

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

- a. the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;
- b. the establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program;
- c. the outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for Our Country;
- 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;
- e. the Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs;
- f. analysis of national, state and regional funding priorities for land care programs;
- g. how the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture have, and can, work together to deliver a seamless land care program;
- h. the role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and
- i. any other related matters.

The establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;

My involvement with the National Landcare Program began during the sale of Telstra and the subsequent funding into the Natural Heritage Trust.

I believe this was an appropriate use of funds from the sale of a government owned utility. The application process and use of funds during the Natural Heritage Trust years was simple and easy for community groups. The application forms were direct, were easily completed and achieved goals for restoration of waterways and vegetation well beyond the expectations of most groups. The dollar return for government was well matched by both community volunteer time and funds from corporate sponsors. It followed well the decade of landcare.

While the program has been accused of “not being strategic” and not achieving significant outcomes I believe that this is wrong. If a review of the community driven programs achieved with the NHT funding was conducted in 2015 the return of biodiversity into some of the revegetated areas will show the benefits of this program. In our area a fauna survey of a parcel of land which has been progressively revegetated has recently been completed and has shown that the revegetation program which began with NHT funding has enabled a return of many fauna species to the area.

I was an assessment panel member for NHT 1 and I do believe that there were some projects – significant state agency projects – which did not achieve their goals. However, every community project that I assessed had achieved the outcomes.

Community groups (non indigenous) are highly scrutinised by their own communities. While a centralised government body does not understand the mechanics of small rural communities, there is no better accountability benchmark than your neighbour watching your every move. The natural honesty of rural communities is not appreciated by government – or more particularly – by Treasury, which seems to assume that everyone is dishonest. Hence the overly bureaucratic forms which serve to provide statistics and do nothing to actually measure the success of a program and drive everyone stark, raving mad.

NHT 2 was a logical follow - on project - with community groups able to receive money for staff. This is a critical support for community driven conservation work.

Volunteers will willingly give of hours to do on ground works. The normal volunteer does this work because they want to feel they are giving something back to society. They won't put it in as many words – but the “act, belong, commit” slogan of mental health fame is a driving force for many people who believe that they owe the Australian community for the outstanding lifestyle we have.

However, they DO NOT want to do the hours of paperwork which is required to deliver a project. As an example a typical revegetation project has to start 8 to 12 months before trees are put into the ground.

Time Line

Planting for June/July 2015



This time line is typical of a project. No volunteer wants to do all of this – at the lowest end of the scale this is 90 hours of work, basically in an office behind a computer.

This is why the NHT 2 funding was very successful – it recognised that to gain the maximum benefit from volunteers there needs to be a paid officer to deal with all the paperwork and pre planning required for projects. The premise behind NHT was that protection and restoration of habitat was the best way to protect species. Eminently sensible.

The establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program

Caring for Country went the other way. Protection of species. Getting indigenous communities involved in Caring for their Country. All sounds really good. Didn't work particularly well.

Bureaucratic processes became more pronounced – statistics appeared to be favoured over outcomes. The Government appeared to want to be able to “prove” that the program was operating successfully.

Small community based groups were disregarded in preference to larger national groups focused on protection of species. This naturally led to loss of volunteers who felt that they were not valued in

providing labour as their skills were not in demand – ie because the larger groups employed accredited persons (uni or TAFE graduates) there was no space for the everyday tree planter or bird counter.

Community consultation on the Caring For Our Country Program did cover Australia very well but the Minister was not open to suggestion and the program proceeded as it was originally envisaged. It really didn't appear to matter that the Minister was advised by his staff that the program was not inclusive of community. The continuance of the program and the assessment of individual programs against those outcomes has not been a good fit.

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

The outcomes for sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship in the Caring for Country program are achievable. While it is the nature of government changes to alter programs, previously committed funds must be honoured so those previously funded programs can be brought to a logical conclusion.

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 implications of the budget for landcare programs appears to be dire – the funding that seems to have been made available for on ground projects is nil. This means the impetus which has enabled revegetation of degraded areas across Australia will halt.

If there is any difference to that it has not been made clear. If landcare money is to be funnelled through regional NRM bodies then it needs to be made very clear that those dollars are for on ground work and not to employ facilitators in regional groups- officers which should already be funded from within the regional bodies allocation.

If the government really wish to make a difference through land care programs then a return to the NHT 2 model would be most effective.

By halting the land care movement the long term impact on natural resource management will be a reduction in effort across Australia.

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

doesn't make sense.

Any other related matters

1. As someone who has been involved with the range of environmental programs from NHT to Caring For Country and with Green Corps, WWF, as a farmer, as the Chairman of an NRM group and an on ground landcare officer I think I have the experience to speak on all of these programs. I have been involved on state committees and assessment groups and understand government programs and agency machinations.

The new proposed Green Army is ill thought through and will not achieve any discernable environmental outcomes.

As with Green Corp the management of the teams will be an expensive undertaking. The number of people throughout the country with the ability to manage these sorts of groups of people is limited. The skill set required for the leaders (knowledge of training, environmental management, project management, psychology, and applied application of motivational skills) is immense and in the private sector these people would be paid extremely well. There is no incentive for these leaders to manage an environmental team of less motivated persons, who will be difficult to control for the amount of remuneration they would expect to get from this government program.

The Green Corp funding, which was very similar, while achieving infrastructure projects such as trails, did not have a huge environmental impact.

2. Originally, Natural Resource Management Groups were community driven. Great. This enabled direct on ground work to take place. But of course, agencies don't particularly like democracy. So once again, the spectre of government money being spent unwisely by UNTRAINED COMMUNITY PEOPLE was raised very carefully by strategic agency people. Just general hints began what eventually made the regional groups toe the agency line...fiduciary policies, guidelines, reporting until the groups have become just another bureaucracy. Very sad.

Originally, the groups developed strategic plans – they identified what the community thought was important and then went about achieving this across their region. It worked very well.

State and Government agencies are silos, and jealously guard their own fiefdoms. This hierarchy was threatened by the democratic community approach. So they had to ensure that the status quo was maintained. Heaven help us that the public might decide what should happen.

Now, the groups spend most of their time filling in acquittal forms and responding to Australian Government demands for information and developing policies.

A change back to the original purpose of regional groups, that is community driven environmental change, less reporting and more action would achieve excellent outcomes.