

Natural resource management

Introduction

- 6.1 Natural resource management (NRM) is ‘the sustainable management of Australia’s natural resources (our land, water, marine and biological systems) to ensure our ongoing social, economic and environmental wellbeing’.¹ NRM involves those at the individual, local, regional, state and national levels, from the private, community and government sectors.
- 6.2 NRM governance has become increasingly complex since the 1970s, when NRM issues were largely dealt with by individual states and territories, and soil conservation was a high priority. The 1980s saw the introduction of coordinated national arrangements, including the Landcare network. The 1990s saw an increase in the number of environmental non-government organisations (NGOs), the creation of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and national strategies including the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), and the introduction of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). From 2000, the focus shifted to regional knowledge and integration, with the formation of 56 regional NRM organisations, the creation of integrated regional NRM plans, and a focus on on-farm biodiversity conservation and environmental management.
- 6.3 The NRM governance structure has developed through the following Australian Government programs:
- National Soil Conservation Program (1983-1992)
 - National Landcare Program (1992-2008)

1 Australian Government, *Caring for our country business plan 2012-13*, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra, 2011, p. 95.

- Natural Heritage Trust (1997-2008)
 - National Action Plan on Water Quality and Salinity (2001-2008)
 - Caring for our Country (from 2008).
- 6.4 Over the past 20 years the devolution of responsibility to regional and local levels has been evident, with the Australian Government moving towards an integrated, landscape-scale approach to conservation and NRM, using a regional delivery model, and realising the need for 'effective and adaptive management regimes' to support targets in different management contexts.²

Regional delivery model

- 6.5 The current system of NRM governance is a regional delivery model. There are 56 NRM regions in Australia, each based on catchments or bioregions. The boundaries are agreed by the Federal Government in association with the state and territory governments. Each region is overseen by a management body – known as a regional NRM organisation, NRM group or Catchment Management Authority (CMA) – and has a NRM plan.
- 6.6 In Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, regional NRM organisations are based in the community sector. In the remaining states and territories, regional NRM organisations are based in the government sector, and some have statutory responsibilities.

National framework

- 6.7 The national framework within which regional NRM organisations and NRM bodies operate comprises a range of initiatives and strategies (some of which are listed below) that cover funding, coordination and governance arrangements.
- 6.8 The **Caring for our Country** (CFOC) initiative is the Federal Government program for funding environmental management of Australia's resources. Baseline funding for regional NRM organisations, provided through CFOC, is due to cease in June this year. Organisations may apply for Open Call funding, provided through CFOC, which also provides resources for the Environmental Stewardship Program for private land managers, the Working on Country program for Indigenous ranger groups, and Community Action Grants.

2 Australian Government, *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009-30*, endorsed by the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, Canberra, May 2009, p. 4. This example referred to 'effective and adaptive management regimes' as supporting actions to meet national targets for a National Reserve System.

- 6.9 The **Clean Energy Future Package** includes:
- The Biodiversity Fund, which is designed to support landholders to undertake restoration and conservation projects, and control pests and weeds
 - The Regional NRM Planning for Climate Change Fund, which provides funding to identified regional NRM organisations to incorporate climate change mitigation and adaptation approaches into existing NRM plans, in order to guide regional NRM planning in a nationally consistent way.
- 6.10 The **Carbon Farming Initiative** encourages sustainable farming practices and provides funding for landscape restoration projects. Farmers and land managers may earn carbon credits by storing carbon or reducing greenhouse gas emissions on the land.³
- 6.11 Some of the nationally agreed strategies relevant to natural resource managers include:
- Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-30 (Biodiversity Strategy), which includes 10 interim national targets for the first five years, to be formally reviewed in 2015
 - Australian Pest Animal Strategy
 - Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009-30 (NRS Strategy)
 - Australian Weeds Strategy
 - National framework for the management and monitoring of Australia's native vegetation.
- 6.12 The Standing Council on Environment and Water – as part of the COAG council system, having replaced the NRM Ministerial Council after a review of the ministerial council system undertaken by COAG in 2010 – considers matters of national significance on environment and water issues.

Benefits of NRM delivery at local and regional levels

- 6.13 The Committee received submissions from 11 regional NRM organisations, met with the South West Catchments Council (SWCC) and South Coast NRM in Bunbury, and spoke with a representative from Territory NRM at a public hearing in Darwin. The Committee heard from these bodies about some of the benefits of having NRM delivered at local and regional levels.

3 Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, 'Carbon Farming Initiative – Think Change', <<http://www.climatechange.gov.au/cfi>> viewed 3 January 2013.

- 6.14 The SWCC stated that regional bodies have an advantage in dealing with the changes to biodiversity due to climate change because, while supported at a federal level, they have good relationships with state government agencies, rural community groups (such as Landcare groups), NGOs, and local shires.⁴
- 6.15 The Committee heard examples and suggestions of the successful collaboration and engagement between the local community and regional NRM organisations.⁵ Ms Kate Andrews, Chair of Territory NRM, cited the success of the Territory conservation agreements (voluntary 10-year binding agreements entered into by pastoral landholders) as a good example of working in a collaborative way as an NGO.⁶ Ms Andrews also stated that Territory NRM funds four pastoral Landcare positions, and that they are more trusted in the community as they are not necessarily recognised as being funded by the Federal Government.⁷
- 6.16 The Goulburn Broken CMA stated that members of the community are often more willing to engage with Conservation Management Networks – made up of private landholders, public agencies and the broader community – and Landcare Australia, as they are not perceived to be government agencies.⁸ The Border Rivers-Gwydir CMA stated that it had established meaningful relationships to enable effective delivery of biodiversity conservation programs.⁹
- 6.17 Another of the benefits of NRM delivery by local groups is the level of engagement engendered in the community, as demonstrated by the fact that, as at August 2012, around 93 per cent of farmers were practicing Landcare on their farms.¹⁰

4 South West Catchments Council (SWCC), *Submission 13*, pp. 11-12.

5 Mr Mark Batty, Executive Manager, Environment and Waste, Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA), *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 10; Dr Jeremy VanDerWal, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Tropical Biodiversity and Climate Change, *Transcript of evidence*, 5 July 2012, p. 6; Mr Andrew Maclean, Executive Director, Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA), *Transcript of evidence*, 5 July 2012, p. 29.

6 Ms Kate Andrews, Chair, Territory Natural Resource Management (NRM), *Transcript of evidence*, 4 July 2012, p. 9.

7 Ms Andrews, Territory NRM, *Transcript of evidence*, 4 July 2012, p. 10.

8 Goulburn Broken CMA, *Submission 6*, p. [3].

9 Border Rivers-Gwydir CMA, *Submission 7*, p. 4.

10 National Landcare Facilitator, *Australian farmers embrace Landcare, but call for innovation*, media release, Chatswood, NSW, 9 August 2012.

Is the system working?

- 6.18 The Committee encountered widespread support for the regional NRM delivery model, but also heard about many areas in which improvements could be made, especially in the areas of governance coordination and integration, and program delivery with regard to baseline monitoring and funding.

Integration between levels of governance

- 6.19 There was much discussion during the course of the inquiry about the need for better coordination between the different levels in the NRM system. The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) suggested that the Federal Government increase coordination with the state and territory governments in relation to the Biodiversity Strategy, the NRS Strategy, the National Wildlife Corridors Plan (NWCP) and the CFOC initiative, possibly by providing incentives for reforms that align state and territory government laws, policies and practices to the achievement of agreed national biodiversity targets.¹¹ Dr Judy Henderson, a Member of the NWCP Advisory Group suggested the need for a uniform standard of governance across the various regional areas, and for the regional planning process to be integrated with Federal Government programs.¹²
- 6.20 The Committee heard that more integration at the regional level was required, with local governments, regional NRM organisations and Landcare groups all needing to play important roles in environmental management.¹³ The Border Rivers-Gwydir CMA observed that: ‘[s]ignificant additional coordination of other governance arrangements, knowledge support and collaborative partnerships is required to ensure that the regional delivery model continues to be effective’, and that there is a need for knowledge to be provided, relating to the resilience and disturbance thresholds of the ecosystems for which regional NRM organisations are responsible.¹⁴
- 6.21 The Queensland Murray-Darling Committee stated that its regional NRM plan was not consistently referred to or considered by key stakeholder organisations or institutions when they are formulating new regional policies, strategies and plans.¹⁵

11 Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), *Submission 64*, pp. 9-10.

12 Dr Judy Henderson, Member, National Wildlife Corridors Plan (NWCP) Advisory Group, *Transcript of evidence*, 12 October 2012, pp. 23, 26.

13 Border Rivers-Gwydir CMA, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

14 Border Rivers-Gwydir CMA, *Submission 7*, p. 4.

15 Queensland Murray-Darling Committee, *Submission 14*, p. 12.

- 6.22 Ms Andrews from Territory NRM stated that decisions needed to be made at the most appropriate level, where people have an understanding of the context that the decisions are being made in.¹⁶ Similarly, the South Australian Government stated that 'government is able to create the institutional frameworks and provide the guidance at a high level' and that, for the Australian Government, opportunities lie in providing 'frameworks at the high level and providing the support to enable those people closest to the ground to progress what they see as important at the time.'¹⁷ Ms Penelope Figgis, Vice Chair for Oceania for the International Union for Conservation of Nature World Commission on Protected Areas (IUCN WCPA) stated that 'big picture national leadership is critical'.¹⁸
- 6.23 The Committee heard that implementation of NRM plans in non-statutory jurisdictions (such as WA) can be difficult where there is conflict between NRM plans and any land-use planning powers of the local jurisdiction. In the event of any conflict, local planning powers will generally override a NRM plan, which means that the best environmental outcomes are not always achievable due to conflicting governance powers.¹⁹
- 6.24 The Committee was advised that, in WA, local governments are successfully engaging with NRM regions on issues such as the impacts that land-use planning decision making is having on the environment.²⁰ The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) stated that regional NRM organisations need to understand the land-use planning framework, and suggested that provision of the right expertise could achieve this.²¹
- 6.25 The Committee heard views which compared the operation of CFOC to other funding programs, such as the National Heritage Trust (NHT). Mr Keiran McNamara, Director General of the WA Department of Environment and Conservation, told the Committee that, compared to the former operation of the NHT, CFOC is being run in less of a partnership way, and that now there was more of a direct relationship between regional NRM organisations and the Federal Government.²²
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16 Ms Andrews, Territory NRM, *Transcript of evidence*, 4 July 2012, p. 12.

17 Mr Greg Leaman, Executive Director, Policy, Department of Environment and Natural Resources (South Australian Government), *Transcript of evidence*, 17 May 2012, p. 12.

18 Ms Penelope Figgis, Vice Chair for Oceania, International Union for Conservation of Nature World Commission on Protected Areas (IUCN WCPA), *Transcript of evidence*, 28 March 2012, p. 25.

19 Mr Batty, WALGA, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 10.

20 Mr Batty, WALGA, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 10.

21 Mr Batty, WALGA, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, pp. 9, 11.

22 Mr Keiran McNamara, Director General, Department of Environment and Conservation (Western Australian Government) (DEC), *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 4.

Mr McNamara was concerned that there was no longer discussion about CFOC at the COAG ministerial council level, as there used to be during the NHT.²³ The SWCC stated that CFOC allowed past strong local NRM planning to lapse.²⁴

- 6.26 The Committee also received evidence from Greening Australia about the more competitive nature of CFOC, as compared to the NHT, with community groups now having to compete with the NRM bodies for funding.²⁵ Mr Sean Sullivan, Acting Deputy Secretary of the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPAC) gave evidence to the effect that expression of interest processes could be expected in future for funding application requirements, in order to foster cooperation and collaboration between regions to address shared issues.²⁶

Regional program delivery

- 6.27 The Committee heard that regional NRM organisations have had varied success in delivering NRM programs, due to the differences in the level of skills and knowledge within the organisations, particularly on biodiversity and connectivity conservation, but also on land-use planning legislation.²⁷ The SWCC stated that 'NRM governance has become increasingly complex over time and will require people with good analysis, able leadership and good knowledge'.²⁸
- 6.28 Professor Kristine French, President of the Ecological Society of Australia stated on her own behalf that inserting ecologists into CMAs would boost the level of skill and help lead and guide the community a little better, but indicated that the lack of available funding prevented those people being engaged in working in the field.²⁹
- 6.29 BirdLife Australia and the Conservation Council of South Australia suggested that the Federal Government roll out biodiversity education and training programs to all sectors of the community, in order to

23 Mr McNamara, DEC, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 7.

24 SWCC, *Submission 13*, p. 12.

25 Mr Hamish Jolly, Advisor and former Chief Executive Officer, Greening Australia, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 34.

26 Mr Sean Sullivan, Acting Deputy Secretary, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPAC), *Transcript of evidence*, 12 October 2012, p. 29.

27 Professor Kristine French, President, Ecological Society of Australia, *Transcript of evidence*, 28 March 2012, p. 18; Ms Figgis, IUCN WCPA, *Transcript of evidence*, 28 March 2012, p. 25; Mr Batty, WALGA, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 10.

28 SWCC, *Submission 13*, p. 12.

29 Professor French, Ecological Society of Australia, *Transcript of evidence*, 28 March 2012, p. 18.

- 'upgrade ecological literacy, and improve skills in biodiversity management'.³⁰ Ms Andrews of Territory NRM suggested the need to invest in long-term training programs for people, to ensure that there is the human capacity to deal with biodiversity issues in future.³¹
- 6.30 Several regional NRM organisations discussed the successful local programs being undertaken. One such example described as having gained strong community acceptance is the enterprise-based conservation program being undertaken in the Western Division of NSW regions. The program has established conservation as a viable alternative enterprise to grazing, recognising an economic value of the environmental services provided.³² The Namoi CMA stated that the program can be undermined by surrounding land-use decisions, and ineffective if not supported by an effective legislative regime.³³ Both the Western CMA and the Namoi CMA emphasised the need for greater and ongoing funding for such private land conservation programs.
- 6.31 It was suggested that the strong relationship enjoyed between Territory NRM and the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association assists in successful program delivery in the Northern Territory region. Ms Andrews stated that Territory NRM holds an annual NRM forum, at which local groups and individuals can get together and discuss what is working.³⁴ The Conservation Management Networks and Landcare groups in the Goulburn Broken CMA's region also provide forums for community members to meet and exchange information. The Goulburn Broken CMA suggested that such forums, along with environmental grants and other instruments, needed to link in to state and federal programs in order to create confidence in the actions being undertaken as part of a bigger policy picture.³⁵
- 6.32 Terrain NRM from Queensland stated that the combination of the Carbon Farming Initiative and existing NRM arrangements is effective in ensuring carbon sequestration and abatement will improve landscape health and resilience.³⁶
- 6.33 The Committee heard that relationships between regional NRM organisations and local groups can work as a double-edged sword, in that
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30 BirdLife Australia (formerly Birds Australia), *Submission 40*, p. [12]; Conservation Council of South Australia, *Submission 58*, p. [6].

31 Ms Andrews, Territory NRM, *Transcript of evidence*, 4 July 2012, p. 9.

32 Western CMA, *Submission 42*, pp. 3-4.

33 Namoi CMA, *Submission 31*, p. 3.

34 Ms Andrews, Territory NRM, *Transcript of evidence*, 4 July 2012, p. 11.

35 Goulburn Broken CMA, *Submission 6*, p. [3].

36 Terrain NRM, *Submission 47*, p. 7.

they can be more trusted in the community but not necessarily recognised as being funded by the Federal Government.³⁷

Baseline monitoring

- 6.34 One of the 10 interim national targets in the Biodiversity Strategy is to establish a national long-term biodiversity monitoring and reporting system by 2015.³⁸
- 6.35 It was suggested in evidence that the abolition in 2009 of the research and development corporation Land and Water Australia left a gap in natural environmental research. In 2010, a Productivity Commission report recommended the creation of a new rural research and development corporation, to invest in non-industry specific research and development that promotes productive and sustainable resource use by Australia's rural sector.³⁹ The Australian Government did not agree with this recommendation.⁴⁰
- 6.36 The 2011 Australian State of the Environment report stated that biodiversity indicators for national state of the environment reporting have differed since the first report in 1996, 'due largely to the lack of information available.'⁴¹
- 6.37 BirdLife Australia suggested that the reintroduction of a research and development corporation was required in order to undertake research into sustainable land and water management and 'establish a long-term monitoring and auditing framework for biodiversity across the continent to assess the impacts of climate change and other drivers of terrestrial, freshwater and marine biodiversity loss'.⁴²
- 6.38 The 2009 report by the Biodiversity and Climate Change Expert Advisory Group, commissioned by the Australian Government and prepared for the NRM Ministerial Council, outlined an approach proposing a new national institution to review the status of Australia's natural resources and advise on progress in achieving biodiversity targets. This institution could also

37 Ms Andrews, Territory NRM, *Transcript of evidence*, 4 July 2012, p. 10.

38 Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-30*, report prepared by the National Biodiversity Strategy Review Task Group, NRMCC, Canberra, 2010, p. 10.

39 Australian Government, *Rural Research and Development Corporations: Report no. 52, final inquiry report*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, 2011, pp. 218-20.

40 Australian Government, *Rural Research and Development Policy Statement*, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra, July 2012, p. 34.

41 State of the Environment 2011 Committee, *Australia State of the Environment 2011: An independent report presented to the Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities*, DSEWPAC, Canberra, 2011, p. 576.

42 BirdLife Australia, *Submission 40*, p. [9].

provide advice at the COAG level in relation to the need to adjust targets and programs, based on the knowledge gained.⁴³

Funding

6.39 The Committee heard that one of the barriers to engaging the community with biodiversity conservation is a lack of consistent funding and the existence of grant application 'fatigue'. The Committee heard from Professor Mark Hovenden from the University of Tasmania, in relation to research on the impacts of rising carbon dioxide concentrations, that a lack of security and certainty in future funding of research tasks, created by short funding cycles, results in research being ad hoc and locally directed, and makes carrying out long-term experiments very difficult.⁴⁴ The Committee heard about the need for significant long-term investment for the success of NRM programs.⁴⁵ Ms Figgis from the IUCN WCPA suggested that:

... we should be looking at projects on 10-year contracts, where people have to report against indicators and perform as in any contract. I do not think they should be short term. I do not think they should be yearly. I think that is exhausting for people. No truly important land repair effort is going to take one year. The danger of that scatter-gun drip-feed approach is that you end up not achieving very much.⁴⁶

6.40 The Committee heard from Mr John Gunn, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Institute of Marine Science that more investment is needed in sustained rather than three-year lapsing program measurements of the environment, in the terrestrial, marine and cryospheric environments.⁴⁷

6.41 The NSW Environmental Trust is an 'independent statutory body established by the NSW Government to fund a broad range of organisations to undertake projects that enhance the environment of NSW'.⁴⁸ Mr Kevin Evans, Chief Executive Officer of the National Parks Association of NSW informed the Committee that the Environmental

43 W. Steffen, A.A. Burbidge, L. Hughes, R. Kitching, D. Lindenmayer, W. Musgrave, M. Stafford Smith, P.A. Werner, *Australia's biodiversity and climate change*, CSIRO publishing, Collingwood, Victoria, 2009, p. 164.

44 Associate Professor Mark Hovenden, University of Tasmania, *Transcript of evidence*, Melbourne, 4 May 2012, p. 32.

45 Border Rivers-Gwydir CMA, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

46 Ms Figgis, IUCN WCPA, *Transcript of evidence*, 28 March 2012, p. 23.

47 Mr John Gunn, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Institute of Marine Science, *Transcript of evidence*, 5 July 2012, p. 22.

48 NSW Government, 'Environmental Trust: NSW Environment and Heritage', <<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/grants/envtrust.htm>> viewed 9 April 2013.

Trust had – for the round of funding at the time Mr Evans spoke to the Committee in March 2012 – changed the length of funding provided for on-ground regeneration programs from one year to six years:

So initiatives that require a long-term commitment to restore the habitat can now have a guarantee that it is not going to be one year of funding and then the challenge of doing it again; it is now six years for some of the large scale projects, which we believe is a big step in the right direction.⁴⁹

- 6.42 Mr Jolly from Greening Australia suggested a fixed and variable component to funding could be introduced, for the groups that NRMs select to work with.⁵⁰
- 6.43 The Committee heard from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies that Indigenous communities are very grants-driven and that ‘more consistent long-term funding with appropriate administrative, community engagement and management support is required to ensure delivery of high quality outcomes’.⁵¹
- 6.44 The Federal Government provided \$711 million in baseline funding to the 56 regional NRM organisations in the first five years of CFOC.⁵² This baseline funding will cease from July 2013.⁵³ The Committee heard that CFOC had provided very little funding for local governments. For example, about 0.08 per cent of the program’s funding has gone to local governments in Western Australia.⁵⁴
- 6.45 The Committee understands that, from July 2013, a new five year funding plan for Caring for our Country will come into operation, with the Australian Government committed to providing more than \$2 billion over that period.⁵⁵ The funding model offers two streams, relating to

49 Mr Kevin Evans, Chief Executive Officer, National Parks Association of NSW, *Transcript of evidence*, 28 March 2012, p. 29.

50 Mr Jolly, Greening Australia, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 34.

51 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), *Submission 34.1*, p. 7; Dr Lisa Strelein, Director of Research, Indigenous Country and Governance, AIATSIS, *Transcript of evidence*, 20 September 2012, p. 2.

52 Australian Government, *Caring for our country business plan 2012-13*, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra, 2011, p. 12.

53 Australian Government, *Caring for our Country*, ‘Regional base-level funding’, <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/funding/previous/regional-base-level/index.html>> viewed 9 April 2013.

54 Mr Batty, WALGA, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2011, p. 10.

55 Australian Government, *Caring for our Country*, ‘Funding’, <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/funding/index.html>> viewed 9 April 2013.

sustainable environment and sustainable agriculture, with funding programs including:

- community environment grants available to 'help community groups and organisations to contribute to the sustainable management of Australia's environment'
- target area grants to provide funding for projects 'to maintain ecosystem services, protect our conservation estate, and enhance the capacity of Indigenous communities to conserve and protect natural resources across six target areas'
- community Landcare grants to 'help local community-based organisations and groups take on-ground action and build their capacity and skills to manage their natural environment and productive lands'.⁵⁶

6.46 One of the issues raised in the review of *Caring for our Country* was that the competition for funding did not promote cooperation between regions. Mr Sullivan of DSEWPAC stated that the Department was looking at ways to promote cooperation and, as referred to above:

... you can envisage some programmatic funding being put out to more expression-of-interest processes, where we are saying, 'Look, we're interested in your ideas', and then fostering the cooperation and also promoting the fact that we are looking for cooperation between regions, particularly where those issues are shared.⁵⁷

Conclusions and recommendations

Natural resource management program delivery

- 6.47 The Committee encountered widespread support for the regional NRM delivery model. Evidence suggested the need for a strategic and large scale plan that is locally driven. This requires long term, stable arrangements in order to be successful, including more collaborative relationships across state and territory borders.
- 6.48 The Committee heard about the need for greater and longer term funding grants for regional NRM organisations and local NRM groups. Short funding cycles make it difficult for regional NRM organisations and local NRM groups to have certainty and confidence in planning for the future,

56 Australian Government, *Caring for our Country*, 'Funding', <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/funding/index.html>> viewed 9 April 2013.

57 Mr Sullivan, DSEWPAC, *Transcript of evidence*, 12 October 2012, p. 29.

and to maintain competent and consistent human capital. It was suggested that longer funding cycles would be more beneficial.

- 6.49 The Committee heard that the application process for funding was too competitive between regional NRM organisations and local NRM groups, as well as across regions. DSEWPAC gave evidence to the effect that expression of interest processes could be expected for future funding application requirements, in order to foster cooperation between regions in getting together to address shared issues.
- 6.50 Overall, the Committee was impressed by the professionalism and commitment of the NRM organisations and local NRM groups that participated in the inquiry. However, the Committee is also aware that, because NRM bodies originated in different jurisdictions and with different capacities nationwide, their consistency, standards and quality are inevitably variable. As recipients of public funds, all NRM organisations and local NRM groups should be able to demonstrate that those resources will be used to best effect and the Committee believes there is scope for improvement.
- 6.51 The Committee would like the Australian Government to review NRM boards, in particular in relation to these three areas.

Recommendation 12

- 6.52 **In recognising the importance that NRM boards operate effectively, the Committee recommends that the Australian Government conduct a review, with particular reference to:**
- **funding, including assessing claims that existing application processes result in ‘grant fatigue’, and can foster competition, rather than cooperation between NRM bodies**
 - **measures to improve consistency of standards between NRM bodies nationally**
 - **measures which may improve skills management, including sufficient capacity to attract and retain personnel, especially in regional areas.**

Research and development

- 6.53 The Committee notes that in evidence provided to the inquiry there was broad support for the re-establishment of a research and development corporation to continue the work of the now disbanded Land and Water Australia. However the Australian Government, in its response last year

to the Productivity Commission's recommendation to create such a body, stated that 'increased focus on collaboration and cross-sectoral research can be achieved within existing arrangements.' The Government also outlined some of its plans to achieve this.⁵⁸

- 6.54 In recognition of the expressed need for re-creating such a body, the Committee believes that it would be reasonable for the Australian Government to confirm that it is meeting these research and development needs through other means.

Recommendation 13

- 6.55 **That the Australian Government advise the Committee and stakeholders as to how the research and development needs formerly undertaken by Land and Water Australia are now being met.**

58 Australian Government, *Rural Research and Development Policy Statement*, July 2012, p. 34.