

## Senate Standing Committee Enquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges.

Dear Senators,

Please accept my submission to the above enquiry. I am currently employed as a Natural Resource Management Officer with Blackwood Valley Landcare in the Southwest of Western Australia. My comments are my own and do not represent the views of the committee of Blackwood Valley Landcare. I have been working in Landcare or NRM for the past twenty years in a range of positions including both paid and voluntary work for mostly community based organisations.

*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 main lesson is that investment works best when the community is engaged in the process in a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. Devolved grants appear to have the best long-term outcomes across the landscape as local landholders are assisted and supported by local NRMO's and project officers who know their area best. The federal government gets more 'bang for their buck' in the bottom-up approach and the landscape gets more long-term benefits.

*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.*

- Ensure some funding is on-going to enable that continuity of people working in a community to carry on so long-term relationships can be developed with the local landholders and landcare/NRM organisations. The current system of short-term funding and project based funding doesn't work in rural areas. It takes time to prove your worth to the local landholders and projects with one or two years funding doesn't allow for any follow-up or on-going support to people. Reams of information has been collected over the past thirty years but when an organisation changes its staff with great regularity much of that knowledge is lost to future employees so further studies, strategies and action plans are then developed, used briefly and placed on a shelf somewhere to be lost again.

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

- Introducing the regional approach consumed enormous amounts of money, time and energy by many existing organisations. The existing catchment management groups tried to stay relevant, showing that they were the best groups to continue to co-ordinate NRM activities within their catchments but the regional model prevailed. The cynical amongst us thought the then federal government was creating a model that bypassed the then all Labour state governments so funding could go directly from the feds to the regions. A whole new bureaucracy was developed which consumed enormous amounts of money that in the past was directed more to on-ground works or practical solutions to NRM issues. The reporting requirements of the new regional bodies now takes up a much greater portion of our time, again decreasing the amount of time we can spend offering practical assistance to landholders, Shires and community groups.

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

- Again, please consider returning to the bottom-up approach. Get serious about making decisions that may not be politically correct but that will begin to create real long-term

improvements to the Australian landscape. Look beyond the next election and think seriously long-term, create aspirational targets (long term, usually 50 plus years) to meet. Use adaptive management so that improved knowledge can be incorporated into the long-term strategic approach.

*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.*

- The current situation where we are in an interim funding year is ludicrous. Regional NRM groups and catchment management organisations have had no idea about any continued funding, and so have been unable to engage any other groups lower down the food chain. The Caring for our Country program is as clear as mud but everyone is scrabbling to get some of the funding as it becomes available. At the end of June 08, many projects ended and staff were lost to the local areas that they had been working in. Along with them went a whole range of local knowledge. Many local NRM and community environment organisations have lost respect for the regional organisations and in fact the whole NRM system as they were unable to get any clear information about current and future programs and projects. Again, a whole lot of money, time and energy went into keeping the bureaucracy alive. Perhaps when the Caring for your Country funding becomes clearer there may be an opportunity to improve the community engagement outcomes.

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

- That remains to be seen. If it supports a further increase in the bureaucratic side of NRM, I think it will have failed. If it creates opportunities for landholders, local government and community organisations to continue practical on-ground long-term improvements to our landscape at a local level then it will have succeeded.

Yours sincerely,

Cheryl Hamence