

**Submission by the
North- West Catchment Management Committee
to the
House of Representative Standing Committee on Environment &
Heritage Inquiry into
CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT**

Background – about the North-west Catchment Management Committee

Based in Tamworth in north-western NSW, the North-West Catchment Committee covers an area of approximately 100,000 km², stretching from the Liverpool Range at Murrurundi, north to the Queensland Border, east to the Great Dividing Range and west to the Barwon River.

As one of many CMCs across the state, we cover a significant part of New South Wales and are an important part of the Murray Darling Basin system. Our committee brings together the community and government to work towards a common vision for natural resource management in our region. We are regarded as one of the more successful Catchment Management Committees – a reflection of our commitment to making Catchment Management happen.

Summary

Clearly the value of a catchment approach cannot be underestimated. Unfortunately though, the approach up until now seems to have been too ad hoc. In course, the full potential for Total Catchment Management has never really been achieved.

The varying level of commitment from the various stakeholders, including all levels of government and the community, has also been a barrier. The situation is further complicated by institutional arrangements that vary both within and between the various states and limited information on which to base our decisions.

For Catchment Management to be most effective there needs to be a more concerted and coordinated approach. There must be genuine commitment from all stakeholders including Federal, State and Local Government and the broader community and a willingness to put their hand in their pocket to make it happen. Without this, the potential for truly integrated catchment management will never be achieved.

We firmly believe that community driven catchment bodies, equivalent to the current Catchment Management Committees, is the most effective mechanism to make catchment management happen and that any move to strengthen this role can only be considered as a positive step forward.

We hope that this inquiry will assist in this regard.

1. The Development of Catchment Management in NSW

The Catchment Management Act of 1989 was the beginning of catchment management on a state-wide basis in NSW. At this stage, seven inland CMC committees were appointed, given a copy of the Act and little else. It was also agreed that the Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC) would host the CMCs.

The NWCMC were allocated 3 very large catchments and provided with very few resources other than a Coordinator who had little or no experience in Total Catchment Management. The system was hopelessly under-resourced from the start and, consequently, we spent our first 2 months trying to determine a role in Natural Resource Management.

After three years the committee decided to start taking an issue approach and started to prioritise issues in the catchments. At the same time, a large proportion of funds was directed to information gathering with very little planning.

However, we soon realised that this “scatter gun” approach was not integrated, nor was it very effective in achieving our objectives for catchment management.

So, after 5 years of operation we decided to change the focus of our activities. Our profile in the catchment was increasing and our role in natural resource management was beginning to emerge. Planning became our focus and we began to involve the community in the development of plans for our three catchments.

The role of CMCs has further evolved and changed over the last two to three years. Much of this change has been bought about by the NSW government water and vegetation reforms.

CMCs are no longer the only group dealing with natural resource management but continue to play an important role in coordination and integration. Our committee has links with no less than 30 other natural resource management committees and uses these to ensure that decisions are made in the context of Total Catchment Management.

Similarly, Catchment Management Committees are no longer the only way that the community can influence decisions about how we manage our catchments. So, in effect, CMCs have paved the way for much of what is happening today. By bringing the community and government together, they have helped to change the attitudes about who manages catchments and how. This is a major success given some of the stumbling blocks in implementing the philosophy of Total Catchment Management (TCM).

2. The Value of Catchment Approach:

The value of a catchment approach cannot be underestimated.

It's difficult to think of any action that could take place at the top of a catchment and not have the potential to influence the environment down stream. All the major environmental problems like declining water quality; dryland salinity and soil erosion are clearly linked to something happening in another part of the catchment. Accordingly, we must manage our land, water and vegetation on a catchment basis – no matter what size the catchment.

A Total Catchment Management (TCM) approach recognises the integrated, complex and dynamic nature of catchments where the land, water, and vegetation fit together to form a complete picture.

A catchment approach also encourages people to think more broadly and look beyond their own farm gate or back fence. People are a critical part of the equation and the concept of working together is critical to the success or otherwise of a catchment approach. Without this commitment the whole process is floored.

The size and scale of the catchment effects the type of work that any group or individual can get involved with. For example, the North-west Catchment Management Committee covers three catchments and an area of 100 000 km². Dealing with three very large catchments means that we can really only operate at a strategic, big picture level.

However, Landcare and other community groups are tackling local issues via a catchment approach, even when they may only cover a few hundred hectares. This is the beauty of a catchment approach – the principles can be applied to any situation.

Unfortunately though, the past approach seems to have been too ad hoc and the emphasis often seems to have been on water and vegetation but not soils.

However, an alternative to the catchment model is one based on bio-regions. Because bio-regions actually cross catchment boundaries, in some cases a bio-region approach may be more appropriate. For example the Regional Vegetation planning process in NSW is based roughly on this principal and there are as many as 5 wholly or partly within the one catchment. The Native Vegetation Conservation legislation also stipulates that these committees must be based on a minimum of one Local Government area.

Similarly, catchment boundaries don't always align with social boundaries and the community to which people feel that they belong. For example, people who live in Narrabri or Moree may have more in common with each other than those living in their catchment eg. Uralla or Glen Innes. We need to be more aware of this.

The human factor is an important one that is often overlooked. Ultimately, it is people who bring about on ground change and they are integral to effective catchment management.

The success or otherwise of a catchment approach is dependent on many factors, some of which are outlined in the following pages. In implementing the Total Catchment Management (TCM) philosophy, we believe that Catchment Management Committees has the following advantages:

- ❖ Providing a coordinated and integrated approach to natural resource managers
- ❖ The strength of TCM committees is the way that they bring the community and government together. This allows the community to influence natural resource management decisions and the allocation of resources to target catchment needs and community priorities.

3. Best Practice Methods for preventing halting and reversing degradation

The development and adoption of Best Management Practices (BMPs) can make an enormous contribution in improving and maintaining catchment health. However, BMPs must evolve as people take initiatives, learn and experience.

To make effective decisions we also need good data on which to base them. While we have the answers to many of our environmental problems, many more remain unsolved. In the absence of long term data it is important to adopt the precautionary principle and make decisions based on what we know.

In the longer term, we must continue to access new data and initiate industry and community driven action research. Effective extension programs to promote the outcomes in a tangible and practical manner must then follow this up.

We believe that there are several crucial factors that must be addressed to successfully adopt the Best Management Practices (BMPs) required to halt, and reverse, environmental degradation:

- The best practice methods for halting or reversing degradation should be based on an integrated catchment planning basis rather than a single-issue approach.
- For effective implementation there must be community ownership. This can be bought about by industries and individuals working together to develop their own best practice methods. No one group can develop best practice.
- The individual landholder needs to be convinced that changed methods are valuable socially and environmentally but, foremost, economically. In some cases there may need to be financial incentives to overcome some of the barriers to adoption.

3.1 The role of groundcover management in improving catchment health.

Many of our catchment problems could be addressed by a few key solutions. For example, simply by maintaining adequate groundcover we can take a few small steps down the track to recovery. Research has shown that the risk of soil erosion is significantly reduced by maintaining more than 70% groundcover (Lang, 1995). This has positive implications for water quality, conserving soil moisture, nutrient availability, soil fertility and in reducing weed invasion.

Through its influence on catchment hydrology (ie the amount of water entering the catchment versus the amount used) groundcover is also linked to dryland salinity and floodplain management (increased cover can slow the velocity of flowing water).

The bottom line is that if we did nothing else but manage and maintain adequate groundcover, ideally above 70%, we would go a long way to improving catchment health. Groundcover management is equally applicable to grazing and cropping systems.

3.2 Some examples of initiatives taken by the North-West Catchment Management Committee

As previously mentioned the NWCMC operate at a strategic level rather than focus on individual farms and farmers. They set the broad boundaries, or strategic framework, for what should and shouldn't happen in the catchment. They then rely on the efforts of numerous groups and individuals to physically implement on ground action. As such, their activities revolve around catchment planning, facilitation/coordination and education/awareness. Following are some examples of NWCMC initiatives:

3.2.1 Catchment Planning in the Namoi, Gwydir and Border Rivers Catchments – provide a future framework for natural resource management, based on a comprehensive process of community consultation and involvement. As such, they are a point of reference for many other groups and individuals including single-focus committees such as Vegetation, Water and Floodplain Management, State Government agencies, Local Government, community and industry groups. The plans also form the basis of a Regional Strategy. This coordination is an important factor.

3.2.2 Formation of one catchment committee for the Border Rivers (1999) – the Border Rivers or Macintyre catchment is unique in that it crosses the NSW – Queensland State border. The NSW and QLD committees have just formed one committee to improve cooperation coordination and efficiency on cross border issues.

Needless to say, there are similar situations in many parts of Australia. Catchments don't stop at State boundaries but marrying the legislative, cultural, social and economic circumstances of two states can be difficult. Hopefully the formation of such committees can overcome these barriers.

3.2.3 Great Grazing Debate (Sept 1999) – a joint initiative of the NWCMC and Sustainable Grazing Systems aimed at promoting sustainable grazing management. This is based on the recognition of the role of grazing management in improving catchment health, farm productivity and profitability and combines the experience of farmers with technical expertise of researchers and advisers.

3.2.4 Numerous public forums including: “The Impact of Cloud Seeding”, “Water in the catchment – Conflict or Cooperation”, “SEPP 46 – Your Contribution”, “Managing Land Differently” and “Moving goal posts – the affects on farms and farm finances.” Such forums target land managers as well as rural advisers.

3.2.5 Establishment of Project Administration Database (PAD) – a comprehensive database detailing projects funded through Federal and State sources since 1994. This is a valuable tool for monitoring the types of natural resource management issues, how they are being addressed and the regional distribution of funds. The information is integral in determining current trends as well as future funding priorities.

Above all we must acknowledge the hurt and despair of rural communities around Australia. In many cases natural resource management is a low priority to survival. Putting food on table comes first and support must be provided before some land managers can even contemplate “fixing” the environment and adopting best practice management.

4. The role of different levels of government, the private sector and the community in the management of catchment areas

Effective Catchment Management relies on the full commitment and cooperation of all levels of government, the private sector and the community.

4.1 The role of Federal government

The Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) has been an enormous help in addressing many of our environmental degradation problems. The Federal government must endeavour to ensure that such funds continue so that the good work that has already started can continue.

The Federal Government should also consider adopting the recommendations of “A full repairing lease” , documenting the outcomes of the Industry Commission inquiry into Ecological Sustainable Development.

We believe that the Federal government also has a responsibility to ensure that this review is conducted in the context of the State review of Natural Resource and Environment Management (NREM) Committees. We must consider if the structure and process for “administering” catchment management should be the same in each state. Maybe it should be Federally administered rather than State!

4.2 The role of State Government agencies

Many actions require the commitment of State Government Agencies. Ultimately, this means Regional Directors who are responsible for managing the staff and resources within a region, directing what those people do, how they do it and where. This means that agencies are in a powerful position to influence land, water and vegetation management.

Obviously, different agencies have different areas of responsibility, resourcing and legislative backing. But by working together in a cooperative and constructive way, consistent with the views and aspirations of the community, agencies can have a major bearing on the future of the catchment.

Catchment Management Committees provide a mechanism for improved cooperation between and within agencies and fosters closer links between the community and government.

Similarly, the Catchment Plans being developed by the NWCMC will provide a community perspective on the priority issues within the region, what needs to happen about them and who needs to take responsibility. While these plans are a valuable bargaining tool, for them to be most effective they must have the full support of state government agencies. This is a real dilemma given the current budget constraints of the key natural resource management agencies that have no room to move on the State government's water and vegetation reforms.

The legislation that is administered by the agencies is sometimes seen as contrary to the spirit of community and government working together. Given the huge amount of legislation relating to natural resource management it may be worthwhile considering putting the Environmental Acts under one Natural Resource Management Act.

The government commitment to community consultation is sometimes questionable. The process of community consultation is floored if the government aren't prepared to listen to what the community says – nor to hear some things that they don't like. From the outset there must be a clear understanding of what is and isn't negotiable so that all involved have realistic expectations. Invariably, this will involve trade offs from both parties.

In some cases, community and government partnerships are dangerously close to disintegration as the community become more disenchanted, more suspicious and more cynical of the hidden agendas. There is a perception that the whole process of involving the community is just for face value and that the decisions have a) either been made already or b) will be made irrespective of the community's wishes and needs. Unfortunately, despite the rhetoric, the state government has failed to fully grapple with social and economic consequences of natural resource management decisions and current reforms.

The key government agencies include: Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC), NSW Agriculture (NSW Ag), Environment Protection Authority (EPA), National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and State Forests.

Overall, the NSW government has a major responsibility to ensure that the current review of Natural Resource and Environment Management comes out with some tangible, meaning and workable solutions. Our views on a future structure are outlined in part 5.

4.3 The role of Local government

The potential for Local Government to influence land, water and vegetation management at the local level is significant. Backed by legislation controlling both existing and new development, they are also ideally placed to integrate economic and social considerations with environmental concerns.

As the closest tier of government to the community, Local Government should be familiar with community concerns and aspirations.

In reality though, the involvement of Local Government in catchment management has been less than desirable. The NWCMC has three Local Government representatives and while these people contribute in a positive and enthusiastic way, their attitude doesn't always reflect that of their constituents. Similarly it is difficult for them to maintain effective channels of communication with the 20 plus Local Government bodies in the region.

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that Local Government boundaries are, in most cases, different to Catchment boundaries. For some time, the NWCMC have pushed for Local government and catchment boundaries to be more closely aligned. Until now this has not been achieved and one would have to question if it ever will be.

Like State government agencies Local government are under-resourced and over worked. Catchment Management can't be a priority even if they would like it to be. It's just another job for them to try and deal with.

4.4 The role of the community

The community is in a powerful position to implement and influence local change. They are usually very action oriented and produce visible and obvious results. This is clearly a very different role from that of the NWCMC who influence policy so land managers, users and holders can manage in an appropriate way.

By providing a common focus, goal and direction, community groups encourage people to work together. Landcare is testimony to this as are numerous other community and industry groups.

Ultimately though the actions of the community need to be coordinated and integrated. Catchment Plans help community groups to identify priority issues and provide a framework for better management and coordination at the local level. They also identify opportunities for cooperative actions.

4.5 The role of individual landholders, managers and users

We all live in a catchment. We must recognise that everything that we do affects someone further downstream. Ultimately then, to improve natural resource management each individual must be prepared to change the way that we use and manage our land, water and vegetation. This applies to not only farmers but people who live in towns.

The role of individual landholders, managers and users cannot be underestimated.

5. Planning, Resourcing, Implementation, Coordination and Cooperation in Catchment Management

5.1 Planning

In NSW, despite the fact that there is a State body called the State Catchment Management Coordinating Committee (SCMCC) there is no overall plan for the state. The absence of a State level strategic plan is a major stumbling block in terms of a coordinated approach to planning.

In the north-west, regional planning is more prolific. There are a huge number of committees developing plans for everything from biodiversity to floodplains. Unfortunately, not all of these necessarily reflect a Total Catchment Management approach.

We believe that Catchment/Regional Plans, developed by CMCs or equivalent, should be promoted and endorsed as the overall framework for natural resource management. However, while the current strength of these plans is that they are voluntary, this may also be a two edged sword in that the implementation may fail because it relies on "goodwill".

Irrespective of this, Catchment Plans need to be endorsed and used as a reference point for other single- issue groups such as Water and Vegetation committees currently operating in NSW. This will improve coordination and cooperation and, above all, result in better on ground outcomes. Regional Natural Resource Management Plans needs to be the basis of action plans developed at a sub-catchment level and we then need to ensure that appropriate funding is supplied.

5.2 Resourcing

The long term funding and resourcing for natural resource management is a major issue. We have massive problems, many of which are increasing, and limited resources with which to tackle them.

While the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and similar programs has been an enormous boost, the administration of such programs has been fraught with problems. The option of devolving more responsibility to individual regional/catchment bodies states should be more seriously investigated. Ultimately, this would lead to more timely on ground action, consistent with community and catchment needs and restore some level of community confidence in the government.

With the end of NHT drawing perilously close, now is the time to consider long term funding for natural resource management.

There is some fear that many Landcare groups will fold once the flow of money stops. If this happens, there'll be a marked decline in the implementation of on ground works to tackle our natural resource management problems. However, we also recognise that funding alone shouldn't be the sole driving factor behind Landcare and similar community or industry groups. Such organisations represent valuable social networks and a community focus to improve catchment management. But no matter how great the collective goodwill of these people, many are not in the financial situation to address local problems without some forma of financial assistance.

From a State perspective, declining budgets and government cut backs are seeing further loss of jobs, and consequently services, in the bush. This is leaving the community disenfranchised, particularly those living away from the major regional centres. This imbalance must be addressed.

5.3 Implementation

Planning must be seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Plans are only as good as the paper they are written on if they are not implemented.

For implementation to be most effective some of the following points need to be addressed:

- ❖ Resolve structure/coordination of natural resource management committees. We need change to happen and to happen quickly so that implementation can happen in a strategic and coordinated fashion.
- ❖ Improve coordination between Catchment Management Committees and the State Catchment Management Coordinating Committee (SCMCC). The role of the SCMCC has been unclear and the links to more grassroots committees variable. SCMCC should have a responsibility in developing an “landscape vision” so that implementation can occur within this framework.
- ❖ There must be some review of the legislation to ensure that implementation isn't hamstrung by too much and/or inappropriate legislation.

5.4 Coordination and Cooperation

Coordination is a huge issue, highlighted by the formation of single-issues committees dealing with water and vegetation. In NSW we now have the situation where such committees are reporting directly to the Minister rather than through some overall coordinating, regional body. We believe that this is contrary to the concept of total catchment management and defies the notion of cooperation and coordination.

In this light, the NWCMC have put forward a future framework for natural resource management in our region. This proposal revolves around the formation of a TCM Board of Directors to replace the current Catchment Management Committees. The make up, role and responsibility of the Board of Directors is as follows.

5.4.1 Role of TCM Board Of Directors

- ❖ Setting overall strategic framework for natural resource management on a catchment basis.
- ❖ Coordinating the efforts of various groups and individuals involved in natural resource management. This would be guided by the NREM Strategies/Catchment plans.
- ❖ Developing Regional Natural Resource and Environment Management (NREM) Strategies to guide future government, community and industry investment.
- ❖ Overseeing the development of catchment plans that are integrated in nature and have a statutory status. These catchment plans would then feed into the NREM Strategy.

5.4.2 Make up of a TCM Board of Directors

- 1 Chair representing Regional Vegetation Management Committees
- 1 Chair representing Water Management Committees
- 1 Landcare representative
- 3 Community representatives representing rural interests
- 1 environmental representative
- 1 aboriginal representative
- 4 Agencies including Department of Land and Water Conservation, NSW Agriculture, National Parks and Wildlife Service and Environment Protection Authority.
- 1 Local Government representative

- 1 Urban representative
- 1 Other

5.4.3 Structure of the TCM Board of Directors and relationship to other committees

See attached.

6. Mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and reporting on catchment management programs, including the use of these reports for State of the environment reporting, and opportunities for review and improvement.

We cannot attempt to gauge our effectiveness in catchment management without monitoring, evaluation and reporting strategies. But despite its importance, monitoring and evaluation is often overlooked, possibly because it's too difficult and too costly.

Nevertheless, agencies have a responsibility to monitor on-ground parameters as a means to evaluate the effectiveness of catchment management. Fortunately, the emphasis on monitoring/evaluation has now increased in NSW since the introduction of the water and vegetation reforms. But the problem of how to use the data and ensure that the results are communicated to CMCs and the broader community still remains.

State of the Environment (SoE) reports have the potential to gauge the environmental gains and losses but seem to fail to achieve this potential. Local Government is under resourced and, consequently, many fail to give SoE reports the attention they deserve.

We feel that there are good opportunities for CMCs and Local Government to cooperate in preparing SoE reports. For some time now we have had a strong push for SoE reports to be prepared on a catchment rather than Local government basis. This takes into account the fact that catchments often cross Local Government boundaries and local government, therefore, may not be the most appropriate boundary on which to manage catchments.

But for SoE reports to be most valuable, they must be based on accurate up to date information on the condition of the natural resource.

Apart from routine monitoring of parameters like water quality and river health, we need regular, comprehensive and technically rigorous audits of the resource condition to pick up any improvement or similarly, decline. Much of the information that we currently have is outdated and in desperate need of review.

Apart from monitoring resource condition, we feel that it is also important to gauge the effectiveness of Catchment Management Committees or any other group in bringing about positive improvement.

Ideally, such reviews should be conducted annually by an independent group and should be based on clearly identified performance criteria. Part of this should involve a review of the adherence to the catchment/regional strategy. The CMC should then have a responsibility to report the major stakeholders and where, appropriate, feed this into SoE. Conversely, SoE reporting should also be integrated into catchment plans.

7. For further information

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