

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT

~ Inquiry into Natural Resources Management and Conservation Challenges ~

On 26 June 2008, the Senate referred a number of matters regarding Natural Resources Management (NRM) and conservation challenges to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport for inquiry and report. The Committee then invited written submissions on the referred matters.

After consideration of the referred matter the following comments are provided for the Committee's consideration.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The South Australian Government has recognised that the health of our natural environment is vital to South Australia's on-going prosperity and wellbeing and accordingly has identified '*Attaining Sustainability*' as a key objective of South Australia's Strategic Plan.

South Australia recognises and supports a long-term commitment to state-wide natural resource management programs. Formal programs commenced in 1983 with the establishment of the National Soil Conservation Program, followed in 1989 by the National Landcare Program. More formal structures for delivering regional NRM were developed under the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), which was established in 1996, then consolidated under the later National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and NHT2 programs. Regional bodies were administratively established to manage regional NRM programs and secure funds including Commonwealth NHT funding during the initial period of the NHT1 program.

In recognition of an historic desire to create an integrated approach to NRM, a series of significant legislative and/or administrative milestones occurred over the past twenty five years, culminating in South Australia's *Natural Resources Management Act 2004* (NRM Act).

The NRM Act provides the legislative framework for the creation of eight NRM regions within South Australia and the establishment of regional and skills based and Ministerially appointed NRM boards for each region. From 1 July 2005, regional NRM Boards also became responsible for delivery of NAP and NHT programs.

The NRM Act also established the NRM Council as South Australia's peak NRM body with skills based members appointed by the Governor on the nomination of the Minister for Environment and Conservation.

Under the NRM Act, a State Natural Resources Management Plan was also prepared by the NRM Council, which identifies strategic and long-term directions, that reflects South Australia's Strategic Plan, fulfils obligations under Commonwealth-South Australian Government bilateral agreements, as well as providing a framework for all NRM initiatives including regional NRM plans and State Government agency NRM activities.

Regional NRM plans are prepared in consultation with community, non-government organisations, industry and agencies, which reflects regional priorities and aligns with the State NRM Plan. In recognition of the integrated approach to NRM in South Australia, and as determined by the NRM Act, the regional NRM plans are also approved at Ministerial level.

The NRM Act defines natural resources as including: soil and water resources, geological features and landscapes, native vegetation, native animals and other native organisms and ecosystems.

The NRM Act and State NRM Plan provide linkages to other key NRM arrangements, including the *River Murray Act 2003*, *Environment Protection Act 1993*, the *Native Vegetation Act 1991*, the *Development Act 1993*, the *Coast Protection Act 1972*, the *Pastoral Land Management and Conservation Act 1989*, the *South Eastern Water Conservation and Drainage Act 1992* and the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*.

Natural resource management and conservation in South Australia are also influenced by key state policies including, the *No Species Loss – A Nature Conservation Strategy for South Australia 2007- 2017*, the *Tackling Climate Change: South Australia's Greenhouse Strategy 2007 –2020* and the *Land Use: Planning Strategy for South Australia*.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

The following is a summary of key points raised in this submission in regards to natural resource management¹ and conservation challenges.

- South Australia supports a regional delivery model for NRM and has established legislative and administrative arrangements to facilitate this approach.
- Natural resource management and conservation are long-term challenges that require long-term vision, commitment and investment.
- An integrated and landscape scale approach to NRM and conservation is required to maintain and improve the health of natural systems and to build resilience to enable those systems to adapt to climate change.
- Effective partnerships between governments, industry, landholders and the community are vital to meeting NRM goals. Working together within a common vision will lead to more positive and productive outcomes. A partnership approach to setting regional NRM goals enables national, state, regional and local issues and priorities to be reflected in regional plans and actions, whilst facilitating stakeholder ownership and relevance.
- To maintain commitment and momentum in NRM it is crucial that the previous and current efforts by the community and NRM sector are recognised and built upon. Continuing to support the commitment of those involved in previous NRM arrangements is essential and will assist in retaining knowledge and experience gained from previous programs.
- Significant effort and time has been invested in establishing current NRM administrative arrangements and structures. To fully realise this investment it is important that administrative arrangements and structures are allowed to mature and are utilised into the future. Continuity of these arrangements will help to maintain momentum in effort and to retain knowledge and capacity. It will also assist in facilitating a smooth transition between funding programs.
- Strategic and accountable investment in NRM is an important factor in achieving agreed NRM outcomes. SA acknowledges that changes in natural resources condition may take decades to occur, making it challenging to report on changes in resource conditions in short term reporting and associated funding periods. Monitoring, evaluation and reporting approaches need to take this into account and agree on appropriate arrangements for measuring the success of investment in NRM.
- It is acknowledged that a number of reviews and evaluations have been undertaken of past Australian Government investment in NRM. For example, refer to the national evaluations along with annual reports of NHT and NAP published on the Australian Government website.

¹ For simplification purposes, references to NRM in this submission includes conservation

Specific responses to each of the Senate Standing Committee's Terms of Reference are provided below.

(i)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.

Integrated NRM

South Australia's approach to NRM over the past three decades has gradually evolved to an integrated NRM effort and is reflected by the establishment of the South Australia NRM Act.

South Australia's experience supports an integrated and landscape scale approach to NRM to support sustainable development, maintain and improve the health of natural systems, and build in ecological resilience to enable those systems to adapt to environmental risks such as those associated with climate change.

Natural resources cannot be managed effectively in isolation from one another. Complex natural systems are more effectively managed by taking an integrated approach, which recognises and takes into account the interactions between individual natural resources. For example managing salinity and water quality is a key factor in achieving biodiversity, and/or sustainable production outcomes in South Australia.

South Australia has recognised that natural resource management and ecologically sustainable development are intrinsically linked to economic and social factors and must be managed within this context.

Regional approach to NRM

South Australia supports a regional delivery model for NRM and has established legislative and administrative arrangements to facilitate this including establishing statutory bodies, i.e. the NRM Council and eight regional NRM boards.

Regional NRM boards are facilitating the delivery of government policy and priorities through strategic funding that is engaging the wider community, including Indigenous people, and industry in NRM decision-making, problem solving and implementation.

The regional delivery model can be a cost effective method of implementing NRM as it avoids duplication through integration, assigns roles and responsibilities and leverages additional external funds.

A long-term approach to NRM

Natural resource management and conservation are long-term challenges that require a long-term vision, commitment, planning and investment. South Australia's experience to date has shown that a long-term strategic and integrated approach to NRM is vital to achieving sustainable development, healthy ecosystems and the current and future prosperity of all.

As a tangible example, South Australia has developed a State Natural Resource Management Plan, which identifies a 50-year vision for NRM in South Australia, and sets out policies, milestones and strategies to achieve this vision.

Drawing on evidence from the numerous NRM programs, it can be concluded that NRM programs benefit from long-term and sustainable funding (regardless of funding source), which provides opportunities to comprehensively and strategically identify, plan and fully implement regional priorities. Continuity of funding and the length of funding cycles are crucial influencing factors in both attracting and retaining high calibre staff, and in maintaining commitment and momentum by the community. They are also key factors in terms of establishing long-term and credible monitoring and evaluation strategies and programs. Annual funding cycles are not conducive to achieving these outcomes.

People, partnerships, community engagement and capacity building

South Australia recognises that knowledgeable, capable and committed people are critical to affecting all aspects of natural resource management.

Partnerships and collaboration between governments (Australian, state and local), NRM boards, industries, researchers, non-government organisations, landholders, Aboriginal communities and the broader community have also been crucial to the success of NRM programs. Whilst it is acknowledged that national, state and regional priorities may not always perfectly align, wherever possible synergies between priorities and programs should be capitalised on to maximise investments.

A partnership approach to setting regional NRM goals is preferable, as it creates the opportunity for national, state, regional and local priorities to be reflected in regional goals and actions.

South Australia has formally recognised the importance of partnerships at a legislative level with the NRM Act requiring regional, indigenous and skills based membership of the regional NRM boards. It also forms some of the guiding principles in the State NRM Plan.

The State has specifically acknowledged that South Australian Aboriginal people have developed cultural, social and spiritual links with the land over thousands of years. Aboriginal identity and culture being embedded in 'country', led to ways of life that involved living with and being responsible for, the unique resources in ways that reflected the knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal communities.

Including communities at all stages of project development and partnership development leads to a greater likelihood of outcomes being embraced and 'owned' by the community. Long-term commitment and an appropriate level of support and capacity building are critical to this continuing engagement. Investment in rural communities also improves employment opportunities, particularly for Aboriginal and/or remote communities. Where relevant, decision-making for NRM projects should consider both traditional and scientific knowledge.

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting for NRM improvement

South Australia has long recognised the importance of resourcing effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting across NRM programs. Like other jurisdictions, the State faces challenges in areas such as monitoring and data collection costs, data storage systems and accessibility. Effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting at program and jurisdiction level requires consistency of direction, sufficient resources, knowledge and capacity.

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting efforts are also determined by a multitude of reporting drivers including strategic, operational and administrative plans and strategies, and statutory and investment requirements. For each of these there are different audiences, purposes, and styles of reports.

It is acknowledged that changes in natural resource condition may take decades to occur, making it challenging to report on resource condition change in short term funding and reporting periods.

Future efforts need to be directed toward defining reporting requirements, proactive planning, working collaboratively and data sharing to achieve best practice outcomes.

(ii) How can we best build on the knowledge and experience gained from these programs to capitalise on existing networks and projects and maintain commitment and momentum among landholders.

To maintain commitment and momentum it is crucial that the previous and current efforts by the community, landholders and the NRM sector are recognised and built upon. For example, substantial efforts have been made to establish regional NRM boards and associated networks, to develop regional NRM plans, and to deliver on-ground works. Continuing to support the implementation of these regional NRM processes and plans is an effective way of maintaining momentum and building on the knowledge and experience gained.

Further to this, significant effort and time has been invested in establishing South Australia's regional NRM administrative arrangements and structures. To fully realise this investment it is important that administrative arrangements and structures are allowed to mature and are utilised into the future. Continuity of these arrangements will help to maintain momentum in effort, to retain knowledge and build on existing capacity. It will assist in facilitating a smooth transition between funding programs.

Supporting the ongoing commitment and involvement of all people involved in previous NRM arrangements is essential to maintaining momentum. Retention of NRM employees and volunteers, through long-term investment will go a long way towards retaining associated knowledge and experience.

To build on the knowledge and experience gained in previous NRM programs South Australia remains committed to achieving a integrated and landscape approach to NRM that recognises the importance of taking into account: the interactions between individual natural resources in complex systems; the time required for systems to respond to management; and the sum of all activities that impact on a natural system.

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

The South Australian Government supports the regional delivery model for NRM. As stated previously South Australia has established legislative and administrative arrangements to facilitate this approach, including establishing statutory bodies, ie. the NRM Council and eight regional NRM boards. Support for the regional model has been outlined in a number of past reviews and evaluations. More specifically past evaluations have identified that there is strong support from the community and other stakeholders for the continuation of regional delivery of NRM programs.

The South Australian NRM Act requires that the regional NRM boards develop and implement regional NRM plans, providing a strategic and integrated approach to NRM at the regional level. South Australia's NRM planning boundaries include all State waters. This approach recognises that coastal and marine environments are integral to NRM, and that terrestrial NRM needs to consider and protect those environments. The plans are developed in consultation with community, stakeholders (including landholders and industry) and governments. The regional approach has facilitated the development of plans and management strategies that are relevant to the local environment, economic and social contexts, whilst reflecting national and state NRM priorities.

The regional NRM plans provide the basis for strategic investment in NRM at a regional level. A benefit of this approach is that potential investors both public and private can utilise these plans to inform their NRM investment decisions.

Applying a regional approach to NRM planning and management has fostered community ownership of NRM issues, as well as the directions outlined in the NRM plans.

A key feature of the planning requirements under the NRM Act is to include arrangements for the proper management of wetlands and estuaries, and marine resources. In this regard the NRM Plan should be consistent with management plans under South Australia's Coast Protection Act.

The NRM Act allows for landowners in a region to contribute to the cost of implementing NRM programs in that region.

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

It is acknowledged that natural resource management is a long-term challenge that requires long-term vision, commitment and investment. A strategic and integrated approach to natural resource management is vital to achieving ecologically sustainable development.

In 2006 South Australia put this direction into reality by adopting the State's first NRM Plan. The Plan assesses the current condition, identifies damage and risks, sets priorities, adopts policies, promotes an integrated management approach, and implements effective monitoring and evaluation. The Plan recognises the importance of a staged approach, as some actions will take time to show their full benefits.

Given the complexity of natural resource management it is critical that a strategic long-term approach is taken at a national level. Such an approach would create greater certainty for potential investors and stakeholders alike. Effective communication of such a vision would provide regional bodies with the opportunity to interpret national priorities and implement them as appropriate in their region.

As discussed in section (i) of this submission NRM programs benefit from long-term sustainable funding as it creates certainty in the ability to pursue regional priorities, allows regions to focus on delivering significant long-term NRM outcomes and provides greater ability to attract and retain high calibre staff to implement programs.

The development of future NRM programs at a national level should be based on: maximising investment return; recognising that it is more cost effective to prevent damage than to repair it; program structures that address strategic NRM issues in an integrated manner, whilst providing sufficient flexibility to accommodate regional variability; identifying, protecting and rehabilitating high value NRM assets; addressing emerging issues (such as climate change); and decision-making that is based on the best available scientific and socio-economic information and advice, and that provide for timely review of this information and advice.

Future NRM programs at a national level should seek to address the following critical areas: biodiversity decline, salinity and water quality, coastal and peri-urban areas, productive and sustainable landscapes, and capacity-building and institutional change.

(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 Caring for our Country program.

As discussed previously in this submission, South Australia has established eight regional NRM boards as statutory bodies, under the NRM Act, to deliver NRM outcomes.

As a result of the recent changes to the funding arrangements under the Caring for our Country program the regional NRM boards have been provided with base level funding for the financial year 2008/2009. This provides the regional NRM boards with immediate certainty for this financial year. However, funding arrangements beyond this transitional year are yet to be finalised, hence it is difficult to comment on future capacity.

Further to this, the full details of the Caring for our Country program are yet to be released. For example, the Caring for our Country Business Plan is due for release in late September 2008 for investment in 2009-2010 and beyond to 2012/13. It is difficult to assess how the Caring for our Country program will contribute to on-ground outcomes without that information.

It should be noted that the Caring for our Country program is one of a number of funding programs that support NRM in Australia. Regional NRM boards and groups have the option of sourcing funding from a number of investors from both the public and private sector. The capacity of NRM boards to deliver on-ground outcomes needs to be considered within the broader funding context.

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

The Caring for our Country program is one of a number of programs that support NRM in Australia. It is a part of the broader NRM picture, it is not nor does it claim to be the entire picture.

As stated in question (v), the full details of the Caring for our Country program are yet to be released. It is not possible to assess the Caring for our Country program without that information.