



South West Catchments Council (SWCC) Submission

to the

**SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS
REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

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

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1. Comments against Terms of Reference.

(a) The establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;

The Natural Heritage Trust was delivered in two distinct phases. The first phase, Natural Heritage Trust (NHT or NHT1), was established in 1996-97 in response to a groundswell in local Landcare, initiated and driven by volunteer landholders and community members.

The primary focus of Landcare at that time was "sustainable agriculture and improved management of the natural resource base – soils, water and vegetation – at farm level".

Under this framework, funding became available to undertake resource assessment, planning, on-ground works, capacity building activities, extension, and research and development (R&D) of an unprecedented scope and extent.

The level of investment was significant and was driven by local priorities, documented in local catchment plans and strategies. It saw significant local uptake of practice change initiatives by a range of stakeholders, especially farmers and small landholders. The significant investment in community prioritised land management issues like salinity was meeting both a community and landholder need.

It also enabled and stimulated an increase in local Landcare employment, boosted local Landcare group capacity and raised the profile of Landcare and Natural Resource Management (NRM) in general. This period saw a significant number of coordinators and facilitators employed by local Landcare groups, to assist the local volunteer effort. This increased capacity support to landholders and community groups nationally, and resulted in a highly engaged and supported community to administer, facilitate and deliver on-ground projects.

Where the NHT1 framework was not so successful was that there was no systematic (and nationally consistent) monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework and protocols to capture, record, and store data to assess the impact and effectiveness of this significant and wide-ranging investment in on-ground works. This didn't allow for the full extent of the funded works to be adequately represented, making it difficult for funders to see and appreciate the collective results of the investment. Concerns were raised that the collective measurable outcomes of significant public financial investment could not be determined. Often referred to as the "vegemite effect", a small amount of investment across the landscape was not seen to be delivering the demonstrable change expected (albeit in a short timeframe).

This resulted in a review of the efficiency and achievements of NHT1 and led to the initiation of NHT2, in 2001.

This phase of the program saw the lack of strategic coordination in NHT1 addressed and improved. It was also the birth of the Regional Delivery model across the country. The NRM Regions (often newly formed) were provided with foundation funding and policy direction to assist with the establishment of robust governance frameworks and to develop Regional NRM Strategies to guide further NHT investment and investment under the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAPWQ).

This Regional delivery model further developed and cemented the formation of a passionate and interconnected professional Landcare and NRM network, with improved project delivery at both the local and regional strategic levels. It was guided by the principles of

subsidiarity, which is a principle still shared and highly regarded by the South West Catchments Council (SWCC). It enabled and facilitated investment into “self-determined” priorities, based upon the accredited Regional NRM Strategy. It was also the first time that NRM investment included a real focus on the engagement of Aboriginal people and Local Government into regional priority setting.

This facilitated the further development of a professional and collaborative NRM sector, and saw the movement away from volunteer-driven works and solely local priorities. Under the Regional Delivery model, the NRM sector was well-resourced, empowered, and was delivering much more strategic projects with far greater rigour in appropriately scaled project management, data collection, monitoring and reporting.

A criticism of the NHT program was that the administrative costs, associated with supporting the significant network of community groups and associate governance, were high.

(b) The establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program;

The introduction of Caring for our Country Program (CfoC) in 2008 was based on a top down prioritisation process based on Business Plans developed by the Australian Government and a dual, regional delivery and competitive application process.

The intent of CfoC was twofold; 1) to reduce the administration costs of NRM delivery and redirect the focus to on-ground delivery; and 2) to address the gaps in the NHT and NAP frameworks in monitoring, evaluation and reporting of on-ground outcomes through the introduction of a comprehensive MERI (Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting & Improvement) framework.

CfoC’s policy direction involved a heavy emphasis on investing in national priorities and outcomes, at the almost complete exclusion of regional and local priorities. This led to significant levels of funding invested in certain areas, creating direct delivery competition between local NRM, Regional NRM and State Agency, with little or no focus on on-ground works in others.

In some areas this led to investment, based on national priorities, that was not the highest priority for environmental improvement at a local or regional scale.

A key issue associated with the CfoC investment planning process was that regional groups were asked to develop their Regional Bids at the same time as the Competitive Grants were announced. This led to multiple groups competing directly for funding and worked against collaborative partnerships from forming, as groups were eager to independently obtain any funds targeted within their local areas.

In WA, this coincided with the end of the bi-lateral funding agreement between the Australian Government and the Government of Western Australia, which further exacerbated the situation. State funding was progressively reduced.

The MERI requirements imbedded in any funding received, while inadequately funded to support staff time to undertake it to the degree and level of quality required, became an additional burden for groups receiving funding. The regional groups had the capacity (through scale) to implement this MERI design, but for smaller Landcare groups with limited staff capacity, the requirements were often detrimental, rather than beneficial.

Added to which, there was very little direction provided to the Regions on MERI approach and or delivery to encourage National consistency and to allow for comparison of data collection and evaluation of project success across and between Regions.

(c) The outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for Our Country;

The CfoC program has inadvertently undermined Australia's regional model for NRM, and eroded gains made under NHT and related programs in building a collaborative, vibrant, passionate and locally empowered professional NRM sector.

The funding provided to NRM Regions to underpin their regional allocation reduced substantially from NHT2 to the introduction of the CfoC Program. Considered in combination with the loss of the bi-lateral agreement, WA was even further affected by this funding reduction (approximately a 75% reduction in total).

This led to an immediate impact on local NRM and Landcare employment, with significant reductions in staff numbers. This created high levels of instability and uncertainty within the professional NRM/Landcare sectors and inadvertently resulted in a significant loss of knowledge and capacity at the local level.

This impact was not only felt in the professional sector. Many Coastcare and Landcare volunteer groups were also unable to access funds, as their works were not aligned with CfoC national priorities and they were unable to meet MERI requirements. This has led to the disappearance and disengagement of many volunteer groups who struggled to access funding to continue their locally focused on-ground work across the region.

This created a number of "blackspots" where there was no local professional or volunteer capacity to undertake the delivery of local priority Landcare work at all.

Grassroots capacity steadily reduced, and local, regional and state priorities suffered. Commitment to local community NRM movements like Landcare and Coastcare has been inconsistent and substantially reduced, and largely unsuccessful.

There was a collective outcry from the NRM sector at this fundamental shift in the framework focus, to which the Australian Government responded with the introduction of the Regional Landcare Facilitator (RLF) network in 2009.

It was intended that this would go some way to addressing the loss of local Landcare capacity that resulted from the CfoC design. Despite all intents and purposes, the RLF Program has not increased local Landcare capacity to any great extent and didn't provide a function that wasn't already provided in the South West of WA. In reality, the funding provided to establish, administer and coordinate the RLF Program simply took further funding and capacity away from the community. Given the prescriptive nature of how the Program was rolled out, the funding could have been better invested in local on-ground priorities and capacity building activities.

The issues in evaluating NRM investment include often complex links between the problems and solutions. Thus to evaluate NRM investments and identify both regional and national priority requires a sound level of knowledge of asset condition and health. This in turn requires adequate resource assessment funding to capture and obtain baseline data, benchmark asset indicators and analyse asset condition and health. This was greatly hindered through CfoC, due to the reduction in R&D funding and no National guidance provided on MERI consistency. This has led to a reduced capacity of groups to objectively

assess the effectiveness of their on-ground projects in a consistent manner.

Contrary to claims of an integrated package of programs, CfoC's national priorities were more reminiscent of pre-NHT programs with a single-issue focus, such as the 1989-1998 One Billion Trees Program. CfoC represented a set of selective investments in particular natural resource areas against a set of priorities determined by the Australian Government with no consultation with the local deliverers, with the potential to produce very non-strategic results.

It is the opinion of the South West Catchments Council that the following published article provides a robust and accurate description of the primary issues experienced in the South West NRM Region through the introduction of Caring for our Country:

Robins, L. and Kanowski, P. (2011) "Crying for our Country": eight ways in which 'Caring for our Country' has undermined Australia's regional model for Natural Resource Management', Australasian Journal of Environmental Management, first published on: 12 April 2011 (iFirst)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14486563.2011.566158>

(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;

Based on our current understanding, that existing regional contracts will be maintained, the future regional allocation budget from 2015/16 will be approximately 22% less than that provided in 2009/10. This does not account for the effects of inflation and similar.

In addition, this funding is now also expected to provide the primary support to local community and Landcare groups within the region for local projects, administer this grants process and fund a more robust community capacity building, engagement and consultation program and on-going regional planning.

Previously, the primary source for local community and Landcare groups was the competitive funding rounds and while the process was considered to be detrimental to local collaboration, the quantum of funding was significant.

This substantial reduction will see a dramatic reduction in capacity of local groups in our region. Several groups will become marginal and are likely to cease operations. Local employment in regional areas will reduce, with flow on effect in local communities.

NRM funding achieves outcomes via two means; Firstly the maintenance of a social system that leverages community effort, outside investment, and general engagement in Landcare, sustainable production and the environment. Secondly, strategic projects that deliver measurable positive change in environmental systems, often at a landscape scale. The significant further reduction in funding will provide major tensions between these two modes of achieving outcomes, potentially resulting in one or both reducing below effective thresholds.

As further prioritisation occurs (reduction in scope), important work on threatened species and communities will reduce and the status of these important biodiversity assets will worsen. Many monitoring programs will cease and our ability to measure the state of our environment, at an important time associated with a changing climate, will reduce.

Anticipated future climate change is very likely to have a wide range of ecological and

biodiversity impacts across Australia. To inform future management of priority assets and areas in Australia under climate change scenarios, assessment of the magnitude of ecological impact that climate change could have on biodiversity is urgently required. Yet the lack of Australian Government R&D funding, especially in the context of climate change, is not allowing NRM to strategically tackle and deal with biodiversity conservation under a changing climate. Research and strategic funding here is critical.

One of the key issues associated with NRM investment since NHT2 is that integrated ecosystem management has been omitted through a single outputs focus. There has been a particular retreat from Integrated Coastal Zone Management, Integrated Catchment Management, whole-of-farm planning and ecosystem services as a result of this narrow focus.

A key focus of the National Landcare Program is that investment be long term. This can now be interpreted as 2-3 years. The feedback that has been provided by the NRM sector over the course of previous investments is that 4-5-year projects are needed in order to effectively plan, implement and coordinate projects, while undertaking comprehensive and meaningful monitoring and evaluation of project outcomes.

An ongoing shift in investment targets and program focus means that a significant amount of human resources and capacity is absorbed in order to transition from one program to the next. This takes significant capacity away from proper engagement with other groups and staff working actively in the field to deliver on-ground results.

The inclusion of programs such as the Green Army within the budget allocation for the National Landcare Program will significantly reduce the ability of the initiative to achieve its intended outcomes, in favour of alternative social outcomes such as training.

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

There are a number of advantages associated with the funding allocated for environment and sustainable agriculture being recombined. The current arrangement, whereby the two funding streams are separated and reported on separately creates duplication and inefficiencies.

The separation of the environmental and sustainable agriculture streams has also resulted in a departure from integrated property management. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that productive farms also require healthy natural environments, due to the associated benefits of ecosystem services, micro-climate creation, etc. The separation of the programs restricts sound and integrated farm planning. The need to separately account for, acquit and report on outcomes prevents the separate programs being co-delivered on ground. Additionally, it does nothing to assist NRM practitioners in engaging with landholders to participate.

If the two streams remain separate, it is suggested that the paperwork, MERI and other related documentation is consistent between the two streams.

One way in which this can be improved for future is via adequate and true consultation with the key stakeholder groups prior to program framework design being initiated.

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

While in the past the regional model has been subject of some criticism, most regions (in particular community based regions) have invested substantially to overcome the identified deficiencies. This investment has established mature, robust groups with the capability and governance structures to provide an effective interface between the Government and local community groups to deliver both complex social and environmental outcomes, and the accountability required of public investment.

Several studies reported that it was widely perceived by a diversity of stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, as the preferred approach to NRM delivery, and one that warranted further development and improvement. Its merits were confirmed by the Australian National Audit Office's evaluation of the 'regional delivery model' and the Senate Standing Committee on Rural & Regional Affairs & Transport's Inquiry into 'Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges'.

(i) Any other related matters.

There are a number of related matters pertinent to WA and the South West NRM Region in particular that further compound the issues associated with the current Australian Government NRM funding model, including:

- Regional NRM model and governance differs to other parts of Australia – Regional bodies in WA have no statutory basis and are community based. As such, they already have strong community relationships and community prioritised actions are a priority. They also don't receive core State Government funding. In this respect, they differ to Regional bodies in other parts of Australia. This needs to be taken into account as part of any future design.
- Lack of State Government support of NRM in WA – as a result of the loss of the bi-lateral agreement between the previous State and Federal Governments, there was a significant reduction in WA State Government NRM investment, as of 2009.

2. The future of NRM delivery under the National Landcare Program.

The details of the National Landcare Program are currently under consultation, with the final design yet to be determined.

The design elements currently known are that regional delivery will be the primary delivery mode, and that the principles of local, simple and long term will form the basis of the program design.

A major motivation of the program was the reintegration of the Landcare and community groups into the regional delivery process; and a return to the positive elements of the National Heritage Trust era.

The South West Catchments Council is highly supportive of this intent and the above principles. It is hoped that these can be maintained through design and implementation.

Caution is expressed that the funding being provided is now approximately 20% of that annually provided in NHT2 and expectations need to be both realistic and communicated to the community. The program is now at a fundamentally different scale.

The importance of Monitoring and Evaluation to a standard above simple output reporting is fundamental to address lessons already learned from the previous programs so that the true benefits of the program can be demonstrated and its value appropriately assessed. Nationally consistent methodologies would be useful and should be developed consultatively.

Research is critical to ensure the most up-to-date scientific information is available to the NRM and Landcare sectors to assist them to deliver environmental management outcomes effectively, undertake adaptive best management practice and evaluate success. It is required to establish robust baseline information and benchmarks in relation to asset condition and trends, and develop innovative approaches to asset management.

The future program needs to take into account the successes and setbacks of the NHT, NAP, CfoC and the current National Landcare Program design, in order to meet the requirements of the community, the Australian Government and to maximise environmental outcomes. Adaptive management through iterative design is preferable to major step changes that currently occur every 3 – 4 years and have significant detrimental effect on the sector.

In order for local delivery of complex projects, sufficient administrative and employment support is required to attract appropriate project managers. Community Landcare volunteers cannot be expected to design, deliver, coordinate and acquit NRM projects to the quality expected by the Regions and the Australian Government without adequate NRM coordinators and facilitators support.

In recent NRM Federal investment there has been a retreat from the integrated catchment management (ICM) and participatory approaches to NRM delivery that have progressively evolved under the NHT and related programs.

We suggest that a broader objective consistent with the goal of the NHT2, which is, 'to help restore and conserve Australia's environment and natural resources through biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of natural resources, and community capacity building and institutional change', would be a more appropriate approach and would allow for greater scope to acknowledge and address the diversity of interests and challenges across Australia's NRM Regions.

In addition, a bilateral agreement between the Australian Government and Western Australian Government would further address a significant limitation. The opportunity is currently available as the WA NRM program for 2015/16 is currently being developed.

References

Robins, L. and Kanowski, P.(2011) *"Crying for our Country': eight ways in which 'Caring for our Country' has undermined Australia's regional model for natural resource management'*, *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*.iFirst.