



## **Submission to SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS INQUIRY INTO THE NATIONAL LANDCARE PROGRAM**

South Coast Natural Resource Management Inc. (South Coast NRM) submits the following comments to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications inquiry into the National Landcare Program based on the terms of reference of the committee.

### **The history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program, including:**

#### **a. the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust:**

As a regional NRM organisation, South Coast NRM was heavily involved in the implementation of the National Heritage Trust programs. We consider that:

- NHT had significant amounts of funding attached to it and therefore produced high levels of on ground works with significant engagement of regional and local community group;
- the link to regional priorities allowed for “ownership” of projects selected by local community which contributed to strong community engagement in the projects; and
- NHT allowed for an appropriate allocation of resources to foundational research, strategic planning, community consultation and capacity building projects to ensure that well planned and considered projects were delivered.

#### **b. the establishment and performance of the Caring for our Country (CfoC) program:**

Again as a regional NRM organisation, South Coast NRM was heavily involved in the implementation of the National Heritage Trust programs. We consider that:

- use of the business plan process encouraged more strategic use of investment to maximise landcare-NRM outcomes;
- strong links to national and international priorities (EPBC listed species, WONS etc) ensured obligations under associated Act's and international obligations were strong factors in the selection and investment in projects;
- significantly reduced funding from those available in NHT resulted in less on ground delivery and some competition and therefore tension between different landcare-NRM groups;
- increased complexity of application and reporting processes resulted in more expenditure on administration and MERI resulting in less money for

on ground implementation, but also resulted in projects being funded on a more strategic basis;

- the initial implementation of CfoC resulted in significant competition within and between regions resulting in damaged relationships between groups that has taken two to three years to overcome and for relationships to be rebuilt;
- national priorities used to direct investment were not always well aligned to local aspirations and needs. This could have been addressed by more consultation with local communities and Regional NRM groups to ensure projects were aligned to Regional Plans and using the most up to date data;
- CfoC underwent significant improvement throughout its implementation including simplification of the MERI process, implementation of on line applications and six-month rather than quarterly reporting; and
- reporting timelines were uncoordinated between different funding streams (RBLF, competitive, Biodiversity fund, climate change etc.) which elongated the duration and complexity of reporting during the course of a calendar year.

**c. the outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for our Country:**

- Through targeting investment at a strategic level projects funded through CfoC have produced significant outcomes in the South Coast region. These included:
  - the investment involved almost 250 projects, around 50 major partners and over 7000 farmers, volunteers and community members;
  - allowed our partners to complete over 1000 ha of revegetation;
  - engaged over 200 landholders to deliver around 1 million hectares of control, removing over 5000 foxes, cats and rabbits, and reducing wild dog related attacks on livestock by 90%;
  - protected 600,000 ha of land, including 4600 ha of RAMSAR wetlands by destroying 1,218 pigs in the Lake Muir/Walpole Wilderness area;
  - completed weed control with over 3800 ha treated for gorse, bridal creeper, African boxthorn and blackberry in particular;
  - working with the community to restore and protect places of cultural heritage significance; and
  - Implemented over 100 projects that increased community knowledge, skills and participation in natural resource management.
- The nature of the funding has encouraged the establishment of strong working relationships between South Coast NRM and a large number of community based landcare-NRM groups, NGO and government organisations.
- CfoC funding has been successful in leveraging significant amounts of other funding into landcare-NRM projects in the South Coast NRM region (eg private funding via BHA etc, funding from Local Government, direct investment by private landowners etc.).

- It is expected that as long as the design of future programs allows for flexibility to take into account the differing needs of unique regions and the need for a level of professional support and coordination for small community landcare-NRM groups that the strong relationships will be retained and positive outcomes enhanced.

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

South Coast NRM believes that the of the implications of the 2014-15 budget will include:

- the significant reduction of funding for landcare-NRM programs will result in major reductions in the number of professional landcare-NRM officers in the South Coast NRM region who can provide support and advice to the motivated volunteers;
- volunteers are motivated to carry out on ground works etc but historically have not been skilled in (or interested in) the high levels of “paper work” associated with applying for and reporting on funding. Professional staff from regional groups also provide important assistance to ensure appropriate financial management systems and governance are in place;
- volunteer “burnout” in all industries (sport, community service, landcare etc) in regional and remote areas are a significant risk especially where the volunteers do not have the support and guidance of professional employed staff. This is a major risk for landcare-NRM going forward; and
- similarly with professional staff, the reduction and short term nature of the funding will continue to see many landcare-NRM professionals employed on short term and part time contracts making the recruiting and retention of these valuable staff difficult. The high turnover of staff in the industry will continue to contribute to the ongoing loss of corporate and specialist landcare-NRM knowledge resulting in less effective on ground delivery of projects.

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

South Coast NRM is supportive of the rationale to move towards simple, local and long-term landcare-NRM programs. We believe that allowing local input into design of projects that address local priorities will assist in engaging local communities.

However, it is important that local volunteer community groups are supported by professional landcare-NRM staff who can provide assistance/support with funding applications, reporting and project implementation as well as providing advice and training to volunteers. Similarly, professional landcare-NRM staff employed by small community organisations and operating in restricted geographic areas (single catchment or local government) need to be supported by a regional organisation that can assist in planning, coordinating and implementing larger strategic landscape scale landcare-NRM projects and assist with training, applications for funding and reporting.

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

South Coast NRM is supportive of the proposal to include regional priorities in the assessment of future investment. This will ensure issues of regional importance are addressed and also help to develop a sense of ownership and therefore commitment by the local communities who, in the South Coast region, have been heavily involved in the development of the Regional NRM Strategy.

South Coast NRM considers national and international obligations and priorities should continue to be considered for funding investment to ensure the projects are of a strategic nature. It is important we don't implement a process where funding is allocated on a geographic basis resulting in investment into projects that have no strategic or long term value from a landcare-NRM outcomes perspective.

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

South Coast NRM has a good working relationship with, and receives positive support, from both the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture staff.

- With limited funding available it is critical that this continues to ensure the amount of funds expended on administration and reporting including consulting with the two departments by all of the landcare-NRM community groups (including NRM Regional Groups) is minimised.
- Maximising the consistency between the application and reporting processes for both Departments is critical to minimise the time and resources expended on these processes.
- It is important that wherever possible, both sustainable agriculture and environmental outcomes are considered for both streams of funding. Many projects have significant overlap in providing both.

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

South Coast NRM considers that in WA, where regional NRM bodies are non-statutory community based Not for Profit organisations, they have and will into the future, provide a high level of support to community based landcare-NRM groups being an important part of a well-coordinated and effective landcare-NRM industry.

- WA regional NRM bodies play a critical role in:
  - providing professional support and advice to community landcare-NRM groups largely made up of volunteers;
  - provide critical assistance to community landcare-NRM groups with the "paper work" burden associated with applying for and reporting on funding which has previously resulted in volunteer burnout and the collapse of small community groups made up exclusively of volunteers;

- play an important coordinating and information exchange role between the numerous community landcare-NRM groups to identify where efficiencies can be found by groups working together on projects etc;
- coordinating the development and implementation of the Regional NRM Strategy which provides guidance on the regional priorities for investment;
- coordinating and implementing large strategic landscape scale landcare-NRM projects that cross the geographic boundaries of the community landcare-NRM groups;
- coordinating regional responses and input into government policy etc relating to landcare-NRM; and
- lobbying on behalf of the regional community landcare-NRM groups in relation to issues that affect their ability to implement sustainable agriculture or environment projects.

South Coast NRM considers that WA currently has a landcare-NRM structure that allows for the successful implementation of projects from cross regional landscape scale projects of a major strategic nature down to small targeted projects at a very localised scale. To ensure the ongoing success of landcare-NRM in WA, it is important we maintain a structure that includes paid professional staff in both regional and community organisations who can support the many motivated volunteers.

**i. any other related matters:**

South Coast NRM considers there a number of other issues which should be considered in the review of past programs as well as during the design and implementation of the new National Landcare Program.

- Short term funding of landcare-NRM projects continues to be an issue in the planning and implementing strategic long term projects as well as to attracting and retaining quality professional landcare-NRM staff in the industry.
- Measuring the outcomes of many landcare-NRM projects often takes 10 years plus. Therefore funding that is only provided for one to three years without a commitment to ongoing monitoring makes it very difficult to demonstrate the strong outcomes achieved during many projects.
- A mix of professional paid landcare-NRM practitioners and motivated community volunteers is critical to the ongoing success of landcare-NRM in Western Australia.
- The use of Green Army teams on landcare-NRM projects can have positive outcomes but we need to be conscious of the need to continue to support our community based volunteers who have been committed to ongoing landcare-NRM projects for often up to 20 years. We need to be careful that resources normally allocated to community groups are not redirected to the Green Army projects resulting in a disengagement of valuable volunteers.