

Chapter 8

Conclusions and recommendations

8.1 Over the 25 years that the Australian Government has supported Landcare, there have been several program iterations, refinements and reviews. While community involvement in Landcare has grown markedly since the movement's inception in the 1980s, each change to the formal program structure and funding arrangements creates uncertainty on the ground. Despite this, community commitment to the Landcare ethos remains:

Landcare is not some tree hugging environmental one day wonder. It is unique and enduring, it is supported by the main custodians of the Australian landscape, the Australian farmers, who are the main environmental stewards, managing, soils, water, endangered and threatened flora and fauna weeds and the list goes on. It is also a partnership between industry, Government and the general community, a unique bi partisan partnership.

Landcare's enduring popularity is due to the embedded philosophy of embracing local issues, empowering communities with education extension and decision support tools that deliver practical solutions.¹

8.2 The committee acknowledges the importance of using local groups and landholders, employing local knowledge and taking local action to achieve results. The committee supports the continued strengthening of networks and involvement of local groups in regional decision making and planning to achieve enduring outcomes on the ground.

8.3 The committee recognises the mutual contribution of sustainable agricultural practices and sustainable natural resource management to the condition of the environment. A point made throughout the inquiry was that problems causing environmental degradation do not recognise boundaries and that improved agricultural practices on private land contribute to the overall health of Australia's landscape.

8.4 The committee recognises the social benefits of Landcare. Not only does Landcare contribute to improved landscapes through sustainable agricultural and environmental practices; its contribution to individual and community wellbeing is immense. As one submission stated:

Landcare is essentially a social mechanism to achieve biophysical outcomes. While its primary focus is on generating outcomes for sustainable landscapes, it is the relationships that Landcare creates through group action, the resultant peer to peer learning, the norms established and the respect Landcare groups develop in local communities that make on-ground action possible.²

1 Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 3

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

8.5 In redesigning the Landcare framework once again, it is important that community input continues and that changes are clearly communicated. Former Prime Minister the Hon Bob Hawke AC, speaking at the 2014 Bob Hawke Landcare Award ceremony, noted:

The basic point that I think should underlie all our thinking is that the good people of Australia have demonstrated over 25 years the widespread commitment there is in the community to deal with these fundamental issues of protecting our environment and we mustn't do anything which is going to interfere with that commitment.³

Landcare and the 2014–15 Budget

8.6 The 2014–15 Budget announcement of a reduction in funding of \$471 million over the next four years for Landcare and new funding initiatives including the Green Army and 20 Million Trees were seen by some in the Landcare sector as a broken election commitment.

8.7 It was argued that the reduction in funding shows a failure by the Government to understand, and appreciate, the role that Landcare plays in natural resource management, the strong environmental outcomes from Landcare and the value returned to government and the community of continued investment in Landcare. Many submitters pointed to the significant value derived from government investment with research indicating that for each \$1 invested by government, there was community and landholder investment of up to \$12.

8.8 Submitters from the farming sector also pointed to the increase in agricultural productivity through Landcare activity. The farming sector has been able to identify, implement and manage sustainability and productivity issues through Landcare investment.

8.9 It was argued by many that these gains are now under threat from the reduction in funding. The committee received evidence which pointed to a reduction in projects being undertaken by Landcare organisations. In addition, NRM bodies indicated that there would be a loss of staff. This, it was argued, will diminish the ability of organisations to plan, to assist and support local groups and to engage community and volunteer groups. There will be a loss of skills and corporate and local knowledge.

8.10 The committee also received evidence of the wider benefits of Landcare in rural and regional communities through the provision of employment, building social cohesion and capacity, and health and wellbeing of individuals and the community. It was argued that these benefits are under threat with the reduction in funding.

8.11 The committee acknowledges that investment in NRM has produced wide-ranging and long-term benefit for the environment and for communities. It provides a significant return on investment for the Commonwealth Government and for

3 The Hon Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister, 2014 Bob Hawke Landcare Award, *transcript of interview*, September 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-20/the-2014-bob-hawke-landcare-award/5759828> (accessed 22 September 2014).

Australia. Over the last 25 years, processes and planning for NRM activities have become more efficient and effective, reaping improved returns for the environment, the Government, and the community.

8.12 The committee thus finds it very difficult to support any reduction in funding for NRM programs. While the Government has pointed to its funding commitment over the next four years, this commitment includes programs with a limited relationship to Landcare activities. The committee considers the actions of the Government to be short-sighted. The funding cuts have the potential to undermine the Government's stated aim of placing Landcare back at the centre of land management programs. It has the potential to undermine the gains in environmental improvement over the past 25 years and moves to secure increased agricultural productivity into the future. As well, efforts to reengage communities and volunteers, who are so vital to the long-term health of the Landcare movement, may be hindered.

8.13 While recognising the current budget constraints under which the Government is working, the committee considers that the benefits arising from Landcare are too important to be ignored and thus funding should be reinstated to previous levels.

Recommendation 1

8.14 The committee recommends that the Government provide funding to the National Landcare Programme to the same level as provided under Caring for our Country.

8.15 In addition, the committee notes comments in relation to lack of access to small grants under the National Landcare Programme. Evidence pointed to the effectiveness of small grants for Landcare groups. While the Government has provided small grants through the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Programme, funding is limited to a total of \$5 million for this one-off program.

Recommendation 2

8.16 The committee recommends that the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Programme be maintained as a continuing small grants program over the forward estimates.

The Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees

8.17 The committee notes the comments received in relation to two new programs: the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees. While some submitters commented that the programs would augment Landcare activities, others were of the view that there would be limited positive environmental outcomes from these two programs.

8.18 In relation to the Green Army, there was concern that the funding for this program had been drawn from Landcare. It was argued that this is an employment program rather than a Landcare program and that there were program design features which worked against it being a viable alternative to Landcare. These features include the lack of 'in-kind' contributions from experienced landcarers, minimal funding for project specific materials, lack of knowledge of local conditions by participants, limited return on investment as participants are inexperienced and lack of long-term commitment to projects particularly maintenance and monitoring. In addition, as

project timeframes are for 20 to 26 weeks, it was argued that it would be difficult for Landcare groups to fund and organise projects to meet these requirements.

8.19 The committee welcomes the comments by the Department of the Environment that an average of \$10,000 per project could be made available for 'project-specific materials'. The committee also welcomes the department's moves to broker projects across a number of groups to overcome the problem of the provision of projects up to 26 weeks.

8.20 However, the committee remains unconvinced that the investment in the Green Army Programme can be seen as a direct substitute for Landcare. The committee considers that the Green Army Programme lacks most of the essential features of Landcare that contribute so significantly to environmental improvement. The committee concludes that it is disingenuous of the Government to argue that the more than \$500 million investment in the Green Army will return the same level of environmental benefits, and community and landholder buy-in benefits, that a matching investment in Landcare would have done.

8.21 The committee also notes that while information on projects that have been awarded funding under Rounds One and Two are available on the Department of the Environment's website, little additional information is available on the progress of each project. The committee considers that, given the large investment by the Government, and the lauded environmental and conservation activities of the Green Army, information about environmental outcomes must be publicly available. Such information should include project timeframes, project status, and assessment of the environmental outcomes both immediately following completion of the project and after a suitable monitoring period.

Recommendation 3

8.22 The committee recommends that the further information about Green Army projects be made publicly available. This information should include project timeframes, project status, and an assessment of the environmental outcomes both immediately following completion of the project and after a suitable monitoring period.

8.23 In relation to the 20 Million Trees Programme, the committee notes that Landcare already plants many millions of trees each year. While the addition of funding for further tree planting is welcome, the committee does not consider that it is a good use of scarce Commonwealth resources to establish a new program to do so. The committee considers that it would have been more efficient, and additional administration costs would have been avoided, had the funding for 20 Million Trees been rolled into Landcare funding.

8.24 In addition, the committee considers that a full assessment of both the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees should be undertaken after two years of operation to ensure that the goals of the programs are being achieved and the Government is receiving value for money.

Recommendation 4

8.25 The committee recommends that a comprehensive review of the Green Army Programme and the 20 Million Trees Programme be undertaken by June 2016 to ensure that the programs are meeting their stated goals and that the Commonwealth Government is receiving good value for money from its investment.

National Landcare Programme

8.26 The underlying principles of the National Landcare Programme are: local, simple and long-term. The committee considers that enunciation of these principles could provide important reference points to build on Landcare's past successes. However, in the committee's opinion, there other matters which work against sustaining the work of Landcare into the future.

Local

8.27 The local principle was welcomed by submitters as it was seen to bring the program back to its original focus; a focus which appears to have been lost under Caring for our Country. The committee considers that the refocus on 'local' is appropriate to support further development of natural resource management across Australia.

8.28 The committee considers that regional NRM bodies are well placed to advance the local principle: they have expertise; local knowledge; and regional understanding. The active incorporation of local priorities and input by local groups is a positive move to encourage the reengagement of communities, volunteers and landholders in NRM activities.

8.29 However, there are a number of concerns with the new arrangements, particularly the impact of funding levels. The committee recognises that the Government has responded to stakeholder comment and various reviews of Caring for our Country and previous programs. However, the committee is also mindful that one of the factors influencing changes to Landcare programs has been the reduction in funding which the Government has made available.

8.30 In this regard, the committee is concerned that the lack of funding may impact adversely on long-term planning and a systematic approach to NRM which includes both large-scale and smaller projects. The committee received a range of views in relation to the future of large-scale projects with some submitters commenting that these would still be undertaken while others were less certain that funding would enable the continuation of large-scale projects.

8.31 The committee notes that under the national stream it is intended to retain support in important areas such as the management and rehabilitation of coastal rivers, threatened species and ecosystems, the National Reserve System and management of pests. The 20 Million Trees is also included in the national stream.

8.32 While this is welcome, it is unclear how engagement of stakeholders, particularly communities, will work to achieve national priorities. The committee considers that there may be a danger that the arrangements under the new National

Landcare Programme could undermine a comprehensive and coordinated approach to long-term strategic landscape scale planning and action. The committee believes that further consideration should be given to evaluating the impact of the new arrangements on landscape scale projects and consideration be given to improving coordination and planning of large projects.

Recommendation 5

8.33 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government consider avenues to ensure the continuation of landscape scale projects and to foster further collaboration between stakeholders on long-term landscape scale strategic planning and action.

8.34 The committee is also concerned that the new arrangements have the potential to introduce a degree of friction between NRM bodies and community groups and may undermine the aims of the local principle. For example, the requirement for providing a minimum of 20 per cent of regional funding to local groups will be a positive mechanism to support local projects, capacity building and community engagement. However, it comes at a time when NRM funding levels have decreased and access to small grants has been removed. This will mean that significantly less funding will reach groups on the ground.

8.35 The committee has also noted the evidence pointing to the impact on regional NRM staff who provide support and assistance to community groups. Many groups and landholders benefit greatly from the work of facilitators and support officers. The reduction in the number of these positions may impact adversely on the local principle and undermine the strategic objectives of the National Landcare Programme which are based on increasing community and landholder engagement and participation.

8.36 The committee notes the Department of the Environment's comments in relation to the employment of a facilitator by NRM bodies. However, the committee is concerned not only that the facilitator role is maintained, but also that regional NRM bodies retain experienced staff with local knowledge for planning and capacity building activities. At the same time, given the current restriction in funding, the committee considers that all regional NRM bodies must ensure that their administrative arrangements are as efficient and cost effective as possible. In this regard, the committee welcomes the commitment by the Department of the Environment to simplification. The committee considers that this should go some way to reducing administrative costs.

8.37 While acknowledging the reduction in funding received by regional NRM bodies, the committee is concerned that appropriate arrangements are put in place to ensure community engagement and community capacity building. Community participation in NRM is crucial to its success and the committee does not consider that lack of funding should undermine genuine community collaboration and engagement by regional NRM bodies.

Recommendation 6

8.38 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government review the funding model for the National Landcare Programme with a view to reinstating funding for facilitators and community support staff.

8.39 In addition, the committee has noted comments concerning the disengagement of farmers. The committee acknowledges the importance of engaging landholders in NRM planning activities and the benefits that arise from this engagement. The committee considers that further efforts are needed to ensure that effective collaboration with landholders is undertaken. In this regard, the committee notes the comments by the National Farmers' Federation and moves to improve linkages between NRM bodies and industry. The committee considers that this should be further encouraged.

Recommendation 7

8.40 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government conducts a review of factors contributing to disengagement of landholders in NRM activities with a view to addressing those factors and increasing landholder engagement.

Recommendation 8

8.41 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government works to further foster linkages between regional NRM bodies and industry groups.

Simple

8.42 The committee welcomes the Government's commitment to the principle of 'simple' and moves by Department of the Environment to decrease the administrative burden on NRM bodies. In addition, the department has moved to an online monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement tool which is aimed at reducing the reporting burden.

8.43 However, the committee remains concerned about the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation of NRM investments. The committee acknowledges that some reporting is required for financial accountability and governance. However, reporting should be appropriate to the size of the project and investment.

Recommendation 9

8.44 The committee recommends that reporting be proportionate to the size of a project or grant. Notwithstanding that accountability and good governance is expected at all levels, there should be flexibility in reporting so that the requirements for small-scale projects are commensurate with the size of the project.

8.45 The committee also notes the comments by submitters that although there is extensive reporting it does not appear to influence policy debate or policy development. In part, this may be as a result of the focus of reporting on outputs. Reporting on outputs can be time consuming and onerous and does not identify positive changes to landscape and thus whether the investment has been successful. It also does not identify practices which may be applied in other areas. The committee

therefore considers that further effort is required to ensure that there is a move away from reporting on outputs towards effective reporting of outcomes. The committee notes that the Department of the Environment has indicated that the MERIT system will assist in the evaluation of outcomes. However, the committee considers that further work in measuring outcomes of NRM projects is required

Recommendation 10

8.46 The committee recommends that investigation be undertaken to further decrease the focus of reporting on outputs and increase reporting of outcomes.

8.47 Evidence was received about the establishment of a national environmental accounts system. Submitters supported this approach and pointed to the trial of national environmental accounts in ten NRM regions which is being evaluated.

8.48 The committee considers that national environmental accounts are an important initiative as they aim to provide annual reports over various levels on the health and change in condition of environmental assess, underpin long-term planning and improve cost effectiveness of public and private investment in environmental management and repair. The committee urges the Commonwealth to evaluate the trial and to consider the extent to which it could incorporate its approach in the development of a national monitoring and evaluation system.

Recommendation 11

8.49 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government examine the outcomes of the trial of the national environmental accounting system developed by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, with a view to investigating the feasibility of implementing that system, or a similar system, and incorporating it in the MERIT reporting process.

8.50 In addition, the committee has noted the comments on the lack of reporting on social outcomes arising from NRM investment. The committee considers that the Commonwealth Government should investigate ways to incorporate reporting on social outcomes to ensure that the full benefits of its investment are identified.

Recommendation 12

8.51 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government establish a system of reporting the social outcomes of investment in natural resource management so that the full benefits of that investment are identified.

Long-term

8.52 Without a long-term commitment of investment in NRM, there is potential for environmental outcomes to be undermined and for disengagement of communities and landholders. The committee notes that the Government's commitment to long-term funding. This is welcome; however, that commitment is to a much lower funding level.

Delivery of Landcare programs by the Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture

8.53 The committee has considered the evidence in relation to coordination between the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture. The committee notes the departments' arrangements to coordinate the delivery of Landcare programs with the Department of the Environment undertaking the major share of this task.

Interaction of national, state and regional arrangements

8.54 The evidence received by the committee points to concern about misalignment of priorities in national, state and regional arrangements. The committee also notes that there are differing arrangements across jurisdictions. The committee considers that more effective coordination across and within jurisdictions would contribute to a consistent approach to NRM issues.

8.55 One step to improve coordination may be a review of regional NRM bodies with a view to decreasing the number bodies. At the moment there are 56 regional bodies across Australia. The committee considers that there are benefits to be gained through economies of scale, centralisation of resources and improvement in information sharing.

Recommendation 13

8.56 The committee recommends that a review be undertaken to investigate any potential efficiencies of NRM bodies. The investigation may consider adopting a shared services model using existing resources and ways for NRM bodies to reflect effective boundaries. This should be undertaken on a state-by-state basis with due consideration of the importance of community engagement.

Indigenous engagement in Landcare

8.57 The committee acknowledges the significant contribution of Indigenous groups, traditional owners and rangers to natural resource management. Indigenous rangers in the Kimberley work with pastoralists and government bodies and in Far North Queensland a regional approach to NRM has been successfully implemented by traditional owner groups.

8.58 The committee considers that the Commonwealth should ensure that the new National Landcare Programme incorporates flexibility and investment mechanisms to maintain Indigenous engagement in NRM. In this regard, the committee points to the need to:

- better align programs to the social and cultural goals of Indigenous communities;
- take into account native title and traditional knowledge; and
- acknowledge barriers to access and additional costs caused by remoteness.

8.59 The committee also considers that there should be greater consultation with Indigenous groups as the National Landcare Programme is rolled out.

Recommendation 14

8.60 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government ensures that the National Landcare Programme incorporate sufficient flexibility and investment mechanisms to maintain Indigenous engagement in natural resource management.

Recommendation 15

8.61 The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment undertake consultation with Indigenous groups active in natural resource management to ensure that Indigenous views are incorporated in any modifications of the National Landcare Programme.

Research and development

8.62 A further matter raised was the need for continuing investment in research and development in natural resource management. The committee notes that funding for research and development has declined over the years. This committee considers that this is short-sighted particularly in light of the need to increase agricultural productivity and the need to ensure that adequate research is undertaken on the impact of climate change to deal with biodiversity conservation and agricultural productivity.

Senator Anne Urquhart
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