14 December 2012

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Re: Senate Enquiry into "The effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia".

I would like to take this opportunity to provide comments regarding the above Senate Inquiry. The points raised in the Terms of Reference are addressed sequentially below:

(a) management of key threats to listed species and ecological communities;

Key threats to listed species and ecological communities can arise from a diversity of sources. As a consequence there needs to be considerable collaboration across sectors and departments in order to address threats in a coordinated fashion. For example, environmental weeds are a significant threat to biodiversity in the Burnett Mary Region where I live. This is well identified and in many cases the measures needed to address these issues are well understood, albeit costly in many instances. Early intervention when an new infestation arises is critical to ensuring that a pest is brought under control in a cost-effective manner. However the departments responsible for these activities at both a state and federal level are experiencing severe cuts and uncertainty about future tenure. This has implications for the escalation of costs of both control of the weeds, and the economic damage they cause. In addition it places a large burden on private landholders and community organisations

(b) development and implementation of recovery plans;

In my professional life I am developing a Recovery Plan in partnership with the organisation I work for and SEWPaC. My comments here relate to my experience of developing this plan, coordinating recovery team activities, working with the Technical Advisory Group and undertaking community consultation activities associated with the plan. These comments are solely my opinion which is not necessarily shared by my employer or SEWPaC.

This recovery plan is like the regional recovery plans in that it is constrained to a particular geographical area, but is less complex. Whilst recovery plans for particular species are essential for addressing the requirements of species that cover large geographical distributions, the scale of this

recovery plan has provided great benefits in terms of ability to engage the community in the recovery process. This is critical to the success of any recovery plan, particularly in a climate of limited investment in environmental activities. Community organisations and volunteers undertake countless hours of weeding, planting, raising awareness and looking after their local area. They also lobby decision makers and influence decisions relevant to the recovery process. These factors are often overlooked in recovery plans. I believe that this is in part because quantifying the impact of these activities is not a mainstream activity of biologists and ecologists. By involving expertise from social science, these activities could be evaluated in more rigorous ways and be given appropriate standing that is equal to other recovery activities. To facilitate this, the template used for recovery plans and the thinking about performance criteria and monitoring and evaluation needs to be adapted and staff within SEWPaC exposed to these social research methods.

The way in which action prioritisation and costing occurs is also in need of a revamp. Recovery plans needs to be adaptable and flexible in the current climate where funding cycles are often short and there may be uncertainty about priorities of funding bodies from year to year or cycle to cycle.

The difficulty in funding recovery plan implementation is another impediment to recovery planning actually achieving its goals. Recovery plans have not been given a priority for funding in the Caring for Country Business Plans of the past. This is rather perplexing given the effort expended in amassing the expertise, analysing it and identifying the actions that are most likely to contribute to recovery of a threatened species. Although the Prospectus released recently by Caring for Country indicates some alignment with recovery plans, a stronger and closer link would be worth exploring. This is because it will ensure better value for money in expenditure of on ground work.

(c) management of critical habitat across all land tenures;

Critical habitat on any tenure appears to be a bit of a stumbling block for the implementation of the EPBC Act at the moment. From an ecological perspective it is a crucial idea, because without availability of critical habitat for all stages of its life cycle, a species is unlikely to survive and reproduce. I believe it is worthy idea that should be used more extensively in conservation of threatened species. This suggestion aligns with a recommendation of the Hawke Review of the EPBC Act.

(d) regulatory and funding arrangements at all levels of government;

There could be a stronger link between local government planning schemes, state government and federal processes. A disconnect is apparent between these levels. This disconnect is fostered by different systems of classifying species as threatened and different systems of rating weed species.

(e) timeliness and risk management within the listings processes;

I do not have any comments related to this item.

(f) the historical record of state and territory governments on these matters; and

The Traveston Crossing dam proposal clearly illustrated why a national oversight is important for environmental assessments. This is particularly important in instances where the state government is a proponent of a project. However, it would appear to be important in all instances because the state does not have responsibility for the obligations of the Australian government, nor does it have responsibility for responding to the wishes of the majority of the national population.

(g) any other related matter.

Environmental Impact Assessments conducted as part of assessments under the EPBC Act generate large amounts of data that would help fill gaps in knowledge about habitat quality and species distribution. This data is often not made available in publicly accessible databases such as Wildnet in Queensland. It would be of great public benefit if this data were provided for inclusion in relevant databases.

Thank for your consideration of my submission. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss any of the points raised.

Yours sincerely

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