

Introduction

- 1.1 Australia's catchment areas sustain life on this continent. They provide food and water for our communities, contribute substantially to our economy and provide the foundation for our rich and diverse natural environment.
- 1.2 Over the past decade, a compelling body of evidence has emerged that Australia's catchment systems are facing enormous and ongoing threats from human activities.¹ Unless we, as a national community, begin to address these problems, the quality of our life will be substantially eroded over the coming decades. It is not overstating the matter to say that the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems is the most pressing contemporary public policy issue facing the community.
- 1.3 The problems affecting Australia's catchment management systems affect urban and rural Australians alike: no member of the community is exempt. Already, many agriculturalists experience the effects of land degradation. Ultimately, they will be unable to continue farming unless action is taken immediately.
- 1.4 Apart from the farming sector, rural communities are experiencing not only degraded water supplies but also rising water tables and salinity that are destroying whole towns and villages from the ground up. Expensive elements of our rural infrastructure, such as roads, are being destroyed. As Dr Wendy Craik, then executive director of the National Farmers' Federation testified: 'salinity is affecting not only the farming sector but

1 Evidence of environmental degradation due to salinity was noticed in Western Australia as far back as 1917. See P L Eberbach, 'Salt-Affected Soils: Their Cause, Management and Cost' in J Pratley and A Robertson, *Agriculture and the Environmental Imperative*, CSIRO: Collingwood, 1998, p. 79. Dr Wendy Craik, executive director, National Farmers' Federation, advised the Committee at its hearing into public good conservation, that 'salinity had been identified as a problem in 1897'; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage inquiry into public good conservation, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 232.

also the whole community. You only have to drive to Cowra and bump along the road there and also look at the buildings in Wagga to see that it is a whole community problem'.²

- 1.5 These problems are not faced only by rural communities, but are now experienced by the outlying suburbs of our coastal cities and indeed the cities themselves. At the present rate of salinity increase in the Murray-Darling basin, Adelaide will not have water fit for human consumption by 2020.³
- 1.6 These are just a few well known examples. All these problems, however, impose additional and avoidable costs upon the entire community. Those costs are not only financial, such as the cost of repairing the damage or the cost of lost production, but a social cost, as our rural communities lose viability and the quality of life in our urban and rural communities is degraded.
- 1.7 It is sometimes claimed that urban Australians are not concerned about this problem. This is wrong: recent polls indicate that it is an issue that is of concern to the vast majority of Australians, no matter where they live.⁴ There is, then, no rural – urban divide, as some claim.
- 1.8 What emerged clearly from this inquiry, and what has emerged in other inquiries⁵ is the intense interest in these issues by Australians from all parts of the Commonwealth. Australians understand that the problems that the nation faces through poor catchment management encompass an inter-related set of issues that range across the spectrum of natural resource management concerns and they want ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

2 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 296.

3 The Hon. John Howard MP, *Our Vital Resources: National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality in Australia*, p. 1.

4 For example, see the Australian Conservation Foundation poll on land clearing, downloaded www.acfonline.org.au/campaigns/landclearing/briefings/Poll%20results_08_01landc.htm, accessed 10 August 2000.

5 Industry Commission, *A Full Repairing Lease: Inquiry into ecologically sustainable land management*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1998; Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – Australia, *Managing Natural Resources: A discussion paper for developing a national policy*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999; Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – Australia, *Steering Committee report to Australian governments on the public response to 'Managing Natural Resources in Rural Australia for a Sustainable Future: A discussion paper for developing a national policy'*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000. Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee, *Report: Commonwealth Environment Powers*, Parliament of the Commonwealth: Canberra, 1999, p. 91.

- 1.9 The Committee does acknowledge, however, that too often in discussions of natural resource management and catchment management issues the urban – rural divide is used to justify inaction. As well, the problems facing our catchment systems are used to advance narrow sectional interests to the detriment of present and future Australians. Finally, the development of appropriate and co-ordinated solutions is hindered by a lack of reliable information being unavailable or stakeholders not being aware of factual matters.
- 1.10 The community, like the Committee, believe that the inaction, the cost-shifting, the shifting of responsibility and political opportunism has to cease.
- 1.11 The expectation within the community is that legislators will act – sooner rather than later; decisively, rather than timidly. Australians want the talking to stop and the action to begin.
- 1.12 Furthermore, they do not want a piecemeal approach, but a national approach, co-ordinated at a national level, and founded upon a national policy to which all stakeholders should subscribe and in which all Australians have the opportunity to participate.
- 1.13 The Committee acknowledges that there are many initiatives addressing and many reports highlighting the problems facing our catchment systems. There has been, until recent times, little systematic and co-ordinated action. There is at the time of tabling this report, no nationally co-ordinated approach.
- 1.14 The Committee therefore welcomes the announcement by the Prime Minister, the Hon. John Howard MP, of *Our Vital Resources: National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality in Australia*. The action plan proposes the first co-ordinated, national approach to the problems of salinity and water quality. The plan provides the Commonwealth with the lead role in facilitating, in co-operation and agreement with the states, solutions to these problems. The Prime Minister said that unless the Commonwealth took the lead role, the problems ‘will never be fixed because there are competing and colliding state interests that only the facilitating, co-ordinating leadership role of the Federal Government can overcome’.⁶

6 Prime Minister, The Hon. John Howard, Press conference transcript on the launch of *Our Vital Resources: National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality in Australia*, Parliament House, Canberra, 10 October, 2000, downloaded from www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/2000/interview475.htm, accessed 11 October 2000.

- 1.15 While the Committee welcomes this initiative, it does believe that the action plan can be strengthened in a number of ways and specific recommendations to this effect are made in chapters 3 and 4.
- 1.16 This report does not aim to duplicate the findings of other inquiries or make specific recommendations on measures that could be used to address specific, local problems. Rather, the Committee seeks in this report to identify the systemic issues facing the development and implementation of a national approach to the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems and to provide a blueprint for such an approach.

Inquiry background

- 1.17 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage undertook a review of the 1997-98 annual report of the Department of the Environment and Heritage, and tabled a report on its review on 21 June 1999. This review was carried out under the provisions of House of Representatives Standing Order 324 (b).
- 1.18 The management of Australia's water resources, particularly regarding the health of urban and rural waterways and water quality standards, was outlined in the annual report and identified by the Committee in its review of that report as a topic warranting further examination.
- 1.19 On 2 June 1999 the Committee resolved to continue its investigation of the matters raised in the annual report through an inquiry into catchment management. In doing so, the Committee resolved to pay particular attention to the following matters:
- the development of catchment management in Australia;
 - the value of a catchment approach to the management of the environment;
 - best practice methods of preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation in catchments, and achieving environmental sustainability;
 - the role of different levels of government, the private sector and the community in the management of catchment areas;
 - planning, resourcing, implementation, co-ordination and co-operation in catchment management; and

- mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on catchment management programs, including the use of these reports for state of the environment reporting, and opportunities for review and improvement.
- 1.20 The Committee held inspections and public hearings in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, Canberra and Victoria.
- 1.21 At public hearings, the Committee heard from representatives from all levels of government, as well as industry, research, environmental and community groups who are involved in catchment management.
- 1.22 During inspections, the Committee met with catchment management groups to discuss on-ground issues such as administration, funding, best practice in catchment management, and how communities can be encouraged to partake in catchment activities.
- 1.23 The Committee has also looked at catchment projects on the ground, to get an appreciation of the types of activities undertaken by community catchment groups.

The structure of the report

- 1.24 Evidence taken by the Committee has shown that the current approach to, and application of catchment and natural resource management in Australia is ad hoc, inconsistent and confusing. In this report, the Committee attempts to highlight the various approaches to catchment and natural resource management employed by the states; to outline the benefits and problems of these approaches; and to make recommendations to simplify the administration of catchment management in Australia.
- 1.25 It is important to understand how catchment management is applied in Australia and to appreciate the environmental and social context in which it operates. Chapter 2 highlights environmental issues, and examines management strategies employed by the states and territories. Chapter 2 also looks at associated benefits and problems, and examines the level of support for catchment management.
- 1.26 Chapter 3 discusses the present administrative arrangements for catchment management in Australia. The current arrangements, based on inadequate information and ongoing monitoring, are poorly co-ordinated and do not provide for effective harmonisation of programs between jurisdictions. As a consequence, what would be effective programs in one

area can be undone by poorly conceived actions in another. Moreover, while specific local programs have been implemented, whole-of-catchment programs are not developed or implemented. The approach is piecemeal and embodies considerable inefficiencies.

- 1.27 Chapter 3, therefore, highlights the benefits and difficulties of the present administrative arrangements, and proposes a new structure for catchment management that will not only more efficiently deliver programs to problem areas but co-ordinate and harmonise programs between catchment areas as well as jurisdictions.
- 1.28 Administrative arrangements will be effective, however, not only if they are well constructed but also adequately resourced. For this reason, chapter 4 examines the funding options that will most efficiently support a nationally co-ordinated catchment management program so that Australia's catchment systems are managed and maintained in an ecologically sustainable manner.