

# **Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges**

**Submitting Organisation:  
Queensland Regional Natural Resource Management Groups Collective**



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This submission is made on behalf of the Queensland Regional Natural Resource Management Groups Collective (Collective) who represents the 14 Regional NRM Groups in Queensland. In making this submission to the Senate Enquiry the Collective wish to emphasise that it does in the spirit of maximising the efficient and effective delivery of natural resource management to the benefit of all Australians. In making this submission it should not be misconstrued that we are making an attack on this or any previous government.

The desire to protect, enhance and sustainably use our natural resources and ecosystems won't be achieved unless the community who use it and live in have ownership of that desire. There has been significant attitudinal change by land managers (inclusive of both private and public land managers) and community at large towards the sustainable use of our natural resources over the past two decades. Increasingly the community is being mobilised towards more sustainable management practices and uses of our natural resources.

The old adage of awareness leads to action leads to results applies here. We have moved through the awareness phase into the action phase and starting to see results. We need to acknowledge that the NHT and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality programs have been key enablers. Through those programs we have been able to increase the capacity of communities and land managers within those communities to adopt more sustainable practices. Initially at their individual farm, State Forest or Road Reserve level and of late at a landscape level which cuts across the many and varied land uses. This has largely been achieved through the development of Regional NRM Plans. Community based NRM Regional Bodies have carriage of developing and then ensuring these plans are current. In doing this it brings together the many varied and often conflicting agendas of natural resource users in a constructive and strategic manner.

The maintenance of these Regional Bodies is essential. The maintenance of these bodies isn't the end point rather it is the means by which we will continue to keep communities engaged and investing in the long term security of our future generations through sustainable management of our natural resources.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

The way forward involves:

- Taking on the recommendations that fall out of the many program reviews and audits;
- Continue to build the capacity of land managers so they can take responsibility of the resources they have custodianship over;
- Development of robust monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems;
- An integrated national, state and regional framework required that delivers on National, State, Regional and Local priorities; and
- Partnerships and bilaterals that legitimises the frameworks mentioned above.

The process required to achieve future needs is:

- COAG proposal from Australian Government to establish a National Environmental Accord built on the principle of cooperative federalism;
- Accord creates a national, integrated environment programme;
- In the interim continue to fund national state and regional plans and priorities;
- Set aside a portion for “Contestable Innovation” bids to drive new ideas and innovation; and
- Establishes an ongoing national roundtable engaging principle stakeholders (regional bodies, primary production, conservation, local government, Traditional Owners...) to negotiate targets and engage over delivery, reporting and governance.

**THE COLLECTIVE'S DETAILED RESPONSE TO ISSUES OUTLINED IN TERMS OF REFERENCE:**

- **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,**
  1. A community based approach delivered through Landcare and Catchment Management frameworks have created a significant attitudinal change i.e. you need to manage the natural resource sustainably to produce a quality product.
  2. A non strategic approach doesn't work i.e. land managers carrying out land management activities in isolation to each other. Need a landscape approach. NRM plans developed and implemented by the community for management of their natural resources delivers an integrated whole of community, whole of landscape approach to managing the natural resources.
  3. Cost shifting between State and Commonwealth Governments creates inefficiencies and possibly reduction in total Government funds targeting NRM
  4. The regional process has resulted in mobilisation of *massive* community, industry and corporate investment and participation
  5. The role of Local Government in NRM has been recognised and enhanced.
  6. The importance of gaining Traditional owner knowledge and engagement in delivering more sustainable use of natural resources has been enhanced.
  7. Improved relationships between stakeholders, many who have unaligned agendas, have been facilitated by regional bodies which has resulted in effective partnerships delivering desired NRM outcomes in an integrated and efficient manner.
  8. An effective pool of expertise in delivering NRM resides in the regional bodies and partnering organisations.
  9. Regional Plans provide a targeted strategic approach to NRM which can be integrated into other planning processes
  10. Regional plans allow National and State priorities to be articulated in a regional and local context so that on ground delivery is more effective.
  11. Regional plans allow local, catchment and regional priorities to be articulated in a State and National context.
  12. Too many programmes running simultaneously have created confusion amongst land managers as well as creating increased bureaucracy around applying, assessing and reporting in accessing Government funds
  13. There hasn't been effective monitoring and evaluation of natural resource condition resulting from Government programmes

- **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,**
  14. There needs to be recognition that the preservation, enhancement and sustainable use of our natural resources can only be achieved by a mobilised community.
  15. Need to acknowledge what has worked well and where good work is being done.
  16. Any review of past programmes must be inclusive of those who participated in them.
  17. Monitoring and evaluation of programmes and activities carried out under those programmes needs to be better coordinated by Commonwealth Government. Investment in better spatial resource condition monitoring will allow for a time captured sequence of resource condition trends. It will allow land managers to better manage their natural resources and Governments to monitor the effectiveness of their investment.
  18. Must maintain a strategic landscape approach to NRM, primarily doing this through the regional NRM planning process.
  19. Continued engagement and funding contribution by all tiers of Government is essential.
  20. Need to at least maintain and preferably enhance the intellectual capacity that resides in regional bodies
  21. Need to deliver NRM at the scale which is most relevant to land managers leaving it to the supporting bodies such as regional bodies to aggregate that effort up to being relevant to State and Commonwealth Governments
  
- **the overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources,**
  22. Regional approach brings many stakeholders together around the same table which in turn leads to greater total engagement, more leveraged dollars and effort working towards the achievement of a common vision/set of targets. Examples of some natural resource management outcomes achieved by this collaboration in Queensland include but not limited to:
    - Fitzroy Basin Association (FBA) helped prevent more than 75,000 tonnes of sediment being washed into the ocean by flooding in the central Queensland region. FBA is on target to cumulatively reduce sediment entering waterways by 4.1 million tonnes over ten years.
    - The Carpentaria Ghost Nets Programme, involving the Cape York Peninsula Development Association (CYPDA), Northern Gulf NRM, Southern Gulf Catchments and partners, removed 74,757 metres of netting, preventing them re-entering the ocean and continuing their killing spree over 32 months. Since 1996, 205 stranded turtles have been recorded on

Cape Arnhem alone including four of the marine turtle species listed as either endangered or vulnerable under Australian legislation.

- The Queensland Murray Darling Committee (QMDC) and partners have assisted graziers on the Maranoa River to manage waterway erosion and degradation. Using an Environmental Monitoring Support System, QMDC has predicted that as a result of these works, approximately 1,300 tonnes per year less will wash into streams.
  - Desert Channels Queensland (DCQ) instigated partnerships between landholders and the local Aboriginal community to protect cultural heritage sites on properties. This work has led to landowners coming forward, without fear, to share and protect important cultural heritage.
- **the need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level,**

**What is required:**

23. **Reporting** would link regional, state and national State Of Environment (SOE) reporting. For this to work a set of national environmental accounts supported by institutional structures and frameworks (as per the 2020 Summit recommendations and the Wentworth Group proposals) is required.
24. An integrated national, state and regional **framework** required and to include:
- a) National priorities, targets and budget;
  - b) State plans, targets and budgets (reflecting national priorities and adding state priorities and investment); and
  - c) Regional plans (reflecting federal, state and regional priorities).
25. **Accountability** – addressing the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) concerns:
- a) Vertically integrated monitoring, evaluation and reporting (MER) ranging from Management Action Targets (MATs) at the regional level to Resource Condition Targets (RCTs) at the state and national level;
  - b) RCTs to be the responsibility of Australian Government and State;
  - c) MATs to be the responsibility of Regional NRM Bodies; and
  - d) Establish an integrated, publicly accessible national remotes sensing and data capture system.
26. **Partnerships and Bilaterals**
- a) Investment built around CfoC recurrent funding integrating with other programs (e.g. climate and water);
  - b) Bilateral agreement with states encompassing roles and responsibilities of Australian, State and Local Governments and Regional NRM Bodies;
  - c) State plans to meet Australian Government targets to receive funds;
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- d) Regional plans (jointly funded by Australian Government, States, Community and Corporate) to be accredited and to meet standards of governance, reporting, accountability and community engagement in order to receive funds;
- e) Leverage, community engagement, on ground delivery, volunteer coordination, local government/Non Government Organisations partnerships and enviro auctions to occur at regional level;
- f) States to be funded/engaged to unlock expertise, data bases and align agencies enabling full and open participation across federal, state, regional and local levels.

**27. Process**

- a) COAG proposal from Australian Government to establish a National Environmental Accord built on the principle of cooperative federalism;
- b) Accord creates a national, integrated environment programme that (ultimately - may take time);
  - i. Links current Federal and state programs (CfoC, water, climate etc);
  - ii. Addresses biodiversity, sustainable production, ecosystem services (and stewardship payments) water quality and quantity, waste and pollution, national icons, community engagement;
  - iii. Is underpinned by a set of national environmental accounts with independent reporting to Parliament (as is finance);
  - iv. Reports to the public through regional, state and national SOE reports against resource condition targets;
  - v. Consistent definition of best practice farming across all jurisdictions and production systems coupled with green labeling for sustainable production; and
  - vi. Recognition that farmers and landowners can play a major role in carbon sequestration through good practice (soils, rehabilitation, ground cover, etc).
- c) In the interim continue to fund national state and regional plans and priorities;
- d) Set aside a portion for “Contestable Innovation” bids to drive new ideas and innovation; and
- e) Establishes an ongoing national roundtable engaging principle stakeholders (regional bodies, primary production, conservation, local government, Traditional Owners...) to negotiate targets and engage over delivery, reporting and governance.

- **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, and**
  - 28. Open Grant contestable type bids are detrimental to regional bodies and their ability to facilitate the delivery of national, state and regional priorities. It will jeopardize the level of trust which has been built among stakeholders, land managers and community at large. It does not result in strategic integrated deliver of NRM;
  - 29. The recent CfoC Open Grant process resulted in over 150 separate applications from Queensland. The investment required to pull these applications may quite easily exceed the total amount of funds coming to Queensland out of the \$25 million;
  - 30. Beyond July 2009 no regional body in Australia is assured of funding. This is particularly concerning for Regional Bodies in Queensland where they are not underpinned by State Government legislation and are independent legal entities which need to conform to State and Australian Government Business legal requirements around issues of solvency and governance. There is a need for secure, longer term core regional allocations to allow Regional Bodies to
    - undertake good business practices as well as NRM delivery
    - undertake forward planning
    - maintain trust and credibility among stakeholders
    - attract quality staff
  - 31. Short term arrangements makes the attraction and retention of skilled staff, particularly in regional areas, very difficult.
- **the extent to which the Caring for our Country program represents a comprehensive approach to meeting Australia's future NRM needs.**
  - 32. The Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective supports the six national priorities which form the CfoC program. It is feared that some of the cross cutting themes of climate change and community capacity may be “siloed” resulting in a less strategic integrated approach to addressing these issues and not recognising the complexities of sustainable natural resource management. A carbon only approach to climate change for example may result in:
    - a landscape of monoculture and buried CO<sub>2</sub>,
    - missing the opportunity to use to use offsets for landscape repair,
    - resilient landscapes and contribution to the six objectives of CfoC
  - 33. For the six national priorities to be effectively delivered there needs to be:
    - More purposeful consultation of stakeholders in designing the delivery mechanisms;
    - Abandoning the one off Open Grants type schemes as the principle means of delivery; and
    - Greater security of funding for Regional Bodies.



34. Regional plans are fundamental as the basis for sector agreement, collaboration, regional and local investment and delivery of investor priorities;
35. We recognise the need for probity and accountability but there are more and better ways to achieve this than simply having competitive bids. We are not building roads ie well defined projects that lend themselves well to competitive bids, we are dealing with NRM – complex, requiring collaboration, intertwined with social and economic imperatives and requiring fundamental social and economic change eg ETS and Peak Oil. Competitive bids will fail unless it occurs within the framework of an agreed regional plan; and
36. In conclusion it is the opinion of the Collective that in its present form CfoC won't deliver on Australia's future NRM needs.

## **HISTORY OF THE SUBMITTING ORGANISATION**

The Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective (the Collective) represents the interests of the 14 regional natural resource management bodies in Queensland. The state has adopted a flexible approach to community-based NRM, in response to the Australian Governments' Caring for our Country and previous programs. This means that regional bodies reflect diversity within the state, in their corporate structures, stakeholder interests, and stages of planning and implementation of NRM.

The Collective was formed in 2002 because, despite these differences between the regional bodies, the groups themselves felt many issues could be best addressed with a single voice. The Collective provides this voice and a mechanism to reduce duplication, streamline processes, mentor and support, and advocate common issues.

Queensland's 14 Regional Natural Resource Management Bodies (NRM bodies or Regional Bodies) have been established to conserve biodiversity, facilitate the conversion to sustainable agricultural systems and build community capacity. Over the past 5 years, Queensland regional NRM bodies have demonstrated that they are a key element in the state and national approaches to developing and implementing more sustainable management of our natural resources. To deliver this role under the bilateral agreement regional bodies were required to develop community based plans and investment strategies. In order to deliver these strategies the regional bodies are increasingly attracting substantial additional investment from commerce and other sources and that in turn is leveraged by a factor of at least three through community and landowner endeavor.

Queensland regional NRM bodies:

- are the key delivery agents for major public investment programs;
- provide an important bridge between governments and regional communities;
- have established a strong and workable framework for engaging stakeholders across different sectors, and
- operate at the crucial scale between local and state government for taking an integrated approach to a range of NRM issues.
- have built considerable trust among the principle stakeholders

Queensland regional NRM bodies have developed and implemented a flexible “bottom up” approach to managing natural resources which has delivered a high degree of regional ownership and responsiveness, significant outcomes in the management of our natural resources and considerable return on investment of government monies.