

# Chapter 3

## Caring for our Country

### Introduction

3.1 This chapter provides an outline of Caring for our Country (CfoC) and the evidence received in relation to the operation and outcomes of the program. The chapter concludes with an overview of the reviews of CfoC.

### Establishment

3.2 CfoC was established in 2008 as the Government's 'flagship natural resource initiative'.<sup>1</sup> CfoC 'established national priorities to focus investment on protection of the environment and sustainable management of our natural resources'.<sup>2</sup>

3.3 The first phase of CfoC ran from 2008 to 2013, with an investment of \$2.5 billion over the five-year period. The second phase was scheduled to commence in July 2013. CfoC was administered jointly by the then Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and the then Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC).

3.4 CfoC integrated previous natural resource management programs including:

- Natural Heritage Trust;
- National Landcare Program;
- Environmental Stewardship Program;
- Working on Country (Indigenous land and sea ranger programs);
- Community Coastcare; and
- World Heritage.

3.5 With the integration of these programs, six national priorities were established: National Reserve System; biodiversity and national icons; coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats; sustainable farm practices; Northern and remote Australia; and community skills, knowledge and engagement. Each priority area identified what were termed 'ambitious but achievable outcomes'.<sup>3</sup>

3.6 The CfoC recentralised national resource management under a single goal:  
Caring for our Country aims to achieve an environment that is healthy, better protected, well-managed, resilient and provides essential ecosystem

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1 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, p.3.

2 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 9.

3 Australian Government, *Caring for our Country 2008–13*, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html> (accessed 18 August 2014).

services in a changing climate [and funds] projects that improve biodiversity and sustainable farm practices.<sup>4</sup>

3.7 In designing CfoC, the Government sought to address weaknesses identified in previous programs which had been outlined in reviews conducted by both the ANAO and the Keogh Ministerial Reference Group. CfoC sought a business approach to investment with clearly articulated outcomes and priorities and improved accountability through target setting. The key aspects of CfoC involved:

- establishing five-year program outcomes and shorter-term (one to three year) targets to guide priorities for investment;
- an annual CfoC Business Plan, inviting proposals from all relevant organisations to undertake activities that will contribute to achieving the national priorities, outcomes and targets;
- a streamlined and integrated system for managing information, funds, contracts, acquittals and reporting;
- providing certainty for long-term decisions by supporting programs of investment that span multiple years;
- introducing a consistent assessment process to select investments;
- establishing clear and uniform requirements for monitoring and reporting on progress (to be included in all funding agreements) and the framework for the annual Caring for our Country report card; and
- introducing improved web-based tools for accessing and sharing data and information about investments, outcomes and natural resource management activity across Australia.<sup>5</sup>

3.8 The initiative also allocated 'at least 60 per cent of historical average funding' for regional bodies.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Second phase of Caring for our Country***

3.9 The second phase of CfoC commenced in July 2013. Administration was to be devolved into two streams – sustainable agriculture administered by DAFF and sustainable environment administered by SEWPaC. Stage 2 re-emphasised the importance of community, skills, knowledge and engagement. NRM WA commented that these elements had been lacking in Stage 1.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Australian Government, Caring for our Country 2008–13, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html> (accessed 18 August 2014).

5 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Submission 37*, pp 3–4.

6 Australian Government, Budget Paper No.2, 2008–09, <http://www.budget.gov.au/2008-09/content/bp2/html/expense-10.htm> (accessed 18 August 2014).

7 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 3.

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## Evaluations of Caring for our Country

3.10 Submitters held contrasting opinions on the operation of CfoC with their position largely determined by their evaluation of the introduction of national priorities and a greater emphasis on accountability than had existed under previous NRM programs.

### *National priorities*

3.11 The focus on national priorities was seen as providing a 'top-down' approach to NRM.<sup>8</sup> Some submitters saw this as a more beneficial approach. The Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, for example, commented that CfoC was 'hugely successful' and provided a coordinated approach to ensure that work was undertaken in areas of national importance and with a scientific rationale.<sup>9</sup> The Trust for Nature also commented that CfoC had been 'a significant and effective NRM program in delivering effective NRM outcomes on private and public land in a targeted and integrated way'. The Trust for Nature pointed to strengths of the program including: an emphasis on enduring outcomes lasting beyond the timeline of the project; emphasis on landscape connectivity projects; clarity around cost-benefits and risks of project proposals; and the direct funding of groups, not just through NRM bodies.<sup>10</sup>

3.12 Wild Matters also commented that CfoC 'went a long way to realising a holistic, strategic and connected approach to national resource management, the capacity for which was created under NHT'.<sup>11</sup>

3.13 CfoC was also seen as being more beneficial to Indigenous concerns with the Torres Strait Regional Authority stating that the six national priorities under CfoC 'more holistically addressed the key issues and aspirations of Indigenous Australians, particularly in remote northern regions'. The Authority concluded that this was a significant improvement on the NHT era.<sup>12</sup> CfoC included several Indigenous-specific NRM elements, including the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas, the Working on Country program and the Indigenous emissions trading program. These programs were administered separately from the open call process.<sup>13</sup>

3.14 The 'top-down' approach under CfoC was seen as an advantage to larger scale conservation projects.<sup>14</sup> Environs Kimberley also noted that it 'allowed much greater coordination, especially where it involved collaborative project partners and cross

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8 See Dr Jill Wilson, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 36.

9 Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, pp 1 & 2.

10 Trust for Nature, *Submission 39*, p. 2.

11 Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 2.

12 Torres Strait Regional Authority, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

13 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, pp 120–121, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/review/>. (Accessed 18 August 2014).

14 See Mrs Rosanna Hindmarsh, Chittering Landcare Group, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 3.

regional, cross-state and cross-territory boundaries kind of projects'. Dr Malcolm Lindsay went on to state that the five- and 20- year strategic visions for CfoC captured many important aspects of NRM management, as well as social and Indigenous aspects of NRM.<sup>15</sup>

3.15 However, other submitters were not as supportive of CfoC and pointed to a number of concerns including lack of inclusion of local priorities, disenfranchisement of communities and unintended consequences of funding priorities. For example, the South West Catchments Council (SWCC) stated that CfoC had 'inadvertently undermined Australia's regional model of NRM, and eroded gains made under NHT and related programs in building a collaborative, vibrant, passionate and locally empowered professional NRM sector'.<sup>16</sup> Dr Beverley Clarke also commented that CfoC 'narrowed the agenda of NRM, reinforcing politically favourable short-term, measurable outputs'.<sup>17</sup>

3.16 Professor Allan Dale put the view that CfoC 'was probably more informed by political drivers and less informed by governance theory and evidence, although there were some evidential components'. He went on to comment that CfoC was 'not a complete disaster, in my view—I think there were some strong aspects of it—but the framing of the entire agenda, in my view, was not well informed by governance evidence'.<sup>18</sup>

3.17 The Upper Barwon Landcare Network submitted that the outcomes of CfoC were less than ideal, 'mainly because the objectives were confused and outcomes therefore not properly measured or audited'.<sup>19</sup> The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association commented that CfoC 'has produced mixed results and had unintended consequences particularly for local Landcare groups'. The Association went on to comment that there was sometimes insufficient flexibility to allow local problems to be addressed, which resulted in some perverse environmental outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

3.18 As a result of lack of inclusion of local priorities, it was argued that CfoC disenfranchised the Landcare community. This meant that projects considered significant at a local level could only be considered for funding if they aligned with national priorities. NRM Regions Australia commented:

It had a significant effect in the early stages of Caring for our Country, where there was a very marked focus on just matters of national environmental significance as specified under the EPBC Act. That meant a whole raft of things that were previously funded by the Australian

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15 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 3.

16 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

17 B Clarke, 'NRM and the Coast: Past, Present and Future', Australian Coastal Society, *Submission 8*, Attachment 3, p. 7.

18 Professor Allan Dale, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 52.

19 Upper Barwon Landcare Network, *Submission 36*, p. 2.

20 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 4.

government—water quality, salinity and so forth—were no longer funded. It also had the effect that we were not able to fund the capacity-building of NRM communities.<sup>21</sup>

3.19 Other submitters were of a similar view. For example, the Shire of Capel commented that even though the catchment council developed the local priorities, they had to be in line with the priorities set by the Commonwealth 'which often did not take into account previous projects that needed on-going support'.<sup>22</sup> The Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC) submitted that CfoC 'ignored the regional plans developed under NHT' and imposed priorities which were often 'illogical at the regional and local level'.<sup>23</sup>

3.20 Landcare Tasmania also agreed that CfoC national priorities largely negated and stifled locally developed, innovative solutions for local issues. Project promoters attempted to realign projects to national priorities, however, 'good projects were then compromised when re-shaped to fit national targets in an attempt to receive CfoC funding'.<sup>24</sup>

3.21 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW, went further and commented that:

Unfortunately, since the end of the decade of Landcare, resourcing has shifted away from enabling and mobilising the efforts of the community to co-own and co-invest in the solution, to investing in the regional process to buy what I call natural resource management outputs.

Natural resource management has become a public works program. This approach does little to effect practice changes.<sup>25</sup>

3.22 The Border Rivers Catchment Management Association (BRCMA) commented that CfoC resulted in inefficiencies with regard to the expenditure of funds. For example, 80 per cent of Landcare group funding in the border rivers region went to on-ground activities, whereas only 40 per cent of funds distributed by the regional group were attributed to on-ground activities. The BRCMA went on to comment that the regional delivery of NRM funding was a concern as Landcare groups and land managers become frustrated with processes, inefficiencies and expectations. Further, as land managers became disengaged and disenchanting, the regional group's capacity to delivery its contract milestones diminished.<sup>26</sup>

3.23 Similarly, Landcare Tasmania stated that the combination of CfoC Business Plans and a regional model created significant additional bureaucracy and expense,

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21 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 26.

22 Shire of Capel, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

23 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 1. See also, South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

24 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 4. See also, South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3.

25 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, pp 42–43.

26 Border Rivers Catchment Management Group, *Submission 21*, p 3.

frustrating the Landcare community which wanted to progress on-ground projects.<sup>27</sup> Landcare Tasmania went on to state:

The current system has created a culture where the NRM regions are very loyal to federal program deliverables. Their involvement in community projects, and their investment in time or money is predicated on a return that can be measured as a target and reported against. This decreases real engagement with the local community and the ability of NRM regions to respond to local needs (unless it fits with a national priority).<sup>28</sup>

3.24 Many other submitters also noted the disengagement with local communities, loss of momentum in local projects and loss of volunteers.<sup>29</sup> The Chattering Landcare Group, for example, expressed the view that small community groups felt that their contributions and capacity, which had been built up under previous Landcare and NHT programs, were not valued under CfoC:

Caring for Country did not recognise that community support and capacity would be lost. That previous years of landcare would not be built upon. The fact that the good brand name of Landcare was dropped as being outdated and tired made a mockery of the hard work done by countless people both as landholders, paid officers and volunteers for more than a decade previously. Community groups were shown to be 'value for money' but now they had been made valueless. Many of the successful groups struggled on doing the best they could.<sup>30</sup>

3.25 However, it was noted by NRM WA, that in the second stage of CfoC, regional plans were again recognised as planning for climate change developed. In addition, community skills, knowledge and engagement as an end in itself was recognised.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Two streams in second phase***

3.26 The Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) drew attention to the introduction of two separate streams, Sustainable Environment and Sustainable Agriculture, in the second phase of CfoC. In the opinion of the FTLA, this division was 'inconsistent both with the stated intention of an integrated whole of government approach and with the underlying principle of Landcare with which the FTLA is

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27 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 4.

28 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 7.

29 See, for example, Name Withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 2; Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1; South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3; NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 12; Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 2; Border Rivers Catchment Management Association, *Submission 21*, p. 3; Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 2; Upper Barwon Landcare Network, *Submission 36*, p. 2; Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 2.

30 Chattering Landcare Group, *Submission 40*, p. 2.

31 Dr Kathleen Boderick, Natural Resource Management WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 20. See also, National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

principally concerned, namely the indivisibility of healthy ecosystems and sustainable productive landscapes.<sup>32</sup>

### **Funding**

3.27 Some submitters, such as the Condamine Alliance, commented positively on the stability that CfoC introduced, with funding agreements changing from yearly to three- to six-yearly. Submitters commented that the stability of funding led to structural stability in regional bodies and assisted the development and maintenance of regional plans as well as allowing for future planning and facilitated longer-term outcomes to be sought.<sup>33</sup> In addition, longer-term funding arrangements reduced costs for regional NRM bodies.<sup>34</sup>

3.28 The Esperance Regional Forum South Coast NRM also commented positively on the funding arrangements, stating that it encouraged the establishment of strong working relationships between groups including community based Landcare/NRM groups, non-government organisations and government organisations. In addition, CfoC funding was successful in leveraging significant amounts of other funding into Landcare–NRM projects from local government, private landowners and other groups.<sup>35</sup>

3.29 The Kimberley Land Council (KLC) provided a very positive evaluation of the program design of CfoC and submitted that it allowed greater Indigenous participation in NRM activities because it allowed regional Indigenous organisations to directly access funding. The KLC stated that this arrangement allowed for effective engagement of the Indigenous community in the program:

The engagement of Indigenous people in NRM activities requires effective community engagement and consultations, and Native Title Representative Bodies, who have close working relationships with their Indigenous constituents, are in a strong position to facilitate this engagement, ensuring free, prior and informed consent. Through direct funding relationships, without intermediary NRM bodies, CfoC is able to efficiently deliver on outcomes as funding is targeted at regional Indigenous projects without being affected by additional administrative processes.<sup>36</sup>

3.30 Further, the KLC believed that the Indigenous-specific programs included in CfoC allowed Indigenous communities to 'access funding for projects that incorporate cultural values into NRM priorities and align with community aspirations, while simultaneously delivering on national conservation priorities.' In this way CfoC was

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32 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

33 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 2. See also, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

34 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2.

35 Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 3; South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 2.

36 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 3. See also, Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2.

able to encourage projects that contributed both to identified national NRM priorities and cultural outcomes for Indigenous communities.<sup>37</sup>

3.31 However, FTLA submitted that the introduction of CfoC proved to be damaging to Landcare groups, with a reduction in the availability of small grants and a 'significant loss of Landcare support staff at both the agency and local group level.'<sup>38</sup> The FTLA noted, as did other submitters, that funding and support of small community groups improved over the life of CfoC:

Over the first five years of Caring for Our Country the Community Action Grants opened up the program to many Landcare groups and the application processes became more streamlined, although still requiring significant volunteer effort. The introduction of the Regional Landcare Facilitators was a welcome development, although not adequately replacing the loss of personnel and expertise lost in the transition. The recognition of capacity building as a separate funding priority was an important recognition of the importance of sustaining group health.<sup>39</sup>

3.32 It was also noted that funding provided to NRM regions under NHT2 was reduced substantially with the introduction of CfoC. SWCC argued that this reduction led to the loss of staff. This created high levels of instability and uncertainty within the professional NRM/Landcare sectors and inadvertently resulted in a significant loss of knowledge and capacity at the local level.<sup>40</sup>

#### *Competitive funding model*

3.33 A range of issues were identified with the competitive funding model under CfoC including the impact on partnerships and access to funds by small groups.

3.34 The CfoC funding model, based on competitive grants, was criticised as it led to multiple groups competing directly for funding and 'worked against collaborative partnerships forming, as groups were eager to independently obtain any funds targeted within their local areas'.<sup>41</sup> SWCC commented:

It also meant that groups no longer collaborated to the same extent. Projects became intellectual property, so you did not want to share that with the group next to you, because they might go apply for the same thing, and that was your uniqueness. That stopped groups talking to each other and looking at the whole system, saying, 'What can we do as a whole to achieve an

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37 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 3.

38 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 2.

39 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

40 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

41 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3. See also, Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2; Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 4; Esperance Regional Forum Inc, *Submission 42*, p. 2; Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 14.



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outcome?' It made it very siloed, especially in our region, which is quite a complex region socially.<sup>42</sup>

3.35 As a consequence, the quality of investment decision was affected by the lack of regional expertise and local community knowledge.<sup>43</sup> A further matter raised by the Condamine Alliance was the 'opening up' of investment to a wider group of stakeholders – that is, not NRM groups. The Condamine Alliance stated that many of the new players had little understanding of environmental systems or how to achieve on-ground practice change. As a result, 'much of the investment was wasted on initiatives and tools which by their nature could not achieve the required results'.<sup>44</sup>

3.36 The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association also commented on this issue and stated that funding applications were approved:

...notwithstanding that the proponents had no skills or previous history in dealing with on-the-ground environmental issues and, in many cases, were not community based or focussed. Coupled with the concern around failure to critically measure changes and impacts over time, this disjunct has left the program with dubious credibility.<sup>45</sup>

3.37 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective (QRNRMGC) also submitted that the competitive grants process proved to be detrimental to the ability of regional bodies to address state, regional and local priorities. QRNRMGC pointed to a number of reasons for this outcome:

- it undermined trust that had built up between stakeholders, land managers and the community at large;
- it failed to achieve a strategic and integrated delivery of NRM; and
- it resulted in a wasteful direction of resources to the development of applications, over 150 from Queensland for the first round of the open grant process, only a few of which eventually received funding.<sup>46</sup>

3.38 The effects of the competitive grant process were addressed in more detail by NRM Regions Australia which stated:

The first stage of the Caring for our Country program proposed a fundamental change to the role of regional NRM bodies in that they were regarded more as a service delivery agency rather than a partner in the process of determining investments. Agencies felt compelled to honour the competitive neutrality principles and so were unable to receive advice from regional NRM bodies on regional priorities (alignment of projects with regional NRM plans) nor access the "local knowledge" of regional NRM groups in allocating funding to organisations.

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42 Mr Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 14.

43 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2.

44 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 6.

45 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 4.

46 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 6.

The competitive process also resulted in: high transaction costs – with many organisations chasing fewer grants; and competition between regional NRM bodies and other regional organisations undermining partnerships that are essential to the long-term sustainable management of natural resources.<sup>47</sup>

3.39 NRM Regions Australia further argued that, although this strict interpretation of competitive funding principles had been relaxed over the course of the program, it remained an inhibitor to the use of local knowledge in investment decision making.<sup>48</sup> South Coast NRM also acknowledged that the arrangements initially resulted in significant competition and damaged relationships, however, these had been rebuilt over time.<sup>49</sup>

3.40 Greening Australia, however, submitted that the funding arrangements under CfoC allowed for direct government investment in innovative programs, for example, the Grassy Groundcover project in Victoria and the Whole of Paddock Rehabilitation program in Southern NSW, ACT and Western Australia. In the opinion of Greening Australia, these programs 'provided breakthroughs in land repair that fill significant knowledge and capacity gaps in the "how to" of restoration.' Despite this apparent success, the programs have not attracted continued support from regional NRM bodies and only sporadic support from the Australian Government.<sup>50</sup>

3.41 Contrary to the view that CfoC disadvantaged smaller community groups, Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc submitted that the funding arrangements provided much-needed flexibility in that it was possible to bypass regional NRM bodies and to apply for funding as part of a partnership:

CfoC was important because it allowed community Landcare groups to apply for funding in partnerships not dependent on the NRM regional bodies. CfoC was a lifeblood for numerous groups who were not able to get support from their Regional NRM body. It is important to support multiple options for partnerships, on-ground works and community capacity building. CfoC provided options and projects for Landcare to be involved with that were large enough to avoid the "short termism" of just small community grants.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Monitoring and evaluation***

3.42 While some improvements were noted, monitoring and evaluation remained a continuing issue under CfoC. Wild Matters commented that CfoC created more structure in the selection, delivery and reporting of projects, thus addressing some of the shortcomings of the NHT.<sup>52</sup> Submitters, including the Nature Conservation

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47 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, pp 4–5.

48 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 5.

49 South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 2.

50 Greening Australia, *Submission 19*, p. 3.

51 Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc, *Submission 33*, p. 1.

52 Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 2.

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Society of South Australia (NCSSA), pointed to the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) components of CfoC. NCSSA indicated that it strongly supported MERI 'in terms of providing a framework for more effective evaluation of project activities and investment'.<sup>53</sup>

3.43 However, concerns with monitoring and evaluation under CfoC were raised. The SWCC commented that issues with evaluation of NRM investment included the need for a sound level of knowledge of asset condition and health. The decrease in funding for research and development under CfoC hindered development in this area and reduced the capacity of groups to objectively assess the effectiveness of their on-ground projects in a consistent manner.<sup>54</sup>

3.44 Landcare Tasmania added its view on the lack of baseline data available to identify priorities or measure changes over time and/or following the delivery of programs. It stated that:

Robust science within the context of conservation management and sustainable farming must be applied to ensure priorities are appropriate to protect and enhance systems and benefit landscape-scale connectivity.

CfoC attempted to measure outcomes at a national scale in the context of long term (i.e. 20 year) projections within a significantly shorter reporting period (i.e. 18 months to two years).

Under this, long term outcomes are impossible to assess and many benefits are not seen within the short reporting periods of project timeframes. Time is also needed to keep reinforcing messages and principles and Landcare, as a trusted long-term community movement, has the capacity to continue reinforcing messages and principles, however, secure funding support is essential to achieving this and is now looking unlikely in any new NLP.<sup>55</sup>

3.45 In addition, the emphasis on outputs was criticised with one submitter commenting that under CfoC 'bureaucratic processes became more pronounced – statistics appeared to be favoured over outcomes'.<sup>56</sup>

3.46 Some submitters indicated that reporting requirements were not difficult. NRM WA, for example, commented that the seven regional bodies that comprise its membership 'maintain company standards of governance and reporting' and that the reporting and evaluation systems of its members have increased in sophistication over the years.<sup>57</sup>

3.47 However, other submitters criticised the reporting under CfoC with the NACC submitting that the reporting mechanisms for regional groups had become 'very

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53 Nature Conservation Society of South Australia, *Submission 56*, pp 2–3. See also, Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 3.

54 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

55 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 4.

56 Name Withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

57 Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*, p. 1.

onerous' and were absorbing an 'unacceptable proportion' of funds.<sup>58</sup> Requirements were also an additional burden on smaller Landcare groups with limited staff capacity.<sup>59</sup> The Shire of Capel stated that the administrative workload was often higher than the work required for the on-ground action for small projects.<sup>60</sup>

3.48 The difficulties of reporting by small groups was also noted by Mrs Sonia Williams, Landcare NSW, who commented that their reporting was draconian:

If a Landcare group needs to spend three days doing a MERI plan before they can even go out and do the first bit of work and then take a day to report six monthly, that is not why Landcare volunteers join; they join to make a difference.<sup>61</sup>

3.49 The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association concluded:

Caring for Our Country's focus on national scale outcomes in short and less than ideal timeframes has compounded the concern surrounding measurement failure.<sup>62</sup>

3.50 A further issue identified was that in addition to the onerous nature of reporting, there has been little impact of that reporting on policy development. Mr Mike Berwick, QRNRMGC, commented that 'the fact that we do huge amounts of reporting but that it does not seem to translate into political action tells us there is something wrong with our reporting'.<sup>63</sup> The point was also raised by the Victorian Landcare Council which commented that rather than just sending in reports and moving to the next funding round, there needs to be a review of what works and does not work: 'we need rapid learning that is drawn back into the redesign of programs of action'.<sup>64</sup>

3.51 Landcare NSW was of a similar view and stated:

The complexity and frequency of reporting has increased exponentially over the subsequent changes to programmes. It is now often the case of the "tail wagging the dog" with more effort and expenditure spent on compliance than delivery. It is acknowledged that there needs to be monitoring evaluation and reporting, however 25 years of increasingly complex reporting formats, has given little in the way of accessible data

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58 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 1.

59 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3.

60 Shire of Capel, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

61 Mrs Sonia Williams, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 48.

62 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5.

63 Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 28. See also, Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 47.

64 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 10.

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sets and access to lessons of the past. Many reports are lost in archives, and never used other than to tick the box of acquittal.<sup>65</sup>

### *Outcomes under Caring for our Country*

3.52 The committee received varying submissions on the outcomes achieved by CfoC. The Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, for example, stated:

Despite some of the difficulties and frustrations under CfoC, the outcomes have been excellent, and the various programs and projects will continue to deliver good results.<sup>66</sup>

3.53 The KLC provided a summary of significant achievements including the establishment of:

- seven new Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA), which are areas of Indigenous-owned land or sea on which traditional owners have voluntarily agreed to protect important natural and cultural heritage values, covering 91,504 km<sup>2</sup>;
- IPA plans of management covering 16 million hectares of the West Kimberley National Heritage area, which has streamlined NRM activities and addressed local, community and national priorities; and
- the Kimberley Ranger Network, which employs 69 full time and 250 casual Indigenous rangers to work on cultural and natural resource management while also completing TAFE qualifications.<sup>67</sup>

3.54 The South Coast NRM submitted that CfoC had enabled the achievement of significant outcomes, including: over 1,000 hectares of revegetation; removal of foxes, cats and rabbits; reduction of wild dog attacks; protection of 600,000 hectares of land from feral pigs, including RAMSAR wetlands; weed control over 3,800 hectares; restoration and protection of cultural heritage places; and increasing community participation and capacity.<sup>68</sup>

3.55 Esperance Regional Forum stated that significant outcomes had been produced in the South Coast region under CfoC including investment in almost 250 projects involving 50 major partners and over 7000 farmers, volunteers and community members. Revegetation of over 1000 ha had been undertaken, over 5000 foxes, cats and rabbits had been removed and wild dog related attacks on livestock were reduced by 90 per cent. At the same time, weed control on over 3800 ha had been completed and over 100 projects that increased community knowledge, skills and participation in natural resource management had been undertaken.<sup>69</sup>

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65 Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 7.

66 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 1.

67 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, pp 3–4.

68 South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 2.

69 Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 3.

## Reports and reviews

3.56 The CfoC incorporated monitoring in its design including annual report cards. In addition, a number of reviews were undertaken and the program was the subject of two Federal parliamentary inquiries.

### *Report cards*

3.57 As part of the monitoring framework for Caring for our Country, annual report cards were published from 2008–09 to 2011–12. The report cards summarised the program's achievements and provided a snapshot of overall progress.

### *Review of Caring for our Country 2012*

3.58 A major review of Caring for our Country was completed in 2012.<sup>70</sup> The review evaluated the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of CfoC from 2008 to 2011. It found that CfoC had exceeded its targets in almost all of the national priority areas.<sup>71</sup>

3.59 Consultations undertaken as part of the review showed that community groups thought that CfoC took a top-down approach and that the national priorities did not always align with local priorities.<sup>72</sup> As discussed above, this view was also expressed in many of the submissions from community groups to this inquiry.

3.60 The review set out findings on the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of CfoC as follows:

- *appropriateness* – the initiative is appropriate as national-scale natural resource management issues require a national perspective and commitment to address them effectively. It is also appropriate that the Australian Government provide leadership and guidance on natural resource management with the program supporting and addressing the achievement of Australian Government priorities and helping it to meet a number of international commitments;
- *effectiveness* – the initiative is effective as real progress is being made towards a healthier, better protected, well managed, resilient environment and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate. It was found that the five-year outcomes had been exceeded in nearly all national priority areas with the outcomes and targets approach effective in setting and delivering Australian Government investment priorities. The initiative has recognised that community groups have different needs and has met these needs by providing numerous funding options. It was found that generally regional natural

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70 Caring for our Country Review Team, *Report on the Review of Caring for our Country*, April 2012.

71 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, p. 5,

72 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, p. 18,

resource management organisations are effectively building and maintaining relationships with natural resource management groups in their region and are providing leadership. However, it was found that there were uneven standards of governance and community engagement among regional natural resource management organisations; and

- *efficiency* – efficiency has been improved over time with the combining of programs and a focus on continuous improvement in the setting of strategic outcomes, monitoring and reporting requirements, program administration and annual business planning. Changes to the program design, including broader consultation with the community in setting outcomes and targets to address gaps and avoid duplication, would improve efficiency.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Caring for our Country Achievements Report 2008–2013***

3.61 In 2013, a five-year Achievements Report was released at the conclusion of the first stage of CfoC.<sup>74</sup> The report outlined progress towards the outcomes and objectives of the program. The achievements under the six national priority areas were provided against each set of intended five-year outcomes. The achievements included:

- expansion of the National Reserve System by over 27 million hectares including the declaration of 34 new Indigenous Protected Areas;
- management of over 10.8 million hectares of native habitat and vegetation projects to conserve native species and enhance the condition and connectivity of landscapes;
- improvements in the Great Barrier Reef's water quality;
- engagement of over 4,500 community groups to protect, restore and conserve coastal and critical aquatic habitats; and
- control of feral camels near areas of known high conservation and cultural value.<sup>75</sup>

3.62 An independent synthesis was also provided and explored some of the key characteristics, successes and challenges of the initiative. Four key characteristics were identified as critical for success:

- people and partnerships – the individuals, Landcare groups and organisations involved in NRM are key drivers of outcomes;
- integrated efforts and benefits – integrated approaches are appropriate given the scale and long-term nature of NRM challenges;

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73 Caring for our Country Review Team, *Report on the Review of Caring for our Country*, April 2012, pp 3–7.

74 Caring for our Country Achievements Report 2008–2013, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/publications/achievements-report>

75 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 10.

- innovation – innovative approaches in design and implementation can be drivers of project success; and
- a scientific basis for prioritising and evaluating – the best available information should be accessed and integrated to inform investment and evaluate achievements.<sup>76</sup>

3.63 The synthesis commented that 'many of the Caring for our Country projects have created a legacy that is likely to endure' and the achievements provided a sound basis for the next phase of Caring for our Country. However, it was noted that natural resource management issues were complex and that 'to make improvements and sustain them over time is no easy matter'. It concluded that:

Continuity of effort, investment and commitment is required to continue to improve NRM and meet the 20-year goal of Caring for our Country in another 15 years.<sup>77</sup>

### ***Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee 2010***

3.64 In its report, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee considered NRM issues including future needs and conservation challenges. The committee concluded that CfoC fell well short of achieving an environment that is healthy, well-managed and resilient and addressing the issues identified in previous NRM programs.<sup>78</sup>

3.65 The committee expressed concern about the transitional arrangements for implementation of CfoC noting delays in the release of the Business Plan and the monitoring and evaluation framework. In addition, the committee noted that the transition was a disruptive and anxious time for many people involved in NRM as they sought to secure ongoing financial resources.

3.66 It was concluded that the development of national priorities and targets without adequate consultation had resulted in difficulties in aligning local and regional priorities with the national priorities and targets. The committee was therefore of the view that changes were required to foster an integrated and longer-term approach to land management and to ensure that the states' and territories' roles in NRM were recognised and encouraged. The committee recommended:

- a more rigorous and comprehensive approach to identifying national priorities, including engaging regional and local expertise to ensure priorities are relevant at the regional and local level; and

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76 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 10.

77 Caring for our Country 2008–2013 Achievements Report: Synthesis. Independent summary to Caring for our Country, 2013, p. 59.

78 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, p.67.



- bilateral agreements with state and territory governments be pursued to increase investment and drive reform.<sup>79</sup>

3.67 The committee also made a range of recommendations addressing funding, community engagement and capacity building:

- the role of regional NRM organisations be more clearly defined, and the level of institutional and financial support be reviewed;
- incentives be provided for stakeholders to collaborate with a range of project partners on long-term landscape scale planning and action;
- the evaluation of competitive funding applications be modified to give greater consideration to the likelihood of projects achieving defined and measurable environmental outcomes; and
- the funding model be reviewed and consideration be given to increasing overall funding.<sup>80</sup>

3.68 In relation to the application process, the committee found evidence of complexity, uncertainty and high transaction costs. Lack of transparency and accountability in the evaluation process was also identified. The committee recommended the application process be reviewed including opportunities to reduce the costs of submitting applications and that a framework for providing consistent support and feedback to applicants be established.<sup>81</sup>

3.69 The committee also commented on monitoring and evaluation and noted there were ongoing concerns about this aspect of the program despite claims that the design of CfoC would address monitoring and evaluation issues identified in ANAO reports. The committee recommended that a working group be convened to develop a framework for auditing the condition of Australia's natural resources. The committee considered that this would provide a means of establishing benchmarks against which to monitor and evaluate investment in NRM.<sup>82</sup>

***House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry –2013***

3.70 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry into the 2011–12 Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of

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79 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, p.69.

80 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, pp 70–71.

81 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, pp 71–72.

82 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, pp 72–73.

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities included consideration of CfoC.<sup>83</sup>

3.71 The committee inquiry canvassed the 2012 review of CfoC and identified the following areas for improvement:

- the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework;
- additional consultation in the setting of outcomes and targets, that should consider scientific and community experiences and account for the knowledge and expertise of regional NRM organisations;
- uneven standards of governance and community engagement among regional NRM organisations; and
- changes to programme design including broader consultation, establishing mechanisms to ensure the performance of NRM organisations, supporting partnership arrangements to increase leverage on funding and investment and increasing the community's capacity for effective action.

### **Committee comment**

3.72 The committee notes that the Government aimed, in the design of CfoC, to address the issues raised in the many reviews of the NLP and the NHT. It appears that CfoC was less than successful in achieving this and, indeed, introduced features which caused unintended consequences particular at the community level.

3.73 The committee received a range of views regarding the introduction of national priorities. Supporters of this approach pointed to the lack of an integrated and coordinated approach to NRM under the NHT. National priorities were seen as being beneficial for larger projects and were welcomed by Indigenous groups as it allowed for greater collaboration and coordination and 'addressed the key issues and aspirations of Indigenous Australians'.

3.74 However, the committee received evidence that the national priorities caused significant difficulties for NRM groups. Witnesses pointed to the need to align funding applications to meet the priorities. As a consequence, many worthwhile projects did not receive funding and community groups and landholders were alienated and disengaged. This latter outcome has significant implications for NRM as community efforts and the engagement of landholders is vital for long-term environmental improvement.

3.75 Competitive funding under CfoC impacted on partnerships, staff retention, and access to funds by smaller groups. The committee notes evidence that the funding structure of CfoC led to less collaboration at the regional and local level as groups

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83 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry, *Inquiry into the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities Annual Reports 2011–12: Caring for our Country and Landcare*, May 2013, [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_Committees?url=arff/daffsewpac/report.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=arff/daffsewpac/report.htm)

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sought funds to progress their projects. Competitive funding also increased the time and resources expended in developing applications – many of which failed to gain funding approval.

3.76 Evidence also pointed to increased costs and bureaucracy at the regional level. Added to the reduction in funding for the program as a whole, the result was less spending on on-ground projects.

3.77 Monitoring and evaluation remained a concern during CfoC. The committee notes the introduction of the MERI tool which was seen as providing a framework for more effective evaluation of project activity and investment. However, evidence pointed to continuing reliance on output data rather than outcomes, the onerous nature of reporting and an on-going lack of baseline data. As a consequence, the committee regards CfoC as being less than successful in addressing the problems of monitoring and evaluation identified in ANAO reports and by stakeholders.

3.78 The committee was also concerned that there was a view that, after all the reporting, there has been little impact on policy development.

3.79 The committee considers that the outcomes of CfoC point to the complexities of program design and delivery of natural resource management across Australia. The early successes of the NLP and NHT underlined the need for a consistent and long-term approach to funding, the need collaboration and cooperation, and the importance of engagement at all levels: government, industry, the community and landholders. While acknowledging that changes were made over the life of CfoC, the committee considers that CfoC introduced difficulties to natural resource management and failed to carry on the momentum and build on the successes of earlier NRM programs.

