



22 August 2008

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

Dear Ms Radcliffe

## **Inquiry into Natural Resource Management**

### **About WALGA**

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is the united voice of Local Government in Western Australia. The Association is an independent and membership-based group representing and supporting the work and interests of all 139 Local Governments in Western Australia.

The Association provides an essential voice for almost 1,400 elected members and over 12,000 employees of the 139 Local Governments in Western Australia. The Association also provides professional advice and offers services that provide financial, social and environmental benefits to the Local Governments and the communities they serve.

### **GENERAL COMMENT**

WALGA wishes to raise the point that, despite the Federal Governments' tight timeframes, there are processes and procedures that Local Government need to undertake in order to ensure adequate consultation with stakeholders takes place. The consultation process for Local Government is longer than the consultation process afforded by the Standing Committee and as a result, an incomplete representation of Local Government views is likely to be captured here.

The Western Australian Local Government Association does not write submissions on behalf of Local Government, until it has adequately communicated with the sector. This is to ensure that the voice of the sector is adequately represented. It is advised that the Federal Government take note of stakeholder communication requirements in the future if they genuinely seek adequate and representative feedback.

Accordingly, the Association can not provide the detailed analysis it would like on a number of the matters identified in the Terms of Reference.



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## Responding to the Terms of Reference

### (i) The lessons learned.

Given the lack of time available to make an informed submission, the Association is unfortunately not in a position to adequately address this issue in detail, however there are a number of consistent themes that will be covered briefly.

- a. The institutional arrangements between the Commonwealth and the State of Western Australia has been viewed by many as a relatively ineffective method of ensuring NRM outcomes are delivered on the ground. The State Government, through its internal processes, it could be argued, has utilised the bi-lateral process as a mechanism to absolve itself of investing the core funding required for NRM at the level that many in the community would reasonably expect, particularly given the dimension of the jurisdiction, its international biodiversity hotspot and several other hotspots recognised at the national and state level.

The lack of adequate investment for processes to capture ecological data (and the information systems through which to access this critical information) is one small testament to this lack of State Government investment.

- b. The lack of continuity in carrying through with the strategic approaches required for landscape protection and repair, by a succession of Australian Governments may be a political reality, however it is an indictment on this nation that changes in Australian Governments appear to continually undermine the remedial actions required to address degradation of our natural resources. The lack of continuity and seemingly continual changes to administrative arrangements often serves no apparent purpose other than to disenfranchise the goodwill of the community, who participate willingly in the range of investment programmes over the decades. Look no further than NHTI to NHT II to Caring for our Country in terms of disruption to outcome. The state of the Murray Darling basin is the exemplar.

This lack of a strategic approach in Commonwealth investment has also resulted in disengagement of Local Government in natural resource management. Many lower capacity Local Governments relied on NHTI funding to provide local level landcare officers and the implementation of on-ground activities. With the advent of NHTII and the move from 'people to projects', the local connection to natural resource management was lost and Local Governments did not have the capacity to fill the gap. They are further disengaged in the new Caring for our Country program as Local Governments will either be unable to 'fit' their local natural resource management priorities into the new national priorities or they will simply not have the capacity to participate in the bidding for contestable funds process.

This is a major disappointment, and indeed perhaps a significant policy failure, given the recommendations of the Keogh Report in relation to the need to engage Local Government.

"Local government, for example, contributes significantly to NRM across Australia and has strong ties to the community in rural regions, and strong planning powers in coastal and urban regions. While local government is well engaged with regions in many places, the regional delivery of NRM could be enhanced through a more active promotion of partnerships with local government." (Review



of arrangements for Regional delivery of Natural Resource Management programmes, Keogh, Chant Frazer, 2006 p7)

**(ii) How we can best build upon the knowledge.**

- a. Bi-partisan agreement in the Australian Parliament to a plan with a 30 – 50 year horizon.
- b. A regional approach to planning is appropriate, as it empowers those communities closest to the issues. The rigour of the accreditation process for regional strategies under the NHT II model should aggregate to inform State and National Priorities.
- c. NRM regions in this jurisdiction are non statutory. The use of statutory powers, and in particular those relating to land use planning, should be recognised as critical to the delivery (or otherwise) of NRM outcomes. Specifically, an acknowledgment, understanding and use of State and Local Government land use powers is essential in terms of sustainable NRM objectives being delivered upon.
- d. Further to this, it is worth reiterating that both the Keogh Review and the Hicks Report of the Australian and State governments respectively, both reports acknowledged that a key sector identified for better engagement in NRM was Local Government. It is also worth noting that the current Australian Government has abolished the role of the Local Government NRM Facilitators network, which had demonstrated numerous successes in better engaging with the local government sector to participate in NRM.

**(iii) The overall costs and benefits**

Given the lack of time available to make an informed submission, the Association is unfortunately not in a position to adequately address this issue in detail.

**(iv) The need for a long term strategic approach.**

Is clearly fundamental. If the current Australian Government is seeking to purchase outcomes, then it should be basing its priorities on scientifically based approaches. Please refer back to comments in relation to (ii)b.

A strategic approach to NRM delivery, including provisions for continuity of funding, is the most effective method for maintaining commitment and momentum among NRM stakeholders. With every change of resource management program, staff are lost due to uncertainty of continuing employment conditions. This results in on-ground delivery being stalled or unfinished, community networks lost and land-holders once again 'breaking in' a new person. It also results in a loss of confidence in the NRM delivery system, so any new program has to engage in a re-building phase to restore the goodwill of volunteers, community and other stakeholders.

It has also been clearly demonstrated over the years of Commonwealth investment in NRM that time is a critical factor in achieving on-ground change. Often landscape-scale improvements in the condition of our natural resources will not be seen in one, two or even 5 years. The Caring for our Country program emphasis on one and three year outcomes is counter-productive. A strategic approach to NRM would look at realistic targets such as is contained in Regional Strategies – 5 year intermediate targets and 20 year outcomes. This would then recognise the need for time to achieve landscape changes and allow continued investment despite the apparent lack of improvements in the short-term.



**(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**

Please refer to (i) b. The Association would like to reiterate the concerns for many Local Governments to be able to participate in the Caring for our Country program as it will be difficult 'fit' their local natural resource management priorities into the new national priorities or they will simply not have the capacity to participate in the bidding for contestable funds process (including the ability to write successful applications and the necessary project management skills to administer the funds and oversee on-ground delivery). The program is encouraging partnerships between NRM stakeholders, however this assumes that State agencies and Regional NRM Groups will want to build partnerships with Local Government for NRM delivery.

Many Regional NRM Groups in WA have made serious efforts in engaging and supporting their Local Governments to participate in NRM, either in the decision making processes or on-ground delivery. However, with reduction in funding there has already been an extensive rationalisation process to re-prioritise and allocate funds which has resulted in some programs involving Local Government being substantially reduced or ended. It is uncertain whether these programs will be funded through Caring for our Country. The Regional NRM Groups have also lost staff which reduces their ability to engage their community (refer to point (i) b for further information).

It is also clear with the new program that large tracts of land in Australia will simply be excluded from consideration and hence reliant on State Governments filling the gap. With the new program no longer requiring State matching funding, the future for Western Australian NRM Groups and community engagement is uncertain. Current indications from the Western Australian State Government is that the majority of allocated NRM money will simply be channelled back into State Agencies to do work that should have been core business all along. This leaves community groups and non-government organisations with no clear direction around roles and responsibilities and an uncertain future if they are not successful in obtaining Caring for our Country funding.

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

WA Local Governments are currently almost completely excluded from the decision making processes around NRM priorities and investment despite being the closest sphere of government to the community. There is supposedly a position in Canberra for a Local Government coordinator; however it is unrealistic to expect that one national position can effectively assist over 600 Local Governments nationally to better position themselves to undertake NRM activities. How can this one position assist Local Government to build better linkages and partnerships when the Commonwealth Government severed its links with the Local Government Associations (by withdrawing funding for the Local Government NRM Facilitator network) who are the peak advocate bodies for Local Government?

The Local Government NRM Facilitators have been crucial in improving Local Government understanding of, and ability to contribute to, natural resource management outcomes and to increase the capacity within Regional NRM Groups to work with Local Government. If there are no Commonwealth Government supported state-based Local Government Facilitators, who will



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provide feedback to this Canberra-based national position on what is actually happening on the ground and so appropriately inform national policy related to the delivery of Caring for our Country?

Therefore Caring for our Country cannot be considered a comprehensive approach to meeting Australia's future NRM needs if it is excluding important NRM stakeholders and large areas of Australia's landscape.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport. The Association will be happy to provide further input as requested.

Yours sincerely

**Mark Batty, Executive Manager Environment and Waste,  
On behalf of Cr W (Bill) Mitchell, President, WA Local Government Association.**

CC: Cr W. (Bill) Mitchell J.P. President, WA Local Government Association.

