directly contribute to solving the problems and making information about contributing readily available. The burden of NRM is largely falling on the shoulders of those with the knowledge and willingness to deliver those outcomes. In the future, engaging the “unengaged” – recalcitrant? – land managers and resource users is likely to be more difficult. Engaging the wider community is progressing slowly; climate change appears to be a driver that encourages engagement, and we see corporations and individuals seeking “green”

credentials – a social licence to operate in today’s society – becoming more commonplace. Government may be able to encourage this process by making it easier for the “converted” – regional NRM groups, catchment management organisations and other national conservation networks – to deliver consistent messages with local flavour.

Leveraging expenditure through contributions by corporations and individuals should become more than a token gesture. The historical ability and willingness of regional NRM groups and catchment management organisations to undertake this task has been drawn into stark contrast within the wider ACT region, where differing approaches and consequent differing level of community engagement are evident. The effectiveness of community engagement appears to be proportional to flexibility of the approach, tempered only by the level of resources available to the body. In the wider ACT region, the contrast is now further emphasised under the Caring for our Country (CFOC) program by the willingness of jurisdictions to match CFOC funding for each regional NRM group catchment management organisations.

The transitional year unfortunately has done little to instil confidence in achieving the “appropriate” level of future funding, which in turn has resulted in a staff turnover, compromising/losing corporate history and goodwill. We await, with some trepidation, the CFOC Business Plan and the response of each jurisdiction to it. It remains to be seen whether funding goes to those organisations that are able to prepare the best proposals rather than the regions most in need of NRM responses.

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

In the absence of the CFOC Business Plan we can only comment on the identified priorities, which appear to be far from comprehensive. The absence from the six priorities of water resources other than “critical aquatic habitats”, and the apparent acceptance of allowing species and vegetation communities to become nationally threatened before taking actions to “improve outcomes” suggests an inverted logic to the program. It is far more cost effective to protect what we have than to attempt to repair it after it becomes degraded.

It is disconcerting to see that Landcare has devolved into Sustainable Agriculture over the last five years, and continues to be under CFOC. This approach neglects the peri-urban areas where issues such as biosecurity, weeds, water quality and harvesting are often poorly anticipated by planning, and sustainability is frequently an afterthought. Community groups such as Landcare represent a cost effective means of improving outcomes for biodiversity, water and soil.

The disconnect between water – the National Water Initiative and the National Plan for Water Security – and CFOC emphasises the latter’s less than comprehensive approach to meeting Australia’s future NRM needs.

We hope that the Committee finds these comments useful.

Yours sincerely,



Lynton Bond
President, Molonglo Catchment Group
14 August 2008