

Chapter 4

Landcare and the 2014–15 Budget

Introduction

4.1 As part of the 2014–15 Budget, major changes were announced to Landcare, in particular a decrease in funding and the funding of complementary programs including the Green Army and 20 Million Trees. This chapter considers the impact of funding changes, the policy rationale for the changes to the Landcare program and the perceived long-term impact on natural resource management and communities.

2014–15 Budget and Landcare

4.2 On 26 August 2013, the Hon Greg Hunt MP, then Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage, stated in an election campaign media release that:

The Coalition will place Landcare back at the centre of our land management programs. We will merge Caring for Country and Landcare to create a single National Landcare Program to reflect local and regional program priorities.¹

4.3 It was indicated that the Coalition's policy was based on principles sought by Landcare and local conservation groups and the full Caring for Country (CfoC) and Landcare budgets would be maintained and merged with Landcare having access to a greater share of the new National Landcare Program. In addition, the state and national Landcare Networks would receive a combined base operational funding of \$1 million per annum 'to give the Landcare Networks much-needed support to co-ordinate their volunteer operations'.²

4.4 The *Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2013–14* (MYEFO) was released in December 2013 and indicated that the new Abbott Government had redirected funding from CfoC to two other measures: \$1.2 million to provide assistance to farm businesses in NSW and Queensland with installing water-related infrastructure; and \$6.7 million for the Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Programme.³

4.5 In October 2013, the Abbott Government established the National Commission of Audit to review and report on the performance, functions and roles of the Commonwealth Government. The Commission released its first report in February

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- 1 The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage, 'National Landcare Program', *Media release*, 26 August 2013, p. 1. http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2686939/upload_binary/2686939.pdf;fileType%3Dapplication%2Fpdf (accessed 3 September 2014).
 - 2 The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage, 'National Landcare Program', *Media release*, 26 August 2013, pp 1–2.
 - 3 Australian Government, *Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2013–14*, December 2013, pp 117, 140.

2014 and recommended halving the funding for National Landcare Programme with the Commission stating that the Programme should also be better aligned to the goals of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.⁴

4.6 In the 2014–15 Budget, the Government announced the establishment of the National Landcare Programme (the Programme) through the merger of Caring for our Country and Landcare. The new program aimed at delivering 'a simple, local and long term approach to national funding for the environment and will comprise a regional and a national component'.⁵

4.7 The Budget provided \$1,028.1 million over the four years of the forward estimates to establish the Programme. The Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture (the departments) in their joint submission noted that, together with complementary programmes, the total investment in NRM would be \$2 billion over four years. This funding represents a reduction of \$471 million over the next four years, in addition to a reduction of \$12.8 million for 2013–14.⁶ In addition, savings are to be achieved through the termination of the *National Produce Monitoring System* in June 2014 and funding reduction and early termination of the *Environmental Stewardship Programme*.⁷

4.8 The departments also noted that the Programme framework underpins the delivery of several other election commitments, including:

- support for national and state Landcare networks;
- recognising Peel-Harvey Catchment Council and OceanWatch as regional NRM organisations; and
- 20 Million Trees (\$50 million over four years).

4.9 In addition, the Reef 2050 Plan and the Green Army (\$525 million), are linked to the Programme as well as the Government's wider NRM policy settings including: the outcomes of the white papers for Agriculture and Developing Northern Australia; drought policy and programmes; the Government's clean water plan, especially in the Murray-Darling Basin; and Biosecurity Incursion Management.⁸ Complementary programs include Working on Country (\$210.2 million) and the Land Sector Package (\$203.6 million).⁹

4 National Commission of Audit, *Towards Responsible Government, Appendix to the Report of the National Commission of Audit, Volume 2*, February 2014, p. 10.

5 Australian Government, Budget Paper No. 2, *Budget Measures 2014–15*, 13 May 2014, p. 107.

6 Australian Government, Budget Paper No. 2, *Budget Measures 2014–15*, 13 May 2014, p. 107.

7 Australian Government, Budget Paper No. 2, *Budget Measures 2014–15*, 13 May 2014, p. 107.

8 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 5.

9 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 3.

4.10 Both the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture are responsible for the Programme with the Department of the Environment receiving approximately 70 per cent of the budget.¹⁰

4.11 Issues raised in relation to specific program components are discussed in Chapter 5.

25th Anniversary Landcare Grants 2014–15

4.12 On 19 September 2015, the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Agriculture launched the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants 2014–15. These are one-off small grants under the national stream of the National Landcare Programme. Funding of \$5 million was provided to assist community groups and individuals to undertake projects to conserve and protect their local environment and/or to manage the natural resource base. A total of 291 projects received funding of between \$5,000 and \$20,000. Of these, 148 projects had a strong agricultural focus and 143 focused on delivering positive environmental outcomes.¹¹

Responses to the Budget announcement

4.13 The evidence received by the committee in relation to the Budget announcement, addressed the Coalition's pre-election commitment to Landcare and the subsequent reduction in funding. Submitters expressed concern about the immediate and long-term adverse effects on Landcare across Australia as a result of the reduction in funding. In addition, submitters commented on the establishment of two complementary programs: the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees.

Pre-election commitment

4.14 It was stated that many people in the Landcare sector had welcomed the Coalition's pre-election commitment to Landcare, in particular the commitment to maintaining the budgets of CfoC and Landcare.¹² One submitter commented that the Landcare sector was convinced that Landcare had a good future under the Coalition Government.¹³

4.15 However, submitters expressed surprise and disappointment at the 2014 Budget announcement and viewed it as a broken pre-election commitment.¹⁴ Mr Matthew Pitt, for example, commented that assurance was given 'right up until the

10 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 64.

11 The Hon Greg Hunt, Minister for the Environment and the Hon Barnaby Joyce, Minister for Agriculture, 'Christmas comes early for Landcare', *Joint Media Release*, 18 December 2015.

12 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 2;

13 Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 5.

14 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3; Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 3; Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 6; Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 14.

budget was delivered that there would not be major changes to the policy and delivery'.¹⁵ The National Landcare Network (NLN) pointed to earlier commitments:

The decision by the Australian Government to implement the Commission of Audit recommendations to cut the National Landcare Programme budget by 40% completely abrogated the commitment by the Environment Minister that the full Caring for our Country and Landcare budgets would be maintained. This came as a shock to many in the Landcare community who had embraced the rhetoric around "simple, local and long-term" and put their trust in the Minister.¹⁶

4.16 Wild Matters added that the Budget announcement came as a surprise to the sector and had 'seriously affected morale' and commented that 'it is a widely held view within the NRM community that these are the darkest days that the sector has experience in over 25 years'.¹⁷ The NLN went onto comment that the commitment to 'place Landcare back at the centre of our land management programmes' was not possible when half the funds had been removed.¹⁸

Reduction in funding

4.17 The committee received extensive evidence about the level of funding available to the new Programme following the Budget announcement and the effect of the reduction on natural resource management activities and environmental outcomes.

4.18 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, noted that there had been no guarantee at the expiration of CfoC that the Government would provide another round of funding. He went on to comment that 'the regional bodies around Australia were very happy that the new government decided to invest in a new National Landcare Program and a new NRM program'.¹⁹

4.19 However, NRM Regions Australia also stated that the budget 'has resulted in a 26% reduction in funding over the next four years for regional NRM and Landcare compared with the former Caring for our Country funding for the same period'.²⁰ This loss in funding, NRM Regions submitted, was compounded by the previous Government's redirection, in May 2013, of \$213 million worth of NRM funding from the Biodiversity Fund. In addition, the Biodiversity Fund had now been abolished to save \$152 million.²¹

15 Mr Matthew Pitt, *Submission 23*, p. 1. See also, Mr Nev Reis, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Ms Kate Watson, *Submission 69*, p. 1; Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 5.

16 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

17 Wild Matters, *Submission 26*, p. 3.

18 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

19 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 23. See also, Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, *Submission 67*, p. 2.

20 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 6.

21 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 7. See also, Queensland Regional Natural Resource Management Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 6.

4.20 Other submitters also pointed to the compounding effect of reduction in funding over time with the Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective stating that funding for regional NRM bodies had been effectively frozen for the last five years with the 'increased cost of delivery driven by inflation having to be absorbed into stationary budgets'.²² South West Catchment Council (SWCC) added that the level of funding currently provided is approximately 20 per cent of that annually provided through NHT2.²³

4.21 In addition to the reduction in the level of funding, it was noted that the remaining funding needed to cover a greater number of programs. Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) commented that this further reduces the amount of money available to Landcare groups. The FTLA also argued that programs such as \$0.5 million over two years for cane toad eradication in the Kimberley, \$9 million of fishing programs, the \$40 million Reef 2050 Plan and the diversion of funds for drought relief which, while worthy initiatives, are not generally Landcare activities.²⁴

4.22 The Government's reasons for the reduction in funding were questioned by submitters, particularly in light of the continuing need for environmental improvement and the significant direct and indirect benefits arising from Landcare.

4.23 Some submitters argued that the reduction came through a lack of understanding of the myriad of benefits arising from investment in Landcare. Mr David Walker, NLN, commented:

The cuts came from a strong intention to cut expenditure. There has been a lot of debate about the budget emergency and whether or not revenue should have been looked at as well as expenditure. The Commission of Audit took a very strong position. They were the ones who recommended a 50 per cent cut to Landcare. We were actually quite staggered at the disconnect between reality and their, I guess, strong doctrinaire economic view, in that investment in community actually returns so much money.²⁵

4.24 Mr Walker went on to outline the wider benefits of Landcare:

I made the particular point about investing in farmers being private benefit. In terms of catchment, improved water quality, improved biodiversity through conservation on farms and for the wider economy in terms of more productive farms the benefit is a lot wider than just on farms. We were quite insulted by that. I think the comment was made that the people who put that report together might know the cost of everything but know the value of nothing.²⁶

22 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 5.

23 South West Catchment Council, *Submission 11*, p. 8.

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

25 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 14.

26 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 14.

4.25 Similar views were expressed by other submitters. It was argued that the reduction of funding showed 'a lack of understanding of the critical role that Landcare has made and should make to the environment and agricultural health of Australia'.²⁷

4.26 The Victorian Landcare Council commented that there had been 'disbelief' at the funding reduction given the 'overwhelming evidence that Landcare investment delivers change to landscape in a cost effective way and delivers value of money to the Government'.²⁸ To underscore this point, the committee was provided with evidence of the significant improvements in pasture, habitat and watercourses and transformation of landscape achieved under NRM programs.²⁹ For example, the Victorian Landcare Council provided evidence from six of its Landcare groups which have restored local environments including revegetation of non-arable land and replanting around creeks to improve habitat and water quality.³⁰

4.27 In addition to environmental benefits, submitters noted that Landcare has worked to improve agricultural productivity from improvements in sustainable agriculture practices which have occurred over the last 25 years.³¹ These activities include works to protect soil; conserve moisture; and reduce the use of pesticides and fungicides and chemical fertilizers.³² Landcare Tasmania concluded:

Landcare's contribution to ensuring Australia's farming systems are both productive and sustainable, and assisting Australia's farming community to be innovative, collaborative and resilient cannot be under estimated. Indeed, the basis of farmers increasing productivity on their land is an increased understanding of the basic land function and ecosystem processes that underpin their productive capacity. Landcare has provided Government with a remarkable return on investment by enabling farmers to identify, implement and manage their sustainability and productivity issues.³³

4.28 Other submitters also pointed to the significant value derived from every dollar of government investment in Landcare through volunteer and primary producer contribution. The Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc commented:

Changes in policy reflect a failure to comprehend the value of the independent community movement and the vast volunteer resource it brings to land stewardship and community education. The 'bang for your buck' benefits of investing in Landcare are well documented. Estimates, including

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

28 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 3.

29 Greening Australia, *Submission 19*, pp 4–8; Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Submission 45*, pp 8–24; NSW Local Land Services, *Submission 63*; Attachment 3.

30 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, pp 4–6.

31 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 3; Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5; Ms Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 52.

32 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 2.

33 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 9.

from ABARE, show that for every \$1 invested by government, the Landcare community and land holders respond with between \$2.80 and up to \$12.00.

Why wouldn't you invest in Landcare?³⁴

4.29 A further benefit of Landcare has been its longevity with submitters pointing to a 25-year history of engagement with community and regional groups to bring about improvements across the Australian landscape. Through community and farmer engagement, supported by Government funding, there has been maintenance of gains and lasting, positive improvements. Kimberley Land Council submitted:

Improvements in landscape health and resilience of ecosystems requires lasting commitments from communities and government. Restructuring conservation priorities to align primarily with current political policy priorities will have an adverse impact on the resilience of ecosystems across all of Australia, and undermine the certainty required to forward-plan on successful NRM activities.³⁵

Effect of funding reduction

4.30 Many submitters argued that the environmental achievements and the additional benefits accruing from Landcare are now under threat through lack of adequate funding.³⁶ The Condamine Alliance submitted that 'because of the interconnectedness of productivity and environmental issues; and the thresholds involved in achieving beneficial outcomes, even small changes in the availability or targeting of resources can have a devastating result'.³⁷

4.31 Landcare Tasmania argued that the reduction in funding could undermine past achievements of Landcare. It was noted that:

It needs to be remembered that the Landcare movement has been instrumental in achieving long-term, positive impacts on sustainable agriculture, increasing agricultural productivity, managing soils, vegetation and water resources, conserving and protecting biodiversity and actively engaging with local communities and contributing to the social fabric of rural, urban and peri-urban Australia. In the absence of funding, these issues are likely to cost significantly more to the Australian economy in the long term if not addressed now in a timely, proactive and cost effective manner. A reduction in funding risks of [sic] undermining the good work already carried out by the Landcare movement over the last 25 years.³⁸

4.32 Similar views were put to the committee by the NLN which commented:

34 Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc, *Submission 33*, p. 2. See also, National Landcare Network, *Submission 4*, p. 4.

35 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 4.

36 Condamine Alliance Group, *Submission 3*, p. 8; Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

37 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 8.

38 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

The significant reduction of the funds available to the Landcare movement by cuts to the National Landcare Programme coupled with the redirection of some of those funds to other Government Environmental initiatives has the potential to severely impact on the capacity of Landcare groups to deliver the vital outcomes of landscape-scale nature conservation and more productive and resilient farming systems.³⁹

4.33 Submitters provided the committee with examples of the direct effects of the funding cuts on the programs that they are delivering leading to undermining of the aims of Landcare in both the short- and long-term. In addition, there will also be adverse effects on capacity building, volunteer and community engagement, social cohesion and local industry.

Effects on the ground

4.34 Evidence was received which pointed to concerns that the reduction in funding would result in fewer projects being undertaken and as a consequence, there will be adverse impacts on the environment.⁴⁰ For example, Bass Coast Landcare Network commented that it has delivered changes through landscape, establishing over 2 million indigenous plants over 120,000 ha. However, the reduction in funding has resulted in:

The Projected budget implication in the 2014/15 year include a 73% reduction in on ground activity for revegetation, remnant protection and sustainable agriculture. For the past ten years we have annually established 180,000 plants and protected 150 ha of remnant vegetation. Momentum has been established in the community and we fear that this will be lost with the recent changes to the Landcare Program.⁴¹

4.35 Bass Coast Landcare Network went on to state that it expected a decrease in staff numbers and to be unable to undertake large-scale projects 'because they are simply too expensive'.⁴²

4.36 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee (LCDC) also provided evidence of the effect of the implementation of the National Landcare Programme on its operations in 2014–15:

Obviously being forced into this equivalent of another interim year, in terms of funding, has hurt us a fair bit. We basically have no tree orders at this stage, which we normally place in November ready for next year. We have none because we have no funding there.⁴³

39 National Landcare Network, *Submission 4*, p. 4.

40 Mr Max Kitchell, Chair, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 23.

41 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 3.

42 Mrs Nichols, Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 48.

43 Mrs Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 44.

4.37 A further example of the impact was provided by the FTLA which stated that its group of 100 members had been undertaking about 30 to 40 ha of revegetation on private land every year. While the group had funds for seeding, the cost of fencing was prohibitive without funding. As a result of funding cuts, it was now only undertaking about one third to one quarter of the revegetation work that it had capacity to do.⁴⁴

4.38 The SWCC gave evidence that regional funding currently supports both small-scale local activities and strategic larger scale projects. However, it predicted that it would be unable to support large scale projects such as storm water intervention to improve water quality. Mr Damien Postma, SWCC, concluded:

Those really big strategic projects that can achieve amazing outcomes have to be let go.⁴⁵

4.39 NSW Local Land Services was also of the view that there would be a shift away from large grant projects such as major landscape projects aimed at biodiversity and water quality.⁴⁶

4.40 Evidence on the impact of funding cuts on activities in the vast areas of rangelands was provided by Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance:

The size of the areas that these boards, local land services and organisations in Queensland work over are quite substantial. There are six million square kilometres to cover. When there is a reduction in budget, it substantially reduces their ability to work on the ground with people. Even being able to afford the vehicles to visit landholders and those sorts of things is impacted on by the cuts. The impact of the cuts is not just that there will be a reduction in programs; it will be a reduction in ability to provide the support that is required by these landholders who undertake work that provides a large number of ecosystem services for the country, whether it is dust reduction, monitoring water quality in rivers or just maintaining our level of biodiversity in the Australian rangelands, which is recognised around the world as substantial. There are some big advantages to continuing to fund the rangelands. The NRM Alliance offers a way of dealing with some very large issues which can be quite confronting if you are looking at them as a whole. It is 80 per cent of the country. The regions understand how to deal with those issues.⁴⁷

4.41 A further matter raised by submitters was the potential loss of continuity of activities such as pest animal and weed control due to a reduction in funding. It was

44 Mr David Clark, Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 33.

45 Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 13.

46 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 5.

47 Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 58.

argued that this will result in a loss of previous years' gains and achievements and will impact adversely on volunteer engagement.⁴⁸ SWCC added its concern that important work on threatened species and communities will be reduced and the status of these important biodiversity assets will worsen. In addition, many monitoring programs will cease and 'our ability to measure the state of our environment, at an important time associated with a changing climate, will reduce'.⁴⁹

4.42 Environs Kimberley commented that remote communities will be disadvantaged as it would now be undertaking projects closer to Broome because of a lack of funds. As a consequence, there will be an impact on capacity and an impact on some of the relationships which are being built between Aboriginal groups and pastoralists. Dr Malcolm Lindsay concluded that 'it is hard to see how the major funding cuts will not have large consequences through the region'.⁵⁰ The Rangeland NRM Alliance also commented on the impact in remote areas:

The regional NRM bodies involved with the Alliance carry a high degree of concern regarding any changes to policy and investment which negatively impact their ability to maintain relationships with the people in their regions who manage the natural resources of Australia. Supporting the people in remote areas to manage and improve the natural environment they live and work in revolves around developing understanding and relationships with those people as their decisions will have the greatest impact on natural resource condition. The need for continuity is particularly high in these sparsely populated areas.⁵¹

4.43 The committee sought evidence from the Department of the Environment on the impact of the reduction in funding on on-ground activities. The department responded that the Budget reduction occurred in parallel with the program redesign from CfoC to National Landcare Programme, and the allocation of funding to new environment and natural resource management programs, including Green Army, Reef Trust and 20 Million Trees. As a consequence:

The shift to the National Landcare Programme and the introduction of these new programmes will have different implications for on ground activity and at regional scale – therefore it is not possible to itemise the impact of the funding reduction in the National Landcare Programme announced in the 2014–15 Budget. The Budget also contained a \$2 billion commitment to environment and natural resource management over the forward estimates. Given this, and the Government's focus in the new National Landcare Programme on giving regional bodies the autonomy to set investment priorities, it will be a matter for these bodies to determine how they manage the adjustment to their business.⁵²

48 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1

49 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 5.

50 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 8.

51 Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 2.

52 Department of the Environment, *Answer to question on notice No. 1*.

4.44 The impact of funding reductions on the viability and effectiveness of some groups was also raised in evidence. For example, the Rangeland NRM Alliance stated there was now 'a very critical level of funding, where viability is somewhat questioned'.⁵³ The SWCC submitted as a result of the reduction in funding several groups in its area will become marginal and are likely to cease operations.⁵⁴

4.45 The Leschenault Catchment Council also commented on the need for funding to maintain viability and the possible impact if this was not available:

If the Leschenault Catchment Council struggles for survival, there will be a noticeable ripple effect across the community in a major national growth area...our capacity to fulfil the wishes of the NLP is severely and fundamentally compromised by the level of public moneys being made available through this program.⁵⁵

Effects on staff levels and engagement

4.46 Access to funding to maintain staff levels was also addressed in many submissions. It was noted that organisations may have to decrease the number of staff employed and uncertainty of future funding is forcing staff to seek employment elsewhere.⁵⁶ This, together with the loss of staff with specialist skills, has a direct impact on the number of projects which can be delivered and the provision of support for community groups.⁵⁷

4.47 Dr Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, provided evidence on the effect on staff retention in his organisation. While Environs Kimberley had been able to secure a long-term grant from CfoC until June 2016, Dr Lindsay commented that, if further funding after that time was not available, it was possible that 75 per cent of staff would have to be laid off.⁵⁸

4.48 The SWCC emphasised the importance of a long-term funding commitment to the retention of staff:

Professional paid staff—for example, Landcare officers—to support voluntary community effort is a strength of the model, yet increasingly this is the hardest funding for community groups to secure. It is essential that NLP funds are made available for community groups to employ staff with

53 Mr Andrew Drysdale, Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 57.

54 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 5. See also, Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 3.

55 Mr Bill Bennell, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 11.

56 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1; GeoCatch, *Submission 10*, p. 3; Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 3; Chittering Landcare Group, *Submission 40*, p. 2; Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 4;

57 Mr Justin Bellanger, South Coast NRM, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 31. See also, Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 32; Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 58.

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

some level of long-term commitment. It is these paid staff who predominantly engage with business and local industry, who leverage co-investment and participation and who work with agribusiness.⁵⁹

4.49 NRM WA also pointed to the potential loss of staff and volunteers with 'incredible expertise' who are 'critical to the long-term success of NRM'. To avoid this loss, it suggested funding levels need to be maintained to assist retention of skilled staff and to engage new volunteers and young landholders to ensure the continuation of work on the ground.⁶⁰

4.50 A number of submitters emphasised the importance of the contribution of facilitators within Landcare organisations and for volunteers. Dr Bill Pigott stated:

We are particularly concerned that cuts to funds are going to mean a reduction of the community support officer type roles that Landcarers all over the state, and particularly in our area, have felt were essential to their survival.

Our regional Landcare facilitator did a brilliant thing with Caring for Our Country funding. He developed a program called Tending the Grassroots, which pulled all of the Landcare groups into a joint proposal so that we all did small amounts. It was effectively devolved funding but it led to an acceptable level of achievement in NRM outcomes.⁶¹

4.51 Mr Brendan Sydes, Connecting Country, commented that the value of the Landcare facilitator role was that it encouraged more long-term planning and capacity development in Landcare groups. Mr Sydes went on to state:

For many Landcare groups to put together a project that aligns with a regional strategy and national strategies and targets is quite difficult. Unless they have an NRM professional in the group on their committee they really struggle with it. They are ordinary people who are not in this world of NRM and all that kind of thing. To try and produce projects that align strongly is difficult for them. I think that is another reason why coordinators or facilitators or whatever they are called in other parts of Australia are quite helpful. If the government wants groups to help to implement these strategies it needs to help the groups to do it.⁶²

4.52 It was also argued that the loss of these staff could compromise the engagement of farmers and volunteer as professional staff provide support and advice; provide assistance to ensure that appropriate financial management systems and

59 Ms Christine Kershaw, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 10. See also, Mr Keith Hyde, Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 40.

60 Dr Kathleen Broderick, NRM WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 25. See also, Wild Matters, *Submission 26*, p. 3; Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5.

61 Dr Bill Pigott, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 37.

62 Mr Brendan Sydes, Connecting Country, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 12.

governance are in place; and, reduce volunteer burnout through support and guidance.⁶³

4.53 The impact on volunteers was also highlighted. It was argued that with less money available, and fewer projects being funded, both landholders and volunteers will be less inclined to continue in Landcare.⁶⁴ Ms Susi Johnson, FTLA, commented that people put a lot of effort into a grant but with so few chances of succeeding in their funding request, 'not on the merits but just simply because there is not enough funding available, there is a lot of disengagement'.⁶⁵

4.54 The FTLA pointed to the significant contributions by volunteers compared to public investment. However,

...in many areas any reduction or patchiness in available funding significantly impacts the amount of work able to be accomplished and undermines gains already achieved in natural resource management. The gap in funding this year is already affecting Landcare groups and networks who are reporting significant loss of momentum and a reduction in capacity to achieve works on-ground.⁶⁶

4.55 Similar views were provided by other submitters including the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association which stated:

In essence, the significant reduction in funding for Landcare is counterproductive as the new programs do not engage local people in projects and so do not capture the in-kind and other voluntary contributions that have been the hallmark of Landcare since its inception. In the long term, this will force future generations to pick up the cost of our short sightedness.⁶⁷

4.56 The Department of Agriculture confirmed in evidence that funding would continue to be provided to regional NRM organisations to support a Regional Landcare Facilitator, either as one full-time position or several part-time positions.⁶⁸ This was reiterated in the Government's response to the community consultation process, which stated:

Long-term funding will be available to regional NRM organisations through multi-year contracts that provide surety of investment. This will

63 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1; South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 3; Landcare SJ Inc, *Submission 28*, p. 3; Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

64 Border Rivers CMA, *Submission 21*, p. 3.

65 Ms Susi Johnson, Farm Tree and Landcare Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 31.

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

67 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5. See also, Landcare Tasmania Inc, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

68 Ms Michelle Lauder, Department of Agriculture, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 66.

enable them to maintain regional infrastructure for NRM planning and delivery and retain key staff, including a Regional Landcare Facilitator.⁶⁹

Effects on wider benefits of the Landcare movement

4.57 It is well recognised that an investment in the Landcare community through a national Landcare program will have benefits far beyond improved environmental outcomes. A 2010 study commissioned by the Australian Landcare Council found that involvement in Landcare, and NRM more broadly, led to additional benefits in six categories, as follows:

- learning, awareness and practice change;
- social – community health and wellbeing;
- social – political and social capital;
- economic;
- cultural; and
- resilience.⁷⁰

4.58 On community health and wellbeing, the study found that meaningful connections with the environment through participation in community activities led to an increase in social connectedness.⁷¹ On political and social capital, the benefits were equally evident. The report stated:

The dynamic social relationships and cohesion developed through Landcare and NRM can form an intrinsic part of the social fabric, in many cases filling gaps in the community beyond the agricultural and environmental domain. The benefits—particularly for regional and rural communities—include enhanced social capacity and cohesion, stronger local governance, the increased recognition of women in rural communities, and self-empowerment and fulfilment.⁷²

4.59 The study also found that Landcare 'promotes the formation of complex networks' that assist communities to cope in difficult times, such as drought or bushfire, and can promote individual and community resilience.⁷³

4.60 Submissions received by the committee similarly pointed to the benefits of Landcare including promotion of social cohesion, improvement of health and wellbeing, provision of employment opportunities in rural and regional areas and

69 Australian Government, National Landcare Programme, *Outcomes of Community Consultation*, October 2014, p. 4.

70 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. 69.

71 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. i.

72 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. ii.

73 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. iii.

support for local business.⁷⁴ Dr Peter Ampt argued that the social benefits of Landcare 'cannot be overestimated'.⁷⁵

4.61 With the reduction in funding, there were concerns that these ancillary benefits will be at risk. Submitters commented that Landcare programs contribute greatly to employment and business activity and thus the health of communities. This is particularly important in remote regions, where employment opportunities are scarcer and resource costs are higher.⁷⁶ For example, members of the Rangeland NRM Alliance contribute to the direct employment of 250 people. The Alliance added:

The indirect support of regional employment including Indigenous employment is more difficult to quantify however regions support employment through local contracts, consultancies, community activity and volunteer support and other delivery mechanisms to increase the footprint of Australian Government funds they receive. The impact of this employment is proportionately greater in the much smaller communities of the rangelands regions.⁷⁷

4.62 The wider benefits of Landcare investment were also outlined by Ms Ella Maesepp, Katanning LCDC:

Our Landcare group brings in, on an average year, between half a million dollars and \$1 million worth of grant funding into our community. That money is then circulated around our community through our local nursery, for the purchase of trees; rural supplies for the purchase of fence material; contractors; for the purchase of catering for workshops; venue hire; and for all those things that Landcare does. If we lose the continuity to the point that we lose the capacity of our organisation, we lose the ability to bring that amount of money into our community every year. We have a population of 4,200 people; it is not a big community. That amount of money circulating our community is relevant. For every year that the amount of money we bring in is down—this year is a down year—that is less money going through our community. It does impact and it impacts wider than just the Landcare group because of all that broader thing in our community. Long term, Landcare has been active in Katanning since 1990. Every single one of our farmers—100 per cent—is engaged in Landcare in some way or another. Some engage every single year; some will do the odd bit here and there. It does not matter; they are all involved.⁷⁸

74 Mr Bill Pigott, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 38; Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 42;

75 Dr Peter Ampt, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

76 Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 58.

77 Rangeland NRM, *Submission 4*, p. 2;

78 Ms Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 51.

4.63 The contribution of Landcare to the social fabric and capital of rural communities was highlighted by submitters.⁷⁹ Mr Walker, NLN, provide the following comments:

Another very important product of a healthy and confident Landcare community is social cohesion, social networks and community resilience. Getting farmers off their farms, mixing with their neighbours and thinking about how they can design a positive future has a very positive impact on rural mental health. Community recovery from natural disasters like floods and bushfires has been much quicker and with less evidence of social collapse and personal tragedy where there has been a strong Landcare local network.⁸⁰

4.64 This evidence was echoed by Landcare Tasmania which pointed to important social and community support networks provided by Landcare, particularly during the drought crisis in Queensland and NSW and the bushfire recovery in Victoria and Tasmania.⁸¹ Landcare NSW also noted the contribution that Landcare makes to community wellbeing and resilience:

Working on the land and in nature has been shown to have positive impacts on health and wellbeing, including mental health. Landcare has supported farmers and their families by providing opportunities to socialise through difficult times. Landcare groups have built bridges, bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people together on country with their neighbours to work on projects. In the cities Landcare has provided a meeting place for people from different cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸²

4.65 Submitters considered that the additional contribution of Landcare to communities was not adequately measured or considered. Dr Ampt, for example, commented that:

While Landcare was implemented to build social capital, and evidently achieved this through the extensive Landcare networks that currently exist, being unable to measure the impact per se or prove value for money in the short-term has clouded the perceived relative worth of the NLP.⁸³

4.66 The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association held similar views and commented that this contribution is too important to be ignored:

This story has not only been about productivity but also the preservation and improvement of the natural environment and the engagement of local communities. Such engagement is difficult to measure purely in financial terms but provides a very real point of contact in communities that are too often isolated. It needs to be acknowledged that the current significant

79 Upper Ovens Landcare Group Inc, *Submission 32*, p. 1.

80 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 8.

81 Landcare Tasmania Inc, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

82 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 42.

83 Dr Peter Ampt, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

funding reduction clearly puts at risk the accumulated good work carried out over an extended period, such erosion of an asset should not be tolerated.⁸⁴

4.67 Environs Kimberley further noted that long-term engagement with Indigenous communities was one of the key targets in Caring for our Country and should be maintained. It considered this to be 'very important' because it required NRM groups to engage Indigenous communities and encourage long-term knowledge sharing.⁸⁵ Indigenous engagement in Landcare is discussed further in chapter 7.

Small grants

4.68 A further matter raised by submitters was the reduction in funding directly available to Landcare groups through small grants. It was noted that small grants were an important source of funds for Landcare and provided significant benefits. Ms Johnson, FTLA, noted that small grants had been highly sought after with 25 applications for each application approved.⁸⁶

4.69 Landcare NSW commented that small grants provided through programs such as Envirofund and Community Action Grants had been a 'vital' co-investment for groups to undertake the tasks they had identified as a priority. Landcare NSW stated that small grants were a tool in the suite of NRM arrangements to build capacity in human and social capital that underpins successful community-based NRM.⁸⁷ Mr David Clark, FTLA, added that even \$1,000 or \$2,000 was effective in allow groups to function and keeping capacity in communities.⁸⁸

4.70 Landcare Australia Ltd also expressed disappointment with the lack of access to small grants and noted that reduced funding limits the capacity of groups and decreases the longevity of projects. Small grants over a period of time also allow Landcare groups to stage project activity. Groups are able to commence new works while retaining the capacity to maintain, or protect, areas previously rehabilitated. Landcare Australia Ltd concluded that:

A reduction in available funding is likely to enforce a rescheduling of priorities, preventing new works to be commenced, with some reversal or degradation of rehabilitated/revegetated areas. Some of the gains from previous investment and volunteer time will be lost, which will result in a negative impact on environmental assets, as well as the motivation and participation of groups.⁸⁹

84 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5. See also, Landcare Tasmania Inc, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

85 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 4.

86 Ms Susi Johnson, Farm Tree and Landcare Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 30.

87 Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 6.

88 Mr David Clark, Farm Tree and Landcare Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 30.

89 Landcare Australia Ltd, *Submission 34*, p. 1.

4.71 Organisations noted that small grants had been made available under the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Programme. The Government is providing \$5 million to assist community groups and individuals to undertake projects to conserve and protect their local environment and/or to manage the natural resource base. Also in that category of small grants is round one of the 20 Million Trees.⁹⁰

4.72 While the additional funding was welcomed, it was noted that the 25th Anniversary program was a one-off program and only \$5 million was available.⁹¹ The NLN welcomed the small grants funding allocation for 2014–15 but described it as a 'token' amount that 'cannot replace commitments that should not have been lost in the first place'.⁹² Mr Walker, NLN, noted that the \$5 million funding effectively only provided about four-\$20,000 projects in each of the 56 regions across Australia. As a consequence, 'Landcare is going to struggle to continue to engage and support as well as find the seed funding to resource projects across the Landcare community for the next couple of years'.⁹³

Committee comments

4.73 The committee considers that there is ample evidence that the reduction in funding for Landcare announced in the 2015–15 Budget will have a detrimental impact on natural resource management in Australia. The gains over the last three decades through the concerted efforts of government, NRM bodies, communities and landholders are now under threat.

4.74 While recognising the current budget constraints in the environmental area, the committee supports submitters' view that the Government has failed to understand, and acknowledge, the significant benefits to the environment of funding for natural resource management and the wider benefits for communities through the establishment and engagement Landcare activities. The Government has also reaped significant benefits from its investment with studies indicating many multiples of investment return for every dollar of government investment.

4.75 The committee considers that loss of funding will have wide ranging effects: there will be less on-ground work, fewer resources for capacity building, loss of experienced and dedicated staff in regional bodies and disengagement of volunteers and landholders will continue to grow.

4.76 These outcomes are very significant; the benefits of natural resource management are built on a long-term commitment to improving environmental outcomes. The engagement of volunteers and landholders is vital to success: without their contribution, many areas of Australia would still be showing the effects of uncontrolled weed growth, degradation from feral pests, contamination of creeks from livestock, degraded farmland and treeless landscapes.

90 Mr Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 59.

91 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 13.

92 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 4.

93 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 13.

4.77 The committee considers that the benefits of investment in natural resource management cannot be underestimated.

4.78 The committee also notes that small grants will not be available under the National Landcare Programme. Evidence pointed to the contribution of small grants available under previous programs to the activities of local groups. While the \$5 million allocated by the Government under the 25th Anniversary Land Grants Programme is welcome, it does not address the need of long-term access to small grants.

