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The Secretary  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

**Submission: Inquiry into Natural Resource Management (NRM)  
Management and Conservation Challenges**

The Planning Institute of Australia welcomes this Senate Inquiry, particularly those terms of reference that relate to NRM and the capacity of regional NRM groups. PIA is the national professional association representing 5,000 planning professionals across a range of disciplines including environmental planning. PIA sees a need for there to be a stronger relationship between planning decision making and NRM.

The Government's announcements about continued funding for natural resource management under Caring for our Country are welcomed by PIA. PIA is particularly pleased that the Government has decided Caring for our Country will be an ongoing program.

The Planning Institute is also pleased that the Government is retaining the best elements of the previous Government's natural resource management programs, in particular, the regional NRM bodies and their expertise in coordinating investments in our natural resources and landscapes.

There is one issue however, that is prompting the Institute to make a Submission to this Inquiry, and that is the future of the regional natural resource management

plans that the regional NRM bodies developed under the previous programs, and their ongoing planning role. This is directly relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference.

In general terms PIA is pleased to see that considerable successes have stemmed from three decades of Commonwealth engagement in natural resource management including through the programs listed in the Inquiry's terms of reference (i). There must be no reduction in the financial commitment to support, if anything additional funds are needed to ensure that we are appropriately "caring for our country" and building on this base. It is also critical from PIA's perspective that NRM arrangements have weight and commitment, preferably statutory and preferably linked to a requirement for financial commitments that are matched at Commonwealth and state levels.

This takes us to term of reference (ii). The Institute is aware that new bilateral agreements are currently being negotiated with the States and Territories for the implementation of Caring for our Country in 2008-09 as a transitional year. We also understand that longer term bilateral agreements with each State and Territory or a multi-lateral agreement including all will be negotiated later this year for the out years 2009-2013.

The Institute is in particular concerned that the continuing status of the NRM plans and the NRM planning role of the regional NRM bodies may be overlooked or lost in the negotiations over program delivery and a focus on outcomes.

Under the previous bilateral agreements, the regional NRM bodies in most jurisdictions were designated by governments as having responsibility for developing an NRM plan and an investment strategy for their region. In some states the regional NRM bodies are creatures of the States (i.e. Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania). That is, they are created and have legitimacy by virtue of a State statute. In other States, the regional bodies are not-for-profit community-based bodies (Queensland, Western Australia and Northern Territory).

Irrespective of the structural arrangements, the regional NRM plans provide a strategic framework through which regional communities identify natural resource management issues in their region, assess the social, economic and biophysical drivers, develop regional natural resource condition targets, and identify and prioritise actions to achieve these targets. A regional plan is in effect the blueprint for identifying and achieving the region's natural resource management targets and improved outcomes. The attendant investment strategy is in effect then the business prospectus for attracting investments from government and from external sources. In all jurisdictions Ministers from both governments have accredited these plans. This is a robust model.

The capacity of regional NRM groups (term of reference (iv)) to deliver on the ground outcomes may as a result be compromised. Existing levels of shared commitment, governance, funding, recognition of regional bodies and oversight must at a minimum be maintained.

In the States where the regional NRM bodies are non-statutory, their status, and therefore strong support for their strategies, targets and investment in them, is entirely dependent on the inclusion of these arrangements in the relevant bilateral agreement, namely, in Queensland and Western Australia. This is also critically important.

We are writing to propose that the Inquiry seek to ensure that future bilateral or multilateral agreements with the States and Territories for the delivery of natural resource management activities, including under Caring for our Country, will continue to include joint designation of regional NRM bodies, the preparation and regular updating of regional NRM plans by the regional bodies and last, but by no means least, requiring them to reflect national, state/territory and regional priorities and to appropriately fund them. A system of joint accreditation by Commonwealth and State/Territory Ministers is critical to getting a robust and reliable level of buy in at both levels and to provide the necessary regional support for successful delivery of meaningful outcomes.

The cost/benefit of this model has been more successful than previous models in delivering outcomes and should be build on, not weakened.

The alternatives may lead to a less coherent and underfunded range of outcomes. The primary purpose of the regional NRM plans is to provide a sound basis for making, monitoring and measuring all NRM investments on a landscape scale. This scale and the wider and more inclusive considerations implicit in these plans and the systems put in place to support them risks being undervalued and outcomes compromised.

This measure was initially introduced under Natural Heritage Trust Phase 2 (NHT2) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality because under NHT1 the scattered grants allocation processes made it very difficult to ensure the investments were making valid and measurable contributions toward improving the condition of our natural resources. There was no shared model for managing and measuring delivery and outcomes.

The Institute believes the regional NRM planning process that has existed under NHT2 should continue to be strengthened and recognised as the best basis identified to date for creating a shared incentive between governments and a reliable vehicle for managing investments in NRM by governments and other stakeholders to deliver real and measurable landscape scale changes and improvements in overall environmental management of our natural assets.

Resources permitting, clearly much more could be done than envisaged under Caring for our Country, but even under the proposed model, outcomes will be better assured if the issues outlined above are considered and current structures, shared State and Commonwealth commitments and funding links at the state level are not maintained.

We would be happy to expand on this short submission at hearings should the Committee wish to call the Institute as a witness.

Yours sincerely

Di Jay  
Chief Executive Officer

15 August 2008