

Submission to Senate Inquiry on

The history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program

by Dr Jill Wilson, Chair, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC), WA

Preamble

Another, detailed submission has been made on behalf of all the Regional NRM Groups in Western Australia ("WA NRM").

This is a brief submission on behalf of the NACC Board to highlight what we think are the key points in relation to each of the terms of reference

Response to terms of reference

a. the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust

The Natural Heritage Trust generated significant and very beneficial activity in the NRM sphere leading to some very positive outcomes, not only in relation to improvements in the natural resource itself, but also with regard to some structural issues around delivery of NRM across Australia. In WA there were several very positive aspects of the implementation of the NHT which have subsequently been lost or diminished (and which we would welcome a return to):

- NHT involved bi-lateral agreements between the state and federal governments which provided increased funding, delivery synergisms, and cooperative approaches;
- NHT involved development of regional strategic plans with resource and management targets which were useful for both developing regional and local priorities and also for providing a framework for measuring improvements. This process included the whole community and recognised the knowledge and commitment at the local level. Regional autonomy in the delivery of projects generated considerable "buy-in" and improved outcomes;
- Under NHT the regional system of delivery through the NRM Regional Groups was developed and very successfully implemented. In WA these Regional Groups were all developed (and now continue) as community not-for-profit bodies such that the linkage between regional and local activities has remained strong;
- In WA, Regional NRM groups have developed into very strong organisations with excellent governance and accountability systems in place. They are well placed to deliver a broad range of programs at the regional level into the future.

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

While funding under CfoC has been welcome, a few negative aspects are:

- CfoC largely ignored the regional plans developed under NHT and imposed its own priorities which have often been illogical at the regional and local level. Because of this, considerable autonomy has been lost at this level and we have been frustrated by not being able to develop activities around our own priorities;
- The bi-lateral aspects of NHT were lost; this has in WA had the unfortunate consequence of reduced state funding for NRM, particularly for community-driven activities;
- Reporting mechanisms for regional groups have become very onerous and use up an unacceptable proportion of the funds. While we acknowledge the importance of accountability, and the usefulness of measuring outcomes, we would welcome greater simplicity with regard to reporting.

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

Despite some of the difficulties and frustrations under CfoC, the outcomes have been excellent, and the various programs and projects will continue to deliver good results. The detail of this is covered extensively in other submissions, including that from NRM WA.

One issue which concerns us is the uncertainty around some programs that only received short-term funding at the beginning of the latest CfoC. An example is NACC's Coastal Program which received only one-years funding initially, recently extended to December 2014. This is one of our most successful programs, with outcomes to date being outstanding, and we are very anxious that it is continued into the future.

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

We welcome continued investment in NRM, though reduced funding is disappointing. However, we recognise the current budget constraints.

We are pleased to note the intention to engage current Regional NRM Groups in regional delivery. This is very wise as it will provide the most efficient and effective system.

We are however concerned that the transition to the new program is as seamless and as efficient as possible. Current contracts must be honoured, with any adjustments made in a collaborative manner. There must be considerable regard for the local knowledge, technical and management ability, and commitment, of the Regional Groups.

Long-term impacts of NRM will be greatest where there is local buy-in and local input into strategic direction. This will encourage greater community input and create synergies for the program. Regional not-for-profit groups such as NACC are well placed to continue building on our excellent community relationships into the future and to assist the government to deliver great long term outcomes.

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

We are not yet fully conversant with the policy rationale, although issues are gradually becoming clearer; after this inquiry, and contract negotiations, we expect to reach a greater understanding.

We understand there will be a 70:30 split between the environment and agriculture in the new programme. We are not sure on the reason for this, but welcome the fact that both areas are covered.

We are particularly pleased with the concept that actions will be **simple, local, and long term**. We welcome all three aspects of this framework. We are also pleased that it is intended that Regional NRM groups will be pivotal to delivery of the regional stream of the programme.

We are also pleased that the value of partnerships are recognised throughout the programme as we believe this approach will deliver the best outcomes.

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

There are many different methods of establishing priorities and many existing lists based on the value of assets and / or the analysis of threats. National, state and regional plans have all established different priorities. However, we would caution against aggregating issues up into a few national priorities, as they may then become meaningless at the local level and there is a risk of useful outcomes being lost. We would also caution against all local issues having to be recognised in an national or state process as this can cause unnecessary complexity and also lose many important priorities from the program. (For example, having to have assets recognised by the ECPB Act has in the past disallowed some valuable projects).

In order to achieve maximum commitment at the regional and local level it is important that funding aligns with, or complements, regional priorities.

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

Different collaborative approaches have been tried over the years with various levels of success. It has been most confusing and inefficient when the two departments have worked separately.

A team approach or a “one stop shop” would be most beneficial at the regional and local level.

Of critical importance are the individual relationships developed between Regional NRM groups and their designated liaison officer. It is important that these officers have knowledge, authority, and a collaborative approach. Moreover it is important that continuity is maintained in these relationships.

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

Regional NRM organisations have had a range of structural roles over the years. These have included:

- Direct delivery of projects using our very talented and committed staff
- Collaborative delivery of projects with a wide variety of partners including the community groups, universities, local government, the CSIRO, conservation organisations, industry organisations, and state government departments
- Management of devolved grants to farmers, community groups, and individuals
- Oversight and management of projects delivered by other groups, organisations and agencies
- Sponsorship for other organisations, particularly smaller community groups
- Collaborative development, with input from many stakeholders, of a regional strategic NRM plan (which still has considerable relevance, and has recently been updated to align with climate change priorities)

Regional NRM organisations have several key attributes which make us valuable contributors:

- Strong governance and accountability systems
- Robust, established, and efficient monitoring and reporting systems
- Experienced, talented and committed staff
- Excellent local knowledge of both technical issues and community dynamics
- Good ongoing relationships with local landcare and coastcare groups, local government, and individual local community members, and a commitment to maintaining the networks.

i. any other related matters.

No other comments, though we are happy to provide more information if it would be useful and are available for consultation.

Submission prepared by

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This submission is authorised to be on their behalf by the Board of the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council.