



## **Landcare Tasmania Inc. submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment**

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### **Administration and transparency of the Register of Environmental Organisations and its effectiveness in supporting communities to take practical action to improve the environment**

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**Landcare Tasmania is endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR)**

**This submission is not confidential**



## ***Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment***

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### **1. Background**

Landcare Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations. The terms of reference outline a number of important areas that are likely to have significant implications for Landcare generally, and Landcare Tasmania specifically with respect to our deductible gift recipient fund, the Tasmanian Landcare Fund (TLF).

Landcare Tasmania is the state peak membership body for community Landcare and provides an independent, representative voice across Tasmania. Landcare Tasmania represents and supports more than 200 Landcare groups covering sustainable agriculture, Coastcare, Bushcare, Junior Landcare, 'Friends of' groups and urban and peri-urban Landcare groups. We represent more than 3,500 volunteer community members who benefit directly from the support services Landcare Tasmania provides, as well as the funding provided through the TLF. We represent a major portion of the volunteering community across the state who contribute a significant amount of their time on a range of activities for the public good.

Landcare groups make significant contributions to address and manage a range of agricultural, natural resource management and environmental issues on behalf of the Tasmanian community. Landcare group members all have a common approach and purpose and are at the forefront of sustainably managing our soils, vegetation and water resources, conserving and protecting biodiversity and actively engaging with local communities. These all contribute to increasing agricultural productivity and output, allow for the sustainable use of our natural resources and improving the environment, all of which directly benefit the state's clean green image and potential for high quality, high value food production.

From all corners of the state, Landcare volunteers are active in all communities, protecting Tasmania from noxious weeds and pests, keeping our beaches and waterways clean, restoring fragile ecosystems and the environment, and working with farmers and graziers to promote sustainable agriculture. Over the last two years, the estimated dollar value of community Landcare volunteer activities in the state equated to more than \$5.6 million<sup>1</sup> in volunteer and unpaid contributions to the state economy. This is a significant cost saving to tax payers and the Tasmanian Government. Landcare Tasmania has also been successful in leveraging additional investment in excess of \$1,880,000 into the state economy over the last three years. A significant portion of this has been from philanthropic sources.

All these natural resource management and landcare activities have long-lasting public benefits and provide a broader land stewardship function that governments often take for granted. Donations to groups that are on the Register of Environmental Organisations and who undertake such activities to protect the environment should remain tax deductible.

<sup>1</sup> This figure has been calculated by multiplying the conservative number of total volunteer hours, taken from membership surveys over the last two years, by community Landcare volunteers per year (approx. 162,000 hours) by the standard volunteer hourly rate set at \$30 per hour.

## **2. Definition of 'environmental organisation' under the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997**

The Tasmanian Landcare Fund (TLF) is an important philanthropic program for individuals and groups across Tasmania to address and manage important Landcare projects. The TLF has been in operation for over 10 years and has been instrumental in providing individuals, Landcare groups and schools with an alternative funding source to address practical on ground Landcare and environmental issues. To date, the TLF has delivered over \$350,000 to fund more than 80 important practical on-ground projects across Tasmania.

In 1965, the late John Methven Roberts sold his farm at Longford and retired to Launceston after farming 'Kinlet' for 32 years. During his retirement, when organising his will, John thought about his farming days and decided to give something back to the farming community. Specifically, Mr Roberts asked that the funds from his Trust address important environmental and agricultural issues including repairing land and soil degradation, erosion and improving soil fertility, cleaning polluted streams and waterways, planting trees and shrubs and informing the community and educating children in schools of the importance of Landcare. In particular, he saw kids as the future and as future farmers and wanted to give them the opportunity to learn about sustainable land management.

In late 2002/early 2003, Mr Roberts approached Landcare Tasmania (then the Tasmanian Landcare Association) regarding the donation of a portion of his estate to make a contribution to education and improved farming practices in the north of the state. Landcare Tasmania proceeded to establish an environmental trust fund, The Tasmanian Landcare Fund, as a deductible gift recipient charity, to administer funds from Mr Roberts' estate for a range of Landcare activities. A management committee was formed and the fund was launched with Mr and Mrs Roberts in 2003 at the Landcare Tasmania Annual General Meeting.

As such, and in keeping with the intent of the TLF, we recommend keeping the current definition of 'environmental organisation' under the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 so listed organisations such as Landcare Tasmania can continue to hold deductible gift recipient status and administer environmental philanthropic funding to on ground environmental programs. We believe under the current definition, we can significantly demonstrate that our 'principal purpose' is the protection and enhancement of the environment. Given the significant public benefits that the Tasmanian Landcare Fund generates for the broader Landcare community, it is appropriate and crucial that it remains eligible for tax-deductibility status.

## **3. Requirements to be met by an organisation to be listed on the Register and maintain its listing**

The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) is the independent national regulator of charities. The ACNC has been set up to achieve the following objectives:

- maintain, protect and enhance public trust and confidence in the sector through increased accountability and transparency
- support and sustain a robust, vibrant, independent and innovative not-for-profit sector
- promote the reduction of unnecessary regulatory obligations on the sector

The TLF is currently registered with the ACNC (registration number 50622521764) as a charitable organisation and is compliant with the requirements of the Australian Tax Office confirming the TLF is endorsed for charity tax concessions and as a deductible gift recipient. This endorsement for DGR status was provided on 9 May 2014 under Item 1 of the table in Section 30-15 of the Income Tax

Assessment Act 1997 and the fund is listed in Subdivision 30-B of the Act as a Public fund on the register of environmental organisations. Landcare Tasmania Inc. is also currently endorsed for charity tax concessions by the ATO under the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997, the New Tax System (Goods and Services Tax) Act 1999 and the Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986 respectively.

Landcare Tasmania currently distributes funding under the TLF via a rigorous, robust and transparent devolved grant framework. A scientific Technical Assessment Committee reviews and critiques all applications and assesses each project's methodology to ensure best practice techniques are used and risks are identified and managed. Projects recommended for funding are then considered by the TLF Management Committee, the 'responsible people' under the Deductible Gift Recipient rules. Projects are recommended and approved by the Committee and presented to the Landcare Tasmania Executive Committee for final approval and payment to successful applicants.

The Tasmanian Landcare Fund is now a highly respected and regarded philanthropic program and a lasting legacy to Mr John Roberts and his vision for Landcare and sustainable agriculture in Tasmania.

Landcare Tasmania is currently compliant with all aspects of reporting and we believe the current requirements to disclose donations and activities funded by donations are satisfactory and that we are currently subject to an appropriate level of scrutiny by regulators and the public to ensure that the donations we receive and the funds we deliver are directed to the principal objectives of the organisation. We recommend the current administrative requirements on the TLF and Landcare Tasmania be retained and not increased, allowing the limited resources we have to be spent on our core activities and support work rather than on unnecessarily onerous compliance activities.

#### **4. Activities undertaken by organisations currently listed on the Register and the extent to which these activities involve on-ground environmental works**

The Landcare movement has been instrumental in achieving long-term, positive impacts on sustainable agriculture, increasing agricultural productivity, managing soils, vegetation and water resources, conserving and protecting biodiversity and actively engaging with local communities and contributing to the social fabric of rural, urban and peri-urban Australia. In the absence of ongoing government funding, these issues are likely to cost significantly more to the Australian economy in the long term if not addressed in a timely, proactive and cost effective manner. Donations into charitable organisations like the TLF provide a significant and alternative mechanism for community groups to undertake ongoing natural resource management environmental programs.

Every dollar invested in Landcare generates a co-investment by the community and Landcare groups of \$4 to \$5 through contributions towards labour, equipment, volunteer time and expertise as well as additional donations from landholders and businesses. This investment in Landcare provides major benefits for all Australians in terms of a stronger economy and healthier landscapes. Landcare programs and the community Landcare movement play a significant role in contributing to this increase in environmental protection, better natural resource management, increased farm productivity, protection and enhancement of habitat for biodiversity, mitigating climate change and climate variability and improvements to water quality.

We do not support any efforts to limit the activities that can lawfully be carried out by Landcare Tasmania or the Tasmanian Landcare Fund for practical on-ground environmental programs. Strong advocacy, increased public awareness, education and understanding and community engagement and participation are essential to this on-ground delivery. Each of the broad range of activities

delivering environmental protection under the TLF should be eligible for deductible-gift recipient status. Examples of projects delivered have included:

- Revegetation activities along riparian areas to enhance wildlife habitat.
- Soil conservation measures to prevent and mitigate erosion.
- Removal of pest plant and animal species
- Protection and enhancement of biodiversity
- Fencing existing high quality remnant vegetation from a range of threats
- Education in schools on food production and sustainable land use
- Water quality initiatives in riparian areas

Those Landcare groups, organisations and networks who have the capacity, the governance frameworks and ability to run philanthropic charities and deliver devolved grant funding programs should not be penalised in providing these services.

## **5. Advocacy by environmental organisations is an essential contribution to free speech and our democracy.**

Landcare Tasmania is the state membership body for community Landcare, and since 1994 has been providing an independent, representative voice for community Landcare across Tasmania and at the national level. We engage, support and build the capacity of volunteer groups in the Landcare and NRM sector across the state. As such, we are well positioned to represent, strengthen, support and grow Tasmania's community Landcare movement to improve the health and productive capacity of our agricultural and environmental landscapes. Landcare Tasmania's strategic plan focuses on four key imperatives:

1. Encourage and increase engagement and participation in Landcare, particularly sustainable agriculture
2. Communicate and promote benefits of Landcare and Landcare volunteers
3. Strengthen and support Landcare across Tasmania
4. Advocate for the Landcare movement

Landcare Tasmania has a key focus on communicating with and representing community based Landcare at the state level to develop and foster ideas, knowledge and resources. We are a key contact point and act as the interface between Government and the Landcare movement to ensure effective communication of issues, programs and policy as necessary. We speak as the state voice in the development of Landcare and broader natural resource management and environmental policy, to ensure that a sustainable, vibrant, and healthy Landcare movement can play its role "to foster a community that is aware, engaged and active in caring for their environment, so that it is healthier, better protected, well managed, resilient, and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate".

Much of this advocacy work is done on a pro bono basis and relies on the good will and donations of the Landcare community to achieve this. We advocate for equity in the delivery of on-ground funding, highlight the needs of the Landcare and wider NRM volunteer community and identify local priorities and feed this to the state and national level.

We provide support to groups to identify gaps (research, funding, on-ground activity) and negotiate at a state level to address approaches to manage these identified gaps. This enables better investment (including significant philanthropic investment) in on-ground landscape change by promoting Landcare and the wider voluntary movement as a cost-effective and high return

investment. We also act as a conduit between the State Government, NRM organisations and the Landcare community in relation to policy and program development and "Help keep a level playing field for grassroots Landcarers who can't do it for themselves."

## **6. Conclusion**

With reductions in government funding for many of the activities listed above, Landcare Tasmania will increasingly rely on donations from concerned community Landcare members to continue our advocacy role and important public interest work. Removing tax concessions for us to support this work makes attracting funding harder and reduces our capacity to deliver environmental outcomes.

I urge you to retain the current criteria for entry into the Register of Environmental Organisations, to allow the broad range of activities necessary to secure a healthier, fairer and more sustainable society and to maintain the tax-deductible status of organisations on the Register.

I would like to present at any public hearing held by the Committee in relation to this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

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Landcare Tasmania