

WA NRM (Regions) Response to the Senate Inquiry into the National Landcare Program

NRM WA is the representative body for the 7 Western Australian NRM Regions.

Our NRM organisations work to maintain healthy and productive country that supports viable communities and industries. Natural resource management is the responsible use of our land, water, soil, plants and animals to provide a good quality of life for current and future generations. We work from the paddock to the regional scale to address issues that require a landscape perspective. We achieve much through our engagement with community members, landholders, governments, business, and industry.

We work with NRM Regions Australia to enable community and landcare activity to better address long term strategic issues of national importance.

The 7 WA regional bodies that comprise NRM WA cover all of the land and coastal area of WA. Most were formed with the inception of the Natural Heritage Trust program by the State and Federal Governments. They are non-statutory, incorporated bodies, comprised of community members, governed by voluntary committees elected by membership. They maintain company standards of governance and reporting.

The 7 WA NRM Regions have built on a proud tradition of soil and land conservation, conservation, landcare, and catchment management groups in WA. The WA NRM regions comprise of: Wheatbelt NRM; Perth NRM; South West Catchments Council; South Coast NRM; Rangelands NRM; Northern Agricultural Catchments Council; and the 7th region, the Peel Harvey Catchment Council, was formally recognised as an NRM region this year.

Over the period of the focus of the senate inquiry we have:

- Incrementally improved organisation performance.
- Increased the sophistication of our reporting and evaluation systems so we can report clearly on the achievement of NRM outcomes.
- Improved the quality of successive regional strategies, both in terms of targeting and prioritising natural assets and developing a clear investment framework for investment in the management of the resources.
- Engaged an enormous amount of people in undertaking NRM work on private and public lands, often in a voluntary capacity.
- Improved the NRM information systems and ensured that knowledge is shared with those that need and can use it best.

The history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program in Western Australia in relation to:

a. the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;

The first phase of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) ran from 1996–97 to 2001–02 and allocated \$1.5 billion to NRM and environmental activities. This was followed by a second phase that extended the program until 2006-07 investing a further with \$1 billion funding (to be matched by State/Territories) and the funding of an additional program – the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

The NHT was the first major investment by the Australian Government in natural resource management and led to the establishment of the regional infrastructure to work with regional communities in developing regional Natural Resource Management Plans.

The WA regional plans were accredited by both governments. The accreditation requirement turned out to be overly complicated because of the wide scope of those plans and the number of agencies across governments that had an interest in different elements. However, it commenced a process of integration that has continued through successive plan iterations.

In WA, a Joint Steering Committee comprised State, Federal and Local government representatives and technical experts. The bilateral arrangements and matching requirement strengthened the role of regional NRM organisations in their efforts to align the efforts of our State government (and across agencies) with those of the Australian Government.

The Salinity Council was the peak body for NRM in WA in the late 90's, and was disbanded in 2001 and a new State NRM Council was formed. This was a representative group and along with the State NRM Ministerial Council and the Joint Steering Committee provided NRM regional activity with direction and accountability.

b. the establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program;

In 2008 the Australian Government announced its Caring for our Country program that continued the high level of Australian Government investment in natural resource management with funding of \$2 billion for the period 2008 to 2013.

While the renewed effort was welcomed by regional NRM bodies and many of the elements of the NHT program were retained in the new program, the regional bodies were concerned about the lack of opportunity to have input to the program design particularly in relation to the changed arrangements for funding landcare groups, the loss of State matching requirements and the separation of salinity and other water quality programs from Caring for our Country funding. We did welcome the regional delivery funding initiative and the move towards longer term funding arrangements that reduced the funding transaction costs for regional NRM bodies.

In WA these changes meant that the State Government withdrew funding and support for regional NRM and financial commitment to their broader NRM responsibilities, to the point that the WA government investment in NRM in 2013-14 was less than \$4M. See the attached table for a breakdown of NRM funding over the period in Western Australia.

The idea of providing a business prospectus and a market for NRM services was an interesting one but implemented carte blanche resulted in unrestrained competition, oversubscription to competitive rounds by an order of magnitude and a breakdown in previously productive relationships. It also meant that regional expertise in terms of technical knowledge and knowledge of stakeholder capacity was not accessed and this affected the quality of investment decisions. It also precluded local community knowledge from being part of the investment decisions.

One of the key achievements of the CFoC was the additional investment in Indigenous Land and Sea Management Programs, particularly Working on Country. The number of Indigenous Land and Sea rangers increased across the country with research showing the multiple social and economic benefits this has had in communities, even including higher school attendance. The full benefits of these programs are yet to be realised.

The transition from stage 1 to stage 2 of the Caring for our Country Program was well managed with regional NRM bodies and other stakeholders being actively engaged in the design of the new program. The Stage 2 program re-emphasised the importance of community, skills, knowledge and engagement, an element that had been lacking initially in Stage 1. The WA regions were able to continue programs and projects commenced in Stage 1 as regional funding was maintained.

At the same time the Australian Government recognised the value of regional NRM plans in its NRM Planning for Climate Change initiative and provided additional funds for regional NRM plans to be updated to reflect potential climate change impacts on natural resources.

c. the outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for Our Country;

We note the Australian Government has reported annually on progress towards the Caring for our Country outcomes through the production of scorecards and that a substantial investment has been made by the Government and regional NRM bodies in developing monitoring and reporting plans that establish a program logic framework for identifying outputs.

While output measures are important they do not provide the full picture in relation to outcomes from achieving activities. Regional NRM Chairs have long called for a system of National Environmental Accounts to enable the long term monitoring of resource condition across Australia.

d. the implications of the 2014-15 Budget for land care programs, in particular, on contracts, scope, structure, outcomes of programs and long-term impact on natural resource management;

NRM WA accepts that the 2014 Federal budget has resulted in a substantial reduction in funding for NRM and landcare. The Government's National Landcare Program, rebadging the Caring for our Country program, reflects its election commitment to enhance the role of landcare and other volunteer community groups in the delivery of natural resource management outcomes. We are grateful that existing contracts with NRM regions are being honoured albeit with some variation, yet to be negotiated.

The reduced overall quantum of funding and the requirement that specifies that existing regional delivery funding be redirected presents challenges for regional NRM bodies in terms of renegotiating existing contracts. This coupled with an almost complete absence of State government support in 14-15 makes WA regions particularly vulnerable to any interruption of Australian Government funds, threatening continuity of delivery.

But we also recognise the overall directions being pursued reinforces the importance of regional NRM bodies planning and investment functions and our ability to tailor regional NRM programs to reflect the unique characteristics of regional communities and their different NRM challenges.

NRM WA would encourage the Australian Government to engage with its State counterparts and align investment through regional NRM bodies, maximising the benefits of both programs.

e. the Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs;

No comment

f. analysis of national, state and regional funding priorities for land care programs;

- By “land care” programs we assume the scope is land care in the broadest sense (that is all the natural resource management efforts) and not just community group support;
- In 2012 the National Working Group, with the assistance of the Australian Government undertook a desktop analysis of the priorities in all 56 regional NRM plans. That study found:
 - a. Regional plans identified pest plants and animals as a significant threat to biodiversity;
 - b. Regional plans (77%) identified aboriginal and cultural heritage assets as a critical asset;
 - c. The 10 main threats to sustainable NRM (in terms of the number of regional plans identifying those threats) were:
 - i. Feral animals (93%)
 - ii. Invasive weeds (89%)
 - iii. Climate change (88%)
 - iv. Soil degradation (77%)
 - v. Unsustainable agriculture (75%)
 - vi. Fire management (66%)
 - vii. Water pollution (64%)
 - viii. Unsustainable groundwater use (54%)
 - ix. Alteration of natural flows (50%)
 - x. Unsustainable riparian practices (48%)
- We accept that not all regional priorities identified through the community based regional NRM planning process are priorities for Australian government investment – one aim of the regional NRM planning process is to align the national, state and regional priorities.
- Much of the management activity in addressing threats focuses on building a solid knowledge base, engaging communities, landholders, and other stakeholders, making strategic investments, and building regional capacity.

g. how the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture have, and can, work together to deliver a seamless land care program;

As previously stated, regional NRM bodies supported the Joint Team approach where officers from the Departments of Environment and Agriculture were co-located, and funding and reporting processes were run as one. This facilitated efficient access to the Australian Government by having one point of entry for regional NRM bodies and ensured consistent advice on issues.

The approach was abandoned in 2012 and while the relationship built up between officers from the different departments has ensured consistency and on-going communication between those departments, regional bodies are concerned that this may diminish over time due to staff changes and reductions.

h. the role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and

As we have established in the Introduction to this submission the need for regional arrangements remains as strong today as they did when first established in the mid -1990s.

The regional scale allows for collective planning and delivery of programs to address landscape issues. Defining those regions takes account of the diverse social, economic and environmental conditions across the continent.

Regional NRM bodies deliver a range of services and common to all regional NRM bodies are two core functions:

- Engaging regional communities and land managers in natural resource management
- Preparing regional NRM plans to align investments made by governments and communities

Community Engagement

Building the capacity of farmers and other land managers to sustainably manage their natural resources requires a range of strategies and programs, i.e. awareness raising, extension, support for volunteer group work, design and implementation of new farming systems, incentives for practice change etc. The optimum mix of these programs to respond to regions' NRM challenges and diverse communities are determined through the development of the NRM plan.

NRM WA has recently undertaken a social network analysis project to map the groups and networks engaged by regional NRM bodies in WA. The results show that our networks include environment and community groups and also grower groups, catchment groups, local government, industry bodies and many more. In Western Australia there is no differentiation of group types and groups and organisations best placed to deliver the regional strategy outcomes are supported and partnered.

Table 1. Number of groups in each category and average strength of relationship.

Type of group	Number of groups in category	Percentage of total groups	Average relationship strength	Number of groups with multiple connections
Environment group*	208	26%	3.5	5
Local govt	121	15%	3.4	17
Community group	84	10%	2.8	3
Industry group (agric)	51	6%	3.3	6
WA govt	49	6%	3.3	18
Catchment group	43	5%	4.1	2
Schools	39	5%	2.7	
R&D institutes	28	3%	3.7	5
Indigenous group	27	3%	3.1	
LCDC	27	3%	3.0	4
NGO	25	3%	3.4	8
Indigenous organisation	21	3%	2.7	2
Consultants	20	2%	3.1	1
CRCs	18	2%	3.0	
Grower group	15	2%	3.1	1
Reference groups	13	2%	3.0	
Mining company	8	1%	3.0	
NRM Body	7	1%	5.0 ¹	7
Pastoral Station	7	1%	3.4	
Training institutes	2	0%	2.0	
Grand Total	813	100%	3.3	72

* includes 74 "Friends of" groups, 17 Coastcare groups and 10 Landcare groups

Table from WA Natural Resource Networks (Draft Report) Roberts Evaluation 2014

While investing in building community capacity remains a central goal for regional NRM bodies we are aware that we need to better understand the outcomes from our capacity building efforts. The NRM Regions Australia Group is working to develop methods and report on the outcomes of capacity building efforts across Australia.

NRM Planning

In 2014 the National NRM Chairs Forum received a report *Regional NRM Planning in Australia* that described the basic characteristics of regional NRM plans and how they relate to other planning activities. The report identified three core characteristics, or underpinning objectives, that are

widely shared by NRM plans across the nation, whether specified by State or Territory governments, or defined by community-based NRM organisations:

- With the underpinning aim of sustaining the natural resource base for future generations, the plans take a long view into the future. They recognise that landscape change can be slow, but that clear guidance is needed on the priority actions that need to be taken now. The plans therefore also spell out intermediate objectives and clear pathways from the present to the future.
- The plans are highly integrative. They involve all land uses and their socio-economic values across their regional landscapes, and they take into account the ecological interactions that influence natural resource outcome. In this way the plans are distinguished from, but complementary to, those that deal with single industries, single issues or single natural resources.
- The plans are built with broad stakeholder and community involvement so that they reflect local knowledge and aspirations, gain local credibility, commit local organisations to a role in implementation and empower local communities to be involved. The broad directions for each plan come from relevant overarching plans and strategies at higher scales so that the result is an alignment of interests and opportunities across multiple scales.

Challenges identified for our regional NRM Planning effort include:

- Developing frameworks for better achieving integration of NRM components in plans – shifting the focus from planning on the basis of biodiversity, land and water assets to an ecosystem basis where dynamics and functions are better incorporated.
- Incorporating carbon mitigation actions and adaptation to climate change into plans.
- Growing the capacity (human and social skills, and knowledge management) to deliver a high standard of planning.
- Reducing duplication of effort across regional NRM planning and other natural resource and land planning activities. There are some 54 regional NRM plans, 55 Regional Development Plans, 59 State-based Regional Development Strategies and 564 local council plans with varying degrees of overlap, as well as other government plans and agreements, like offsets policies, that impact on NRM outcomes.
- Building community engagement skills, including Indigenous engagement, and beginning the move from community engagement to community decisions about trade-offs.
- Better closing of the adaptive management loop that is making better use of existing knowledge, and designing monitoring programs to better support planning decisions.

Regional Environmental Accounts

NRM Chairs believe that reporting on the outcomes from the investment remains a challenge. Chairs have advocated for a national reporting system that can report on outcomes rather than or in addition to our outputs and at their 2010 Forum they decided to partner with the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists to pilot a system of regional environmental accounts. We have been conducting a continental scale trial to test the practical application of a science-based *Accounting for Nature* model for measuring the condition of our environmental assets over time, at all scales at which decisions are being made.

These trials have been assisted by scientists, economists and statisticians from the private sector, Commonwealth and state agencies, universities, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Bureau of Meteorology, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, the Ian Potter Foundation, and CSIRO.

The Accounting for Nature model creates a common (non-monetary) environmental currency that allows us to compare the relative condition of one environmental asset with another, and aggregate information at different scales and for different assets.

This concept of a common environmental currency represents a transformative shift in the business of environmental management, because it simplifies the complexity of natural systems using the rigour of scientific measurement. In our pilot we have adopted a common unit of measure, the common currency, called an Econd. It allows every environmental asset, at any scale, to be described relative to its undegraded “reference” condition, as an index between 0 and 100.

It does not imply a monetary value, nor does it describe a desired state: it creates the accounting framework to enable existing and new data to be aggregated to construct environmental accounts at multiple scales: property, local, sub-catchment, regional, state and national.

Supporting Landcare and other volunteer groups

Community volunteer groups are essential to regional NRM. These groups have different names depending on where they are located – Landcare, Indigenous Land and Sea Management groups, coast care groups, friends of groups, agriculture production groups, single issue groups, etc.. (see table in community engagement section above for group types and numbers). However, they all contribute to sustainable management of natural resources.

In 2012 the National NRM Chairs Forum developed a Statement of Common purpose with the National Landcare Network that outlines a process for how Landcare organisations and groups from the national level to the regional level can work together. In WA there was no State Landcare Network until recently (June 14) when a fledgling group was formed and Federal funding became available for this purpose.

Longer-term funding for regional NRM bodies

Regional NRM bodies welcomed the move towards five year funding under the second phase of the Caring for our Country program and the current commitment for 3 year regional delivery funding under the National Landcare Program. To build the partnerships and regional capacity necessary to plan and delivery sustainable natural resource management programs takes time.

We note and reject the recent Commission of Audit proposition that “National Landcare Program funding should be halved and better aligned to the goals of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999”. The Commission of Audit proposition is based on its view that the program provides funding for activities that deliver substantial private benefits and there is overlap between Commonwealth and State responsibilities and activity.

Through regional NRM bodies the Program uses sophisticated processes to identify cost sharing based on public benefit of those works. Various reviews illustrate that farmers spend \$3 to \$5 for every \$1 invested by government in adopting best practice and this reflects the split between public and private benefits arising from those activities.

The regional NRM approach is also specifically designed to address potential overlap issues between Australian Government and State/Territory Government activities by using regional NRM bodies and their NRM plans to align Commonwealth and State/Territory investments. The NRM plans, do as the

Audit suggests and direct funding to “activities with the greatest environmental externalities that do not provide sufficient private benefits for landholders to fund themselves”.

It has been our experience that many landholders do not take steps that provide environmental protection and increase biodiversity without the incentive of a grant or the technical and other support provided by project officers funded through the Program. Longer term funding arrangements also makes it easier to attract and retain staff in regional areas, retaining expertise, capacity and knowledge of the community.

i. any other related matters.

Australia’s regional NRM approach has been part of our national natural resource management effort for over 15 years and has enjoyed the support of all political parties. It has, and continues to, evolve in response to shifts in policy emphasis, new knowledge and our learning from experience with its implementation. We see a focus over the next three years on:

- Continual improvement of regional NRM governance. In 2011 Chairs agreed to national Performance Excellence Project where over 85% of regional bodies undertook a formal performance excellence evaluation. Regional bodies will be undertaking follow-up reviews to assess progress with improvements in governance;
- Learning from each other through development of leading practice examples of how we do our business. Indigenous engagement in Land and Sea Management and regional NRM bodies’ delivery of sustainable agriculture services have been given priority by NRM Regions Australia;
- Continuing to receive strong community support for NRM initiatives that assist all Australians in valuing their landscape and the extensive linkages it provides – not just in providing sustainable biodiversity & ecosystem outcomes (and subsequently sustaining the recreation and tourism economies), but also in further enabling the agri-business economy (export and domestic), continuing to provide health outcomes (both mental and physical) for all Australians through sustaining natural environments.

NRM Funding Summary
Western Australia
expenditure as at 18 November 2013

	2001-02 actual \$	2002-03 actual \$	2003-04 actual \$	2004-05 actual \$	2005-06 actual \$	2006-07 actual \$	2007-08 actual \$	2008-09 actual \$	2009-10 actual \$	2010-11 actual \$	2011-12 actual \$	2012-13 actual \$	2013-14 actual \$	2014-15 budget \$	2015-16 budget \$	2016-17 budget \$	2017-18 budget \$	Total \$
State NRM Program phase 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2,500,000	17,446,312	14,335,042	7,548,452	10,804,462	11,739,736	7,253,141	0	0	0	71,627,145
State NRM Program phase 2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8,000,000	8,000,000	8,000,000	24,000,000
NAP (State)	142,383	1,151,640	2,356,022	5,615,065	35,170,041	37,292,550	40,510,849	8,895,114	1,065,943	0	0	0	3,836,733	0	0	0	0	136,036,340
NAP (Cwlth)	0	0	3,545,776	6,237,208	36,122,699	34,218,848	41,508,814	9,398,204	1,662,389	10,000,000	0	0	-11,163,266	0	0	0	0	131,530,672
NAP interest	0	0	0	5,980	21,351	97,540	291,755	3,494,166	139,778	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4,050,570
NHT2 (regional component)	0	8,322,385	10,946,515	16,196,319	21,879,038	22,052,488	20,875,343	8,181,611	193,374	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	108,647,073
NHT2 (national component)	0	876,438	1,945,072	2,586,253	708,283	1,370,475	2,547,981	714,346	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10,748,848
NHT2 interest	0	0	8,231	84,565	84,104	0	1,140,350	1,949,595	463,653	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,730,498
NLP	0	0	711,757	4,224,265	3,230,397	3,527,653	4,853,914	186,089	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16,734,075
NLP interest	0	0	0	0	0	370,000	45,880	289,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	704,880
CfoC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	29,420,000	25,113,500	25,232,306	28,779,740	30,825,197	0	0	0	0	0	139,370,743
CfoC2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23,248,469	23,248,469	18,598,776	18,598,776	18,598,776	102,293,266
Total	142,383	10,350,463	19,513,373	34,949,655	97,215,913	98,929,554	111,774,886	65,028,124	46,084,949	49,567,348	36,328,192	41,629,659	27,661,672	30,501,610	26,598,776	26,598,776	26,598,776	749,474,109