



**SUBMISSION to the Senate Inquiry
into the history, effectiveness, performance and future
of the National Landcare Program**

8th August 2014

The Victorian Landcare Council (VLC) was established in 2008 to represent the interests of volunteer landcare in Victoria. In 2011 the organisation representing landcare professionals voted to merge with the VLC.

The Council is governed by delegates elected from each of Victoria's 10 NRM regions.. Council meets at least three times a year, with the day to day activities being overseen by an elected Committee of Management of 12, meeting bimonthly. VLC is a member of the National Landcare Network.

This submission has been authorised by the Committee of Management of the Victorian Landcare Council. The submission is NOT confidential

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The Victorian Landcare Council is an advocate for community Landcare in Victoria. Community landcare means the grassroots individuals and groups that embrace the ethic of caring for their local environment - in Victoria, this equates to more than 780 Landcare groups, 67 Landcare networks, and numerous Friends and community environmental groups.

In this submission we respond to aspects of four of the Inquiry's terms of reference:

- 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;
- the Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs;
- the role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and,
- one related matter – the measurement of NRM outcomes.

In summary, our observations are these:

1. The policy shift to targeted investment has undermined community Landcare support for local level action in natural resource management (NRM), and threatens the social infrastructure of groups and social networks in which people learn and organise action to improve the environment. A modest Australian Government investment in community Landcare would secure this social infrastructure, and work hand-in-hand with other investment targeted at priority landscapes.
2. NRM decision making by regional NRM bodies needs to draw on the local knowledge of Landcare groups and networks. There is an opportunity for national leadership in facilitating rapid learning around the design of programs for landscape health, bringing together technical and local knowledge and private landholder and public investment in landscapes. This will improve the return on investment in NRM through programs that better influence landholder behaviour and leverage public investment.
3. To underpin such decision making, we urgently need to develop a set of environmental accounts that will meet the needs of government decision makers, land managers and the wider Australian community. Those accounts will inform choices about effective programs, and allow the NRM sector to make the case for public investment in the environment.

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

Community Landcare delivers change to landscapes in a proven cost effective way. How this is achieved, and the extent of its impact, have been well documented, and we refer the Inquiry in particular to Professor Allan Curtis's review *Reflecting on the Landcare experience*, Bureau of Rural Sciences, September 2003, and *Achieving NRM outcomes through voluntary action: lessons from landcare*, by Allan Curtis, David Lucas, Mike Nurse and Max Skeen, Charles Sturt University and Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2008. Landcare major impacts are:

- Participation in Landcare groups increases *awareness* of environmental degradation, and knowledge of land and water degradation processes and sustainable practices;
- Participation increases *adoption* of recommended land management practices, participation in training and farm planning, and implementation of on-ground works to ameliorate land degradation;
- 95 per cent of Landcare group members and 71 per cent of non-members report that their properties have benefited from their participation in Landcare activities;
- In districts with a Landcare group, landholders have higher levels of adoption of sustainable farming practices than those without a Landcare group.
- Government funding for landholders' on-ground projects generates five times that investment by landholders themselves.

The significant reduction of the total 2014-15 NRM budget, the direction of that expenditure to priority landscapes, through NRM regional bodies, the loss of direct funding for Landcare projects and the continued loss of funding for Landcare facilitators, all threaten the momentum of change initiated by community Landcare groups and networks.

The recent announcement (6th August 2014) of \$5m direct funding for Landcare projects, and the direction to regional NRM bodies that at least 20 per cent of their Australian Government funding must go to Landcare and other local projects are welcome. However, the larger issues of failure to integrate community Landcare activity with government NRM funding, planning, and implementation remain. These are policy issues, and we want to support Inquiry members in getting a firm grasp of these issues, so they can recommend action to put Landcare back at the centre of land management.

To set the scene, we take you out the back door and across the paddock, to several of many sites where Landcare members and their groups have been at work.

Neerim & District Landcare

Before



After



The erosion area above a wet, glyceria infested spring has certainly been better protected from grazing stock with the addition of a new fence, ongoing weed control and planting 2000 indigenous plants on the site (not to mention the one-to-one advice the new landholder receives from having specialists in the field tailor the site specific works to his needs!)

Geelong Landcare Network

Before



After



In total we have fenced off and revegetated around 20 ha of non arable land since 1998. Planting and replanting perhaps 13,000 native trees and shrubs. To this day we are still replanting where wallabies and kangaroos insist on destroying "what will eventually be a better environment for them". We still have an annual program of clambering all over the area to control feral animals and weed.

Most of the work we funded ourselves with some help for off stream watering from the CMA.

Barrabool Hills Landcare

Before



After



Landcare planting in the Barrabool Hills. Mostly funded by landowner, but extended with landcare funding to increase the outcomes. Before and after, the first was taken in spring 2010, the second on Friday. This is the top of the Merrawarp Creek, which flows into the Barwon..... part of our focus in the Barrabool Hills to improve habitat and water quality in the Barwon. This was once part of a degraded sandstone quarry. Approx 10 ha.

Kilmany-Pearsondale Landcare



Our first project was to establish 7,000 trees along the Central Gippsland Number 3 drain (CG3) at Kilmany and involved negotiating with adjoining landholders, fencing off relevant sections, carrying out significant earthworks to level the clay banks in preparation for revegetation, many days of planting and follow up maintenance.

Before



After



The project was deemed a great success with the trees planted in 3 stages over an 18 month period. In addition to working bees that involved many local members volunteering their time, we had assistance from students at Sale College, Wurruk Primary School and Gippsland Grammar Junior School. Twelve years on, this plantation has greatly improved the appearance of the Kilmany landscape as well as providing shelter for animals, a habitat for many birds and assisting in reducing runoff of fertilisers into the drain and ultimately, the Gippsland Lakes.

Upper Keiwa Landcare

Before



After



In 2011 the Upper Kiewa Landcare Group received a request from a community member asking if they could do something about restoring a once loved streamside reserve that was over-run by blackberries after the 2003 fires. The task was enormous requiring a bulldozer to create access, but over the past three years much of the blackberry has been controlled and an 800 metre streamside walking path constructed.

The project has garnered considerable investment from many groups - the local council, Parks Victoria, Department of Environment and Primary Industries, an electricity provider and the local Catchment Management Authority. It is estimated that a Landcare grant of just over \$3000 has seen over \$80,000 of value-adding works from project partners.

Over 1000 voluntary hours have been given with a substantial contribution by prisoners from the Beechworth Correctional Centre, school students and the broader community. Fishermen can now access the river and the streamside walking path is proving popular with locals and tourists. Without Landcare (and a small amount of funding to get started) - the area would continue to be a weed infested mess.

Landscape Transformation, one working bee at a time!



How did the Upper Kiewa Landcare Group transform a 500m section of the East Kiewa River from an inaccessible, blackberry-infested mess, into a joyful chorus of bush and mountain river? One working bee at a time, for three years, with community muscle and financial support from the Alpine Shire, AGL, ParksVic, and State Landcare funding. Take community Landcare out of the picture, and how much of this would happen?

The Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs

What community is community Landcare? Community Landcare is about local people taking action to care for their local environment. The ethic of landcare is taken up by farmers in the way they manage their land, and government runs various support programs for Landcare. But the root of community landcare essentially is the volunteers who decide to work together in their local environment on the issues they see as important.

We note the current Coalition policy commitment to putting Landcare back at the centre of NRM, and recent funding for Landcare, and look forward to what this will mean for decision making in NRM at Australian Government and regional NRM levels. However, we invite the Inquiry to consider the historical record of Commonwealth policy in relation to community Landcare, a history with which many older Landcare members are well acquainted.

There has been a sustained shift away from a policy of community participation, where action to improve Australian landscapes was supported across the continent, to a policy of targeted investment, which limits funding to the small number of landscapes deemed to be of national significance. This shift has had the effect not just of reducing the momentum of improvement across Australia's landscapes, but also of marginalising the contribution of community Landcare to NRM decision making. To understand this shift, it is necessary to go back some decades.

Before Landcare. Landcare's predecessors in Victoria are the volunteer-based farm tree movement, the committees of management of small parcels of public land, and programs of the Soil Conservation Authority that began using local Land Protection Groups to plan erosion control works. By the 1970s, the cumulative effects of large-scale vegetation clearing, grazing and cropping practices, river regulation and irrigation were appearing. Dryland and irrigation salinity, declining water quality, and loss of habitats began to get attention alongside soil erosion. These were seen as threats to agricultural productivity, so State Agriculture departments got involved.

Some field staff of agriculture agencies began challenging the idea that their role was to pump farmers full of technical information. They started using community groups to assess problems in farming landscapes and plan action.

The creation of Landcare. In Victoria, a change of government in 1982 led to amalgamation of several departments, agencies and boards into a Department of Conservation Forests and Lands (CFL). Within this agency, a Land Protection Service (LPS) brought together the Soil Conservation Authority, the Vermin and Noxious Weeds Destruction Board, and the farm forestry section of the Forests Commission. This multi-disciplinary environment broke attachment to old agency loyalties and encouraged partnerships with landholders. The Land Care Program (as it was first called) was conceived within the LPS as a way to integrate agency services and focus them through community-managed groups and projects:

"(Land Care) will be group driven, that is, its management will be by local groups who will cooperate towards a defined (Land Care) objective.The purpose of groups is to focus, and give practical, local expression to local needs, enthusiasms, initiatives and to integrate local and Government strategies, plans and resources to that end." (Poussard in Youl, 2006: 114, citing internal CFL submission)

The new program won support from an alliance between Heather Mitchell, President of the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF), and Joan Kirner, Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands (Campbell, 1994). The launch of the first Land Care group at Winjallock near St Arnaud was held beside a lone

Casuarina stricta tree on a degraded grazing block being restored by the local VFF branch and the landholder.

1986-1995 Community participation in NRM. At the national level, a surprising alliance between the National Farmers Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation produced a blueprint for a national policy of rural environmental management centred on local Landcare groups. In 1989, Prime Minister Hawke backed that plan, and announced a commitment of \$360m for a Decade of Landcare.

The subsequent 1989 National Landcare Program (NLP) had relatively open guidelines, allowing a variety of models of local group organisation to develop). NLP funding supported local group coordination and administration, property and catchment planning and demonstration projects, but excluded direct funding for new works or practices, on the expectation that farmers should invest their own money in putting into practice the changes they learned through their local Landcare group. The thinking behind funding for Landcare was that groups would support farmers in getting a better understanding of what was happening on their properties and shift their attitudes concerning land degradation. As a consequence, they would change their land management practices—control erosion, fence and plant out waterways, stop clearing of native vegetation and so on.

Landcare was wildly successful as a way of mobilising local action. By 1990, 50 Landcare groups had been registered in Victoria; by 1991 there were over 300 groups and more than forty community-based facilitators. By 1995, in rural areas with Landcare groups, there was a Landcare member in almost 50% of households.

Landcare also went *deeper* than expected. Researchers found that attitudes were not at issue. Most farmers wanted to look after their land. What they needed was a way to learn how to do that. Landcare groups fostered a process of group learning that generated new norms of landholder practice and supported learning between peers. Landcare groups then functioned as repositories of local knowledge on good practice, handing on that knowledge to and mentoring new people settling in their local area.

1995-2002 Integrated Catchment Management. Encouraged by the success of Landcare, government NRM managers began to consider whether the cooperation and planning of action that worked well at local level could be reproduced for whole catchments. A second motivation for what came to be called Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) was the need to integrate the activity now happening across private and public sectors and focus it on priorities within a catchment. Local Landcare groups changed practices, but it was difficult to notice improvements in resource condition at landscape level. The time required to fix land degradation was starting to sink in—integration of effort was needed.

A third driver behind ICM was that there were now many specialists working on conservation and land management—"ICM" was a way of nailing their colours to the mast to define a new field of work. The 1992 Intergovernmental Agreement laid the foundation for a more cooperative approach to environmental protection and natural resource management between levels of government, and the 1997 Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), with a \$1.25 billion budget over five years, put a massive shot of funding direct to projects chosen by Regional Assessment Panels of community members and agency staff. The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act strengthened federal government powers and stimulated federal involvement in biodiversity protection.

Beginning in 1995, Landcare Networks began to form, on the initiative of community leaders, who saw the advantages of larger scale in Landcare organisation. There were advantages to local groups in more efficient project administration and increased credibility of funding bids. Networks took learning from projects and made this available across member groups. "Capacity building" at local level become a funded outcome.

2002-2014. Targeted investment. The economic, social and environmental costs of land and water degradation, particularly salinity and loss of biodiversity, were shown to be much higher than previously estimated, and progress in reversing degradation slower than anticipated. There was a gradual realisation that problems were systemic and had to be tackled with integrated strategies developed at regional level, where whole catchments could be considered and local and government activities connected.

The voluntary evolution toward ICM was set aside for the requirement for regional scale governance. The National Action Plan of 2001 offered joint State-Commonwealth funding of priorities set by a catchment scale strategic plan. Victoria had established Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) in 1998; targeted investment and bilateral funding meant CMAs grew rapidly, as they developed regional strategic plans for each biophysical asset, and began to design and implement projects.

Landcare members saw Landcare contribution to decisions on expenditure and design of projects fall away. Priorities were set for regions, and projects initiated regionally. CMAs, in turn, found their regional priorities had to take account of State and Federal priorities, leaving them much less discretion over spending than they had expected when the National Action Plan was started.

A 2007 Auditor-General's review of NRM spending had difficulty finding evidence of measureable improvements in natural resource condition. The solution was even closer control of funding allocation by the Commonwealth. Aided by national GIS data on resource condition, the Commonwealth's 2007 Caring For Our Country program targeted spending to 38 priority landscapes. Landcare groups and networks outside these priority landscapes had to fend for themselves, using small grant funding streams from State and Commonwealth. The national NRM budget was reduced, and one early casualty was national funding for Landcare facilitators.

A series of consultations through the late 2000s (The National Landcare Framework, the National Action Plan for Landcare, the review of CFOC) provided Landcare advocacy groups like the VLC with an opportunity to present a set of strategies to secure Landcare's contribution, but the VLC for one found no evidence of serious effort by the Australian Government to work out how to implement its motherhood statements about community participation, or how to develop a transparent and trusted process for connecting the big national issues to action in regions and on the ground.

The future: targeted investment *and* investment in community action. Under the policy of targeted investment, Landcare has become an implementation tool, not a way to involve communities in understanding and defining problems, or designing solutions. Two presumptions are at work in this policy, and we challenge both. The first is that activity to improve landscapes outside of targeted landscapes is not worth public investment. We contend that it is, and that a modest investment in the social infrastructure that community Landcare provides will support on-going local action that benefits not just the local community, but a wider Australian community which wants to know that action is being taken to care for Australian landscapes.

The second presumption we challenge is that decisions on what needs to be done to improve Australia's landscapes are best made by technical experts and decision makers in government. We contend that effective NRM programs need technical expertise, and the wide view of government decision makers, *and* the local knowledge of community Landcare.

This is not a simplistic call to return to the control over funding allocation that Landcare exerted in the early days of NRM. Effective NRM programs require diverse points of view, to define problems and opportunities and to design the best ways to influence landholder practices and shift ecosystem dynamics. Government policy of targeted investment has dramatically reduced support for community Landcare, threatening the social infrastructure Landcare has built over decades, that which will be needed for decades ahead to stimulate and support grassroots change.

As landscapes change, we will need to make tough decisions on what to protect and smart decisions about how to adapt land use. Australia needs a policy that takes the long view of Australia's landscapes and supports community participation in decision making and action for resilient landscapes. Targeted investment to priority landscapes will work hand-in-hand with investment that supports broad in community participation in care for the land.

The role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes

NRM is a multi-level system of governance – national, state, regional, landscape and local levels *each* have their priorities and ways to influence land use. Government programs are necessarily organised around wider public good goals and guided by technical expertise, and they deploy their plans through contractual relationships between purchaser and service provider.

Unfortunately, government decision makers often assume they are the only show in town. Despite the rhetoric of engagement and partnership, our observation is that government programs frequently ignore and avoid Landcare planning processes that combine scientific and local knowledge. Community Landcare is organised around local priorities and guided by local knowledge, which is in no way inferior to technical knowledge. Local knowledge embraces intergenerational understanding of how a specific landscape works, knowledge of changing agricultural and land management practices, knowledge of government programs and their impact (or lack of it) over decades, and local knowledge of the evolving community of a landscape, with its differing segments, attitudes and readiness for change, in short, community capacity to take up desirable changes.

Landcare groups and networks also use their plans in a different way to government programs. Rather than planning what *must* be done, and then *purchasing* services against these targets, community Landcare tunes into what people want to do, and supports their action, individually and together. Because community Landcare depends on voluntary effort, it pays close attention to the motivations of landholders within a landscape. It initiates, then waits to see what the up-take is, and it is prepared to back off and wait if the timing is not right. Community landcare understands the value to the long term success of a project of having landholder “buy-in “ at the inception.

Committees of management take a long-run view of change in communities. Landcare groups and networks think about how they can maintain the momentum of change in communities. Current government priorities and funding sit in the background, as one possible funding source; in the foreground sits the community and its different segments, each with a distinctive profile, and running across those segment, the community's networks with their potential to catalyse change,

Our contention is that NRM decision making at regional level will deliver a better return on public investment when it draws more on the local knowledge of community Landcare. This is not simply a matter of Landcare being part of decision making on priorities or investment allocation. NRM in Australia needs genuine collaboration in the design of ways to maintain change in communities, programs that are specific to particular communities and particular landscapes. There are no cookie-cutter solutions in NRM – it's all about tailor-made support for change, and that's where community Landcare can make a contribution.

The Australian Government-has an opportunity to pay more attention to the *quality* of decision making at regional level. Regional NRM bodies default to what funders want, and if the National Landcare Program asks for a new set of boxes to tick, that is what it will get and little else. We need to improve the way we design action to improve landscapes. We need to look hard at what works and what doesn't work, rather than send in the project report and move to the next funding round. We need rapid learning that is drawn back into the redesign of programs of action.

We argued above that a modest investment in the social infrastructure provided by community Landcare will secure the momentum of change in land management practices and in protection and enhancement of biodiversity across Australian landscapes. We now argue not just that Landcare be given a definite place in decision making, but that investment is needed in action research to accelerate learning around design of NRM programs as a collaboration between local and regional levels. The NRM system has good enough project management and accountability of public expenditure. It has strong processes for evidence-based priority-setting down to sub-catchment scale. What it can't yet do is design programs of change that draw together the knowledge of government and community sectors, maintain collaboration from the design phase through implementation to assessment, and draw learning rapidly back into the next design of programs.

What is needed is a shift to a culture of learning from experience, a competency which Landcare has cultivated for many years. Alongside this, we need stronger systems for measuring outcomes. This is the final area on which we wish to comment.

The measurement of NRM outcomes

Since the mid-2000s, NRM budgets have steadily fallen as a percentage of government spending, expenditure on community Landcare has fallen, and community concern for the environment has also fallen. One factor contributing to all these shifts is a failure to accurately measure and demonstrate change in environmental health and the relationship this has to the social and economic health of the nation.

Systems for monitoring environmental condition are fragmented across different assets and jurisdictions. The purpose of monitoring systems is split between accountability for public spending, and development of scientific knowledge of ecosystems, with little accountability to resource users. Monitoring focuses too much on activities, or on resource condition, and not much on the links between activity and condition.

However, the NRM system can grow its way into a better system of accounting for environmental condition, by integrating existing monitoring around a clear set of purposes for accounting, negotiated with those who will use the accounts, and by articulating the logic that links activities to intermediate outcomes and resource condition improvement.

Community Landcare stands to benefit from accounts that demonstrate the impact of private landholder investment in the environment. It will also benefit if indicators of intermediate outcomes on the pathway to resource condition improvement are more visible, for these are often the practices that Landcare facilitates in local communities.

All NRM contributors stand to benefit from having a way for the sector to speak about environmental condition and evidence from which to argue for investment in programs with a track record of improving condition.

In summary

The policy shift to targeted investment over the last decade has undermined the social infrastructure of community Landcare that supports local level action in NRM. Government investment in community Landcare is a cost-effective way to maintain the momentum of community action for environmental health, with benefits to productivity in rural communities and community and individual health. Investment in Landcare can work hand-in-hand with other investment targeted at priority landscapes.

NRM decision making needs to draw on the local knowledge of Landcare groups and networks. There is an opportunity for national leadership in facilitating rapid learning around the design of effective programs for landscape health. A modest investment here will improve the return on investment in NRM.

NRM needs to develop a set of environmental accounts that meets the needs of government decision makers, land managers and the wider Australian community. Those accounts will inform choices about effective programs, and help make the case for public investment in the environment.