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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Inquiry into Australia's Biodiversity in a Changing Climate

The Local Government Association of NSW and Shires Association of NSW (the Associations) are the peak bodies for NSW Local Government.

Together, the Local Government Association and the Shires Association represent all the 152 NSW general-purpose councils, the special-purpose county councils and the regions of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council. The mission of the Associations is to be credible, professional organisations representing Local Government and facilitating the development of an effective community-based system of Local Government in NSW. In pursuit of this mission, the Associations represent the views of councils to NSW and Australian Governments; provide industrial relations and specialist services to councils and promote Local Government to the community and the media.

The Local Government Association of NSW and the Shires Association of NSW (LGSA) are pleased to provide a submission to the Australian Government House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts, *Inquiry into Australia's Biodiversity in a Changing Climate, in relation to nationally important ecosystems*.

Councils in NSW are increasingly seeking to prepare for climate change. A 2009 survey by the then NSW Government Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW) showed that 82% of the councils that responded to the survey were planning for climate change.

The effect of a changing climate may manifest in a number of changes, all of which will impact on biodiversity. Such changes may include increasing temperatures and temperature extremes, changing rainfall patterns, rising sea levels and increasing frequency of extreme events, including floods, heat waves and weather which creates a high bushfire risk.

Climate change will have an impact on biodiversity. The extent of the impact, and therefore the identification of appropriate management actions is challenging given the intrinsic complexity of biodiversity.

Species may have the capacity to adapt to climatic change, by evolving behaviour or moving and taking refuge in more suitable areas, however this will largely depend on the pace of the changing climate and the availability of suitable habitat. Climate change may create opportunities for further establishment of invasive species, including weeds and pest animals which will bring a whole new set of management issues and may further threaten remaining biodiversity.

Ongoing research is necessary to monitor changes in biodiversity, and the correlation with changes in climate. Such work is required if management and policy options are to be developed and delivered in a timely manner, and importantly prior to more biodiversity losses. Councils rely on such information in developing their own management responses and to assist in their strategic planning processes as well.

The key areas of concern in relation to the impact of climate change on biodiversity, and as identified by member Councils include:

- Exacerbation of loss of connectivity due to habitat clearing and fragmentation
- More frequent and/or severe fire regimes
- Increased risk of pest and pathogen outbreaks
- Greater potential for transformative weed establishment and rapid spread
- Impacts on terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems as a consequence of higher temperatures (including overnight and heat wave periods)
- More variable soil moisture
- Changes to stream flows
- Risk of inundation from rising sea levels and salt water intrusion into ground water dependent ecosystems
- Potential further loss of salt marsh remnants due to sea level rise
- Coastal ecosystems generally, may be heavily impacted and suffer severe losses, as these ecosystems do not have the capacity to migrate inland in response to rising sea levels

Councils require further information that is scientific, Local Government specific and at a local scale to inform decision making. Forums such as those organized by National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) have provided a good opportunity for Local Government to engage with researchers. Research funding should continue to encourage collaboration with end users to ensure research outputs are useful to decision makers. Local Government would welcome further opportunities for collaborative projects with research scientists, particularly projects that directly engage Local Government and build capacity for biodiversity management.

What are councils doing to protect biodiversity?

Best practice responses to managing climate change and biodiversity risks for councils include the maintenance of regional corridors, minimising threats to biodiversity and minimising clearing and fragmentation.

Biodiversity Strategies

Many councils have strategic plans such as Biodiversity Strategies, and while these plans are not statutory, they have been identified as a valuable tool for councils in identifying biodiversity in their Local Government area and formulating management actions. These plans have the capacity to incorporate some climate change considerations as well.

Community Strategic plans

All councils are in the process of preparing, or have completed, a Community Strategic Plan (CSP), under the requirements of the *Local Government Act 1993*. A final group of ninety three councils are working on their CSPs which are due by 30 June 2012. These plans set the long term objectives for the local area and identifies how these will be achieved. Climate change is invariably emerging as a key issue of concern for local communities.

Some examples include:

- The Manning Valley CSP, prepared by Greater Taree City Council identifies 'Preparing for Climate Change' as a key area, although goes on to say: 'At the commencement point of our plan we do not have a clear picture of how climate change will affect the Manning and what the impact will be upon our community.'¹
- The Blue Mountains City Council CSP in its section on Environment, identifies 'respond to climate change' as the first priority which emerged through their community consultation process and 'reduce carbon emissions' as their second priority.²

There is a real opportunity to encourage strategic level thinking about climate change and biodiversity interactions, however councils may seek more guidance in translating goals and statements into action oriented activity.

¹ *The Manning Valley Community Plan 2010 -2030*, page 25

² *Sustainable Blue Mountains 2025*, page 14

Land use plans

The protection of remnant ecosystems has a key role to play in biodiversity adaptation under climate change. Local Environmental Plans (LEPs) can exclude development in areas of high conservation through appropriate zoning and development controls. This may lead to instances where land may need to be down zoned or land in private ownership may need to be acquired, however this is a complex, often contentious and costly exercise for councils.

In NSW, a model LEP, also known as the Standard Instrument or LEP template, exists to create a common structure and language for LEPs. Councils have raised concerns that the LEP template provides inadequate consideration of climate change. Using biodiversity as an example, councils around the state are including specific local provisions to protect priority biodiversity assets which they have determined priority, however there has been no planning guidance around protecting biodiversity assets in preparation for climate change. Greater capacity could be included in the model LEP template to enable councils to proactively plan to manage biodiversity for climate change.

Risk assessment modeling

Councils are undertaking climate change risk assessments. Over 80 NSW councils (53% of NSW councils) have completed a climate change risk assessment. These risk assessments may include NRM and biodiversity issues however most have focused on issues relating to councils' liabilities. Commonly, councils have sought to address asset management planning, tree management strategies, community expectations, maintenance programs, stormwater and drainage infrastructure, flood plans and funding.

Review plans of management

Councils will need to consider the appropriate management regimes for council managed land and reserves to ensure that climate change considerations are included in management regimes. Councils are required to prepare a Plan of Management for all council owned and managed lands. Advice to councils on issues for consideration here would be well received.

Community engagement

Councils have strong local links with their community and are experienced at engaging and liaising with the community through a range of means. This includes newsletters, holding workshops and events but also specific consultation sessions on relevant community issues. Many councils provide valuable resources to their local community to assist in raising awareness on a range of issues, including many environmental management issues. Councils could be well placed to assist in engaging with the community on climate change and biodiversity issues and responses.

Councils are generally very responsive to their local communities' needs and interests and will undoubtedly be a point of call for the community interested in accessing information on climate change. However, it's important to recognise that councils have limited budgets and capacity to take on wider responsibilities. If Local Government is to assume more responsibility for managing the risks of climate change on biodiversity, then opportunities to support these actions should be explored.

What support may be appropriate to assist councils in the biodiversity and climate change challenges ahead?

Adapting and planning for the impacts of climate change on biodiversity will be challenging for councils, given the complexities and to some extent unknown impacts which may result. Councils will need the support of other spheres of Government through the timely delivery of appropriate information and resources to assist in delivering management responses, as well as planning for the impacts of climate change.

The Australian Government could assist Local Government by providing templates for communications materials so that councils can adopt consistent messages about climate change where appropriate to enhance community understanding. A template would also enable councils to tailor the communications materials in order to include locally specific messages and examples.

The recent announcement of the Australian Government's plan for a Clean Energy Future incorporates the development of a Biodiversity Fund. This Fund will provide \$946 million over its first six years, to support

landholders to undertake projects that establish, restore, protect or manage biodiverse carbon stores. It aims to improve the resilience of species to the impacts of climate change, enhance the environmental outcomes of carbon farming projects, and help landholders protect carbon and biodiversity values on their land. Support will be provided to landholders to control weeds, pests and feral animals on their properties.

While Local Government is very supportive of the fund, and the assistance it provides to landholders, the LGSA seeks further advice on any assistance which will be made available to Local Government to ensure councils can plan and manage for biodiversity and climate change. It appears the details of the Biodiversity Fund are still being finalised, so there could be an opportunity to include a Local Government component in this fund. Councils have responsibilities as land holders and managers in addition to their planning and regulatory functions. The Associations would be pleased to assist further in the design and detail of such a component.

The Clean Energy Future announcement also provides \$44 million over five years for natural resource management regions to plan for climate change impacts through making their regional NRM plans 'climate ready'. Once again, we welcome this initiative but reiterate the need to support Local Government in their process of ensuring their plans are climate ready, but also the provision of assistance in the practical management issues they will face as land managers. Increasing weed infestations, changing fire management regimes and continued protection and restoration of remnant bushland areas will be issues for councils as much as they are for other land managers.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on behalf of Local Government, to the Inquiry into Australia's Biodiversity in a changing climate. We look forward to the results of this Inquiry and working with the Australian Government to support Local Government in managing biodiversity for climate change.

For further information on any of the issues raised, or to discuss this issue further please contact the Associations' Senior Policy Officer – NRM by phone _____ or email _____

Yours sincerely

 Bill Gillooly AM
Secretary General