

Chapter 5

National Landcare Programme

Introduction

5.1 The chapter focuses on the underlying principles for the changes to Landcare programs. The committee also canvasses issues related to the design of the National Landcare programme including funding cycles, transition issues and monitoring, measurement and reporting.

National Landcare Programme arrangements

5.2 The departments commented that the Programme 'aims to consolidate NRM investments under the banner of a single programme'. Further, it meets the Government's commitments to healthier local and regional environments and a stronger, more competitive and resilient agricultural sector.¹

5.3 The Natural Heritage Ministerial Board, which comprises the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Agriculture, agreed to four strategic objectives and outcomes for the Programme as follows:

Table 5.1: National strategic objectives and outcomes for the National Landcare Programme

Strategic objectives	Strategic outcomes
Strategic objective 1: Communities are managing landscapes to sustain long-term economic and social benefits from their environment	Maintain and improve ecosystem services through sustainable management of local and regional landscapes
Strategic objective 2: Farmers and fishers are increasing their long-term returns through better management of the natural resource base	Increase in the number of farmers and fishers adopting practices that improve the quality of the natural resource base, and the area of land over which those practices are applied
Strategic objective 3: Communities are involved in caring for their environment	Increase engagement and participation of the community, including landcare, farmers and Indigenous people, in sustainable natural resource management
Strategic objective 4: Communities are protecting species and natural assets	Increase restoration and rehabilitation of the natural environment, including protecting and conserving nationally and internationally significant species, ecosystems, ecological communities, places and values

Source: Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, Submission 53, p. 4.

¹ Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 3.

5.4 The departments stated that, in order to achieve the long-term strategic outcomes, the Government has set out medium-term or intermediate outcomes to help both departments monitor demonstrable progress and evaluate and communicate success. Regional NRM organisations and the Landcare community are then able to use their regional NRM plans to identify local and regional priorities and develop projects that contribute to national objectives using locally appropriate delivery mechanisms.

5.5 The departments went on to note that measuring the medium-term priorities allows the Government to better evaluate the achievements and lasting impact of the Programme. The NRM community is also able to make improvements to project design and delivery and, if necessary, to reorient investment based on the relative merits of investments and to take into account emerging priorities.

5.6 The intermediate outcomes of the Programme are:

- Outcome 1 – by 2018, there has been a demonstrable increase in the quality of landscape-scale management to reduce environmental threats and pressures;
- Outcome 2 – by 2018, NLP investments have made a demonstrable contribution towards increasing the adoption of sustainable farming and fishing management practices with the intent to improve long-term productivity through improvements to the resource base;
- Outcome 3 – by 2018, there has been a demonstrable increase in the level of involvement by the NRM community in protecting, rehabilitating and/or restoring prioritised environmental assets and natural resource management; and
- Outcome 4 – by 2018, there has been a demonstrable increase in the level of protection, rehabilitation and/or restoration of prioritised environmental assets, threatened species, ecological communities and migratory species.²

Program principles and design

5.7 The guiding principles for the new National Landcare Programme were set out in the Government's consultation paper. They are:

- Simple – delivered through simplified guidelines and application processes, and reporting requirements.
- Local – deliver practical natural resource management outcomes with a focus on local and regional-scale activities and on maximising community participation in the delivery of natural resource management projects.
- Long-term – an ongoing initiative that will continue significant investment in natural resource management priorities.³

2 Department of the Environment, *National Landcare Programme – Regional Delivery Key Performance Indicators 2014 – 2018* <http://www.nrm.gov.au/system/files/pages/3b4d2328-dbc0-4e97-b556-e334df116d79/files/nlp-regional-delivery-kpi.pdf>

5.8 In their submission to the committee, the departments outlined the following key components of the Programme.

Governance and accountability

5.9 A consistent framework of standard measures and key evaluation questions will be used to monitor the Programme against its objectives and outcomes. Delivery agents and partners will have an important role in demonstrating the value of investments and will be expected to demonstrate strong financial and organisational governance. Delivering results through effective community engagement and robust regional NRM planning and prioritisation processes will also be important factors.

5.10 Minimum governance standards for regional NRM organisations that clearly articulate the expectations regarding programme delivery have already been established. These governance standards will be incorporated into performance expectations at both the project and organisational level. Performance expectations will be clear and auditable and will be a key quality assurance, risk and performance management tool for the Programme.

Monitoring and evaluation

5.11 A single Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement strategy is being rolled out. This will allow the Government to track and report on achievements, including impacts on the environment, natural resource base and community using information collected from delivery agents. It is being designed to ease the regulatory burden on the community by streamlining administrative arrangements, whilst maintaining support for monitoring and evaluation of long-term investments.

5.12 The strategy will ensure consistency across projects and meets both the sector's need for clear guidance on reporting requirements, and the Australian Government's need for accountability at both the programme and project levels. It will guide the design and implementation of projects. The strategy will deliver projects that are transparent, cost effective, fit for purpose, and based on scientifically and administratively defensible methods.

5.13 The departments stated that an online system has been designed and developed to enable simpler reporting and can be used directly by communities, farmers and others to inform priorities and choices.

Programme delivery

5.14 The Programme will be delivered by regional NRM organisations, agribusinesses, industry groups, Landcare groups, community groups and individual landowners.

3 Australian Government, *Help Shape the National Landcare Programme*, 2014, p. 2.
http://www.nrm.gov.au/system/files/resources/21a50706-1c6a-46e9-aaba-9110ac0b0fd7/files/nlp-consultation-paper_0.pdf (accessed August 2014).

5.15 Public information sessions and consultation with stakeholders commenced in August 2014, and will be used to further refine the design and delivery of the Programme.

Delivery mechanisms

5.16 A range of programme delivery mechanisms will be used including small community-based projects, larger strategic projects and partnerships, and ongoing support for long-term critical investments. The Programme will have a national and a regional stream.

National stream

5.17 Under the national stream, long-term support for the National Reserve System, including Indigenous Protected Areas and World Heritage Areas such as the Great Barrier Reef will be retained. Important coastal rivers, threatened species and ecosystems will be managed and rehabilitated. The 20 Million Trees program will form a long-term commitment to re-establishing green corridors and urban forests around Australia. The management of pests and diseases that threaten the environment and agricultural productivity will continue to be supported.

Regional stream

5.18 The regional stream will be delivered through 56 regional NRM organisations across Australia. The departments stated that regional NRM organisations will continue to build on their partnerships with the Landcare community and will strengthen the capacity of the NRM community to care for their local environments.

5.19 The Government will support regional NRM organisations to maximise community participation, set priorities and deliver environmental and sustainable agricultural outcomes. Each regional NRM organisation is expected to:

- lead regional NRM planning and prioritisation of NRM activities to support environmental protection and sustainable agricultural practices;
- deliver nationally important outcomes;
- broker partnerships, collaborate with networks and support local stakeholders in delivery of regional NRM activities;
- build local community and industry engagement, skills and capacity in NRM;
- support Indigenous participation in delivering NRM; and
- report NRM outcomes at a regional level and contribute to Programme reporting at the national level.

5.20 The departments stated that recognition of OceanWatch as a new NRM region will enhance management of oceans and estuaries to support a sustainable fishing industry.

5.21 In addition to developing partnerships with Landcare groups for on-ground project delivery, regional NRM organisations are also expected to support Landcare and adopt sustainable farm and land management practices and to protect and restore Australia's natural environment through:

- sharing information;
- raising awareness of NRM priorities;
- strengthening Landcare and community networks; and
- promoting the achievements and outcomes of Landcare and the Landcare ethic.⁴

Response to policy principles

5.22 As noted above, the three underlying principles of the National Landcare Program are simple, local and long-term. These underlying principles were generally welcomed by the NRM sector.⁵ Landcare NSW for example, noted that the principles bring the program back into line with the factors which drove the initial success of the original NLP and went on to conclude:

This, accompanied by the lessons of the past 25 years of investment into community based NRM, provide an opportunity to reset the compass of programme design and delivery.⁶

5.23 The South West Catchments Council (SWCC) expressed a positive view of the potential of the National Landcare Programme and stated:

The National Landcare Programme, with its focus on local, simple and long-term; the reintegration of the regional and competitive funding; and the return to regional NRM planning and the Landcare community actively participating in decision making, has the potential to be a very positive reform from a design perspective.⁷

5.24 However, submitters also raised a range of concerns with the approach adopted and the resources available to implement it. Katanning Land Conservation District Committee (LCDC) suggested that the policy was 'over-simplified' and appears to have been developed without an in-depth understanding of the Landcare ethic and movement. It pointed to issues such as volunteer recruitment and retention and the need for improved consultation and commented these issues had not been adequately addressed in the new Programme.⁸

5.25 While acknowledging the need to give priority to the principles of simple, local and long-term, WoolProducers Australia commented that a further three principles should be added: strategic (nationally focused, cross industry, cross border

4 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, pp 4–8.

5 See South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 7; South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 4; Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 3; Mr Keith Hyde, Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 35.

6 Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 8.

7 Ms Christine Kershaw, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 10.

8 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 2.

programs that work together to control a program); effective; and, efficient.⁹ The Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) also suggested that a further missing element was the group based community partnership approach intrinsic to Landcare.¹⁰

5.26 The following discussion canvasses each of the three underlying principles.

Local

5.27 The Department of the Environment (the department) noted that, under Caring for our Country (CfoC), there were national priorities and communities were requested to provide proposals to deliver on those priorities. Under the new arrangements, there is a 'renewed focus on the natural resource management regional plans as the key drivers of priorities'. It was noted that these plans are 'typically based on a high level of community engagement and scientific input in their development'.¹¹

5.28 Many submitters supported the principle of 'local'. The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association commented that it believed that determination of issues at a national level did not deliver the optimum results at a local level. Engagement of local community Landcare groups is cost effective, produces positive results and 'ensures that where practice changes are required they can be implemented by the very people that use them'.¹²

5.29 It was argued that over time, and particularly under CfoC, there had been a shift to a top-down approach with national priorities and lack of recognition of, and input by, local priorities.¹³ As a result, local groups who were interested in smaller, local projects such as protecting wetlands or a creek bed which 'might not have had higher matters of national environmental significance or might not have fit some of the more lofty Caring for our Country strategic frameworks—struggled a bit more to get funding'.¹⁴ This point was highlighted in evidence from Western Australia. Under CfoC, wind erosion had been established as a priority and projects at the local level were moulded to fit this priority to ensure that funding was available.¹⁵

5.30 While it expressed disappointment at the cut in funding, NRM Regions Australia nevertheless 'applauded' that investment will be largely guided by regional NRM plans 'which allows the expression of priorities of local NRM communities to be put forward'. Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, stated that building

9 WoolProducers Australia, *Submission 5*, p. 2. See also, National Farmers' Federation, *Submission 31*, p. 5.

10 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 4.

11 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, 7 October 2014, p. 59.

12 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 6.

13 See Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 28.

14 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 3.

15 Dr Jill Wilson, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 37; Mrs Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 47.

capacity of NRM communities had taken 'a significant back step' under CfoC. Mr Kitchell concluded:

We are very glad also that the Australian government see us regions now not just as service providers to government but partners in the process of delivering the National Landcare Programme.¹⁶

5.31 Similarly, the Condamine Alliance supported the program's local focus and noted 'the key elements reflect good foundational principles for effective engagement and participation of both community stakeholders and service providers'.¹⁷ The Southern ACT Catchment Group added its support for the local approach commenting that it 'augurs well for Landcare and hopefully will empower local Landcare groups'.¹⁸

5.32 The benefits of localism identified by NSW Local Land Services included enabling communities to be aware, engaged, active, skilled and resourced with devolution of decision making, planning and implementation to the community level. It was also noted that localism will increase capacity and resilience, allows peer support, peer learning and peer review, engenders greater ownership of local problems and solutions and it leverages greater commitment in time and resources from local people and communities.¹⁹

5.33 However, submitters also raised a range of concerns with this approach and the resources available to implement it. These included the place of national priorities, the lack of funding and support to engage volunteers and the role of regional bodies.

National priorities

5.34 There was discussion in evidence about how to ensure that national priorities are not lost in the move towards localism. Ms Nicole De Preu, Nature Conservation Society of South Australia, while acknowledging that it was understandable that Landcare groups did not want to be told what to work on and what the national priorities are, stated that 'there has to be some recognition that there is an overall bigger picture of what is going on across the whole country with the species that are listed under the EPBC Act, for instance'.²⁰

5.35 In addition, the Commonwealth must meet certain treaty obligations. Mr Peter Beston, Department of Environment and Primary Industries, Victoria, stated:

...obviously from the Commonwealth's perspective they need to invest in areas of national environmental significance to meet their international and national treaty obligations, so one has to respect and understand that. The role of target areas is important, because you need focus...but, equally, you

16 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 23.

17 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 8.

18 Southern ACT Catchment Group, *Submission 44*, p. 2.

19 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, Member of Board of Chairs, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 1.

20 Ms Nicole De Preu, Nature Conservation Society of South Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 18.

need to balance that against potentially excluding access to funding by some groups²¹.

5.36 Dr Peter Ampt also commented on this point and noted that local groups have their own priorities and will try to make them fit with government policy, thus attracting funds. However, this may be to the detriment of other projects. Dr Ampt suggested that 'having the facilitators linked to a broader network that can see a broader perspective is a good model'. Dr Ampt went on to comment that 'local facilitators are both of the community but are also able to influence the community'.²²

5.37 A further issue raised in relation to the changes introduced in the National Landcare Programme was that the move to smaller, more local projects would potentially see a loss of funding for large-scale project in areas such as the rangelands. Environs Kimberley commented that these projects were important and involved work on multiple sites over a vast area. It was acknowledged that the national funding stream provides for large scale projects such as 20 Million Trees. However, Environs Kimberley commented that they do not address the problems facing the Kimberley where the need for fire management is the focus rather than revegetation.²³

5.38 NSW Local Land Services did not consider that the local approach would ignore landscape-scale repair. However, to ensure that this occurred, it recommended oversight from the national NRM group.²⁴ South Coast NRM cautioned that there was still a need for consideration of national and international obligations and priorities 'to ensure that projects are of a strategic nature' and a long-term value from a Landcare-NRM outcomes perspective.²⁵

Regional approach

5.39 The focus of the National Landcare Programme will be on NRM regional plans as the key drivers of priorities. The department indicated that these plans are typically based on a high level of community engagement and it was looking to NRM regions to identify with their local communities their local priorities and then to provide an investment strategy that aligns with national outcomes. In addition, NRM regions will be required to deliver a minimum of 20 per cent of their funding directly to community groups and individual landholders.²⁶

5.40 The committee received a range of views concerning the new arrangements.

21 Mr Peter Beston, Department of Environment and Primary Industries, Victoria, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 6.

22 Dr Peter Ampt, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, pp 24, 25.

23 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 6.

24 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 4.

25 South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 4.

26 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, pp 59–60.

Support for regional approach

5.41 NSW Local Land Services saw the conditions placed on regional organisations as an opportunity to 'give effect to localism' by formalising partnerships between regional bodies and Landcare groups and allowing 'a level of devolution consistent with earned autonomy over time, where performance is agreed and rewarded'.²⁷ NSW Local Land Services viewed the National Landcare Programme as less prescriptive about where funding could be invested, which, it stated, reflects the maturity of regional organisations and the trust which Government and community have in those organisations.²⁸

5.42 Submitters pointed to the strength of the regional approach and the role played by regional bodies. Queensland Regional NRM Group Collective (QRNRMGC), for example, stated that:

- the regional approach brings many stakeholders together around the same table which in turn leads to greater total engagement, more leveraged dollars and effort working towards the achievement of a common vision/set of targets;
- regional plans are fundamental as the basis for sector agreement, collaboration, regional and local investment and delivery of investor priorities;
- regional NRM bodies are effectively making the linkages between landscape resilience, primary production, biodiversity conservation, sequestration and avoidance opportunities (playing a major role in meeting the targets); and
- regional NRM bodies in Queensland have demonstrated their ability to provide a good return on the investments that the Australian and State Government have made through them.²⁹

5.43 NSW Local Land Services also commented on the central role of regional bodies in the delivery of programs:

Regional bodies in New South Wales and in other places are in a unique position to provide valuable services that link governments, local groups and people across a range of scales. We are committed to giving effect to localism and, by doing so, strengthening the capacity of local people and community groups. This enables effective action and encourages leadership roles within communities.³⁰

27 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Landcare Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 2.

28 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Landcare Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 3.

29 Queensland Regional NRM Group Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 8. See also, South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, pp 4–5.

30 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 1.

5.44 Similarly, South Coast NRM stated that that the structure in Western Australia enabled the successful implementation of projects from cross regional landscape scale projects of a major strategic nature down to small targeted projects at a very localised scale.³¹

Concerns with the regional approach

5.45 However, some submitters, while welcoming the local approach, pointed to a number of concerns with both regional bodies and regional planning in delivering the aim of 'local'. Many of these concerns arose from the experience under CfoC. Dr Ampt, for example, stated that he was critical of the way some regionalisation has happened, while not being critical of the overall concept. He went on to state:

I think it was a very important step to regionalise for natural resource management and to devolve a lot more down to the regional level. I think that was a good move. It is the way in which it was then translated into practice and the level of resourcing that caused some problems in some areas. So, I do not want to say that I am critical, and, like the Landcare Network people, I do not want to see a retreat from regionalisation; I do not think that is sensible.³²

5.46 The FTLA commented that 'local does not mean regional, but means local communities with similar concerns that may be within or across regions. Local does not always mean small-scale, as local groups work together as networks at the landscape scale.'³³

5.47 The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association was of a similar view and stated that the centralised approach of the National Landcare Programme is not the model that Landcare requires moving forward. It went on to comment that Landcare has always been a grassroots 'bottom up' type of structure and the local community is disenfranchised by a top down directive approach. It was concluded that Landcare is cost effective and provides real on ground results without the need for complex and expensive administrative structures evident in CfoC and 'increasingly evident in the proposed new systems'.³⁴

5.48 Mrs Sonia Williams, Landcare NSW, also commented on the loss of involvement at the local level through the emphasis on regional processes:

What we have seen under the regional processes is a move to those distant from the actual doing coming and doing the designing. So we have lost that direct link to the people who are doing. Those whose daily activities are in the Landcare productive sphere no longer have the same ownership over

31 South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 5.

32 Dr Peter Ampt, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 23.

33 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

34 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 6.

what was happening. That is where we have lost a lot of the momentum and co-investment.³⁵

5.49 In addition, Landcare Tasmania commented that regional processes sidelined Landcare and community groups, provided no real communication channels for community to decision makers and there is disengagement from the regions and on-ground delivery.³⁶

5.50 Border Rivers CMA point to the risks to Landcare groups if conflict arises with the regional group and noted that there is no effective mechanism in place for conflict resolution and accountability to the community of which the regional group represents. Border Rivers CMA also commented that as the regional group holds the funding, it dictates the level of investment and type of activities contracted to Landcare groups. In addition, in the past, the regional groups' prescribed delivery mechanisms had presented challenges for Landcare groups. Regional group processes, requirements and operations have often prolonged the delivery of on-ground actions to the point of disenchantment of participating land managers. Border Rivers CMA concluded that:

It is hoped that the current review process of the regional plan will reconnect with stakeholders to ensure the regional plan is representative of the regional community, not just the regional group. This is important, particularly if the regional plan will inform government investment priorities for our region.³⁷

5.51 Some submitters felt that NRM regional bodies compete with local Landcare groups, rather than acting as a coordination point through which funds and expertise can be provided.³⁸ The Southern ACT Catchment Group stated that the introduction of regional bodies in 2002 changed the dynamic of Landcare with much of the funding going to the regional bodies. In many cases, little filtered down to Community Landcare groups.³⁹

5.52 Murrumbidgee Landcare commented that 'the regional model may be the best option that we have' but that 'there is no one-size-fits-all'. It held the view that regional groups have become too bureaucratic and more concerned about reporting upwards than being accountable to the communities they work with. Murrumbidgee Landcare noted that 88 Landcare groups in the Murrumbidgee catchment have folded since 2004, when the regional delivery model was established.⁴⁰

35 Mrs Sonia Williams, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 43.

36 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 8.

37 Border Rivers CMA, *Submission 21*, p. 4.

38 See, for example, Name Withheld, *Submission 2*; Name Withheld, *Submission 27*; Chittering Landcare Group, *Submission 40*; Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*; Name Withheld, *Submission 58*; Mr Douglas Fox, *Submission 60*; Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*.

39 Southern ACT Catchment Group, *Submission 44*, p. 1.

40 Murrumbidgee Landcare, *Submission 33*, p. 2.

5.53 Mr Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, acknowledged that there was aggravation between NRM regions and the Landcare movement. He stated that this was due to the specification of CfoC which did not enable NRM Regions to continue funding to Landcare groups for capacity building. Mr Kitchell went on to add:

It was not so much that they were not engaged in developing the priorities. It was that the regions, because of the specifications of the Caring for our Country program, could not fund capacity-building. It might have been highlighted as a priority in the plan, but then we could not fund it with Australian government money.⁴¹

5.54 Mrs Williams, Landcare NSW, also commented on national priorities under CfoC and noted that there was a clash between a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach by Landcare. As a consequence, 'that interface between the top-down and the bottom-up, where it meshes and meets, is always going to be a very vexed space'.⁴²

5.55 However, Mr Brendan Sydes, Connecting Country, argued that a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches was needed:

...we are cognisant of their role in catchment planning for our programs and priorities. We would say, however, that that top-down planning ought not be at the expense of the investment in small or local initiatives or the ability of Landcare groups to plan and develop ideas themselves based on local knowledge. We think the optimal approach is a mix of the two—it cannot be all top-down; it cannot be all grassroots-up—but if you get the mix right, then you have a really powerful model.⁴³

5.56 In order to build more collaborative relationships, a 'Statement of Common Purpose' has been developed between the National Landcare Network (NLN) and the National NRM Regions Working Group. The NLN stated that the Statement is an 'attempt to ensure a collaborative relationship at the national level that would foster effective working partnerships nationally, regionally and locally between Landcare and Regional NRM Organisations'. The Statement lists what each party brings to the relationship. The NLN stated that:

The fact that there needed to be a document developed to ensure a close working relationship between Landcare and Regional NRM Organisations indicates that the potential for planning, developing, reporting and achieving outcomes has a way to go before it can be acknowledged as successful.⁴⁴

5.57 The department commented on the position of regional NRM bodies under the new arrangements and stated that one of the key reforms is a more outcomes focus for

41 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, pp 26 and 27.

42 Mrs Sonia Williams, Landcare NSW, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 47.

43 Mr Brendan Sydes, Connecting Country, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 9.

44 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 7.

the regional bodies. Regional bodies will provide an investment strategy that aligns with their regional plan. The department commented that 'rather than asking them to specify that they are going to do this many hectares of this weed in this location in this year, we will ask for a higher level of detail'. This will allow for flexibility for regions to respond to unforeseen events, such as climatic conditions as they occur, provided the high-level outcomes continue to be delivered.⁴⁵

Inclusion of landholders

5.58 The need to include farmers in decision making was highlighted by the National Farmers' Federation (NFF). While supporting devolution of decision making to a regional and local level, the NFF stated that industry led initiatives also needed to be accommodated. The NFF highlighted the need to engage landholders in NRM planning activities:

There must be a clear expectation from the Commonwealth for Regional NRM organisations to consult with and engage their communities in NRM planning activities. Actively engaging natural resource managers such as landholders is critical to identifying both NRM priorities, the practice change required to influence these priorities, and the best pathways for investing in this change. Understanding the drivers and motivations of land managers is key to making decisions.⁴⁶

5.59 Mr Gerald Leach, NFF, stated that the NFF considered that there should be a market-based approach to achieving NRM outcomes so that the Government receives the best return on its investment.⁴⁷

Funding through regional bodies

5.60 Submitters commented on a number of issues related to funding arrangements under the regional model. First, that funding will only come from the regional. Secondly, that a minimum of 20 per cent of funding must be direct to community groups and landholders. Thirdly, that while a greater proportion of funding is being provided to regional organisations, overall funding has reduced.

5.61 Mr Damian Postma, SWCC, expressed the view that funding through regional bodies will be more structured and organised and will promote collaboration:

We will then work with the community, which definitely promotes collaboration, but in truth the only funding that is available in total now is the regional funding. That has to support now the regional and strategic projects, plus the local community groups, yet before that the access to that competitive funding was in the hundreds of millions of dollars.⁴⁸

45 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 66.

46 National Farmers' Federation, *Submission 31*, pp 9–10.

47 Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 16.

48 Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 12.

5.62 Environs Kimberley commented that using regional NRM bodies to provide funds to smaller groups is similar to the arrangement under the NHT. It welcomed the opportunity for regional groups to set priorities, working with local people.⁴⁹ It stated, however, that the decrease in core funding allocated to regional NRM groups would have 'major implications' in the Kimberley, particularly the loss of long-term Indigenous rangers.⁵⁰

5.63 Not all submitters saw benefits in the regional funding approach. The National Landcare Network expressed the opinion that requiring community groups to apply to regional organisations for funding would mean that Landcare groups would be 'beholden' to the regional body, creating 'a master-servant relationship as opposed to a partner type relationship'. For such a relationship to work, it asserted, there must be a level of trust, and that trust is eroded every time there are changes in programs and funding.⁵¹

5.64 Mr Mike Berwick, QRNRMGC, addressed this matter and commented that there was a view that the regions will receive all the funding and the other groups will be disenfranchised and will no longer have direct access to Commonwealth funds. However, Mr Berwick noted that there is only a certain amount of funding and that the importance lies in how to ensure that the money is distributed in a rational way, communities are empowered and projects delivered. He concluded:

The point I am trying to make is that we have a rational structure that looks at how you can best spend scarce resources on local, regional, state or national priorities. Let's all get behind that system and make it work and, if there are things that are not quite working, let's improve them. We are all open for change. There is nothing perfect about this.⁵²

5.65 In relation to the Government's policy of 20 per cent of regional funding being delivered to local groups, it was noted by many regional NRM groups that they already provided this amount of funding to the local level.⁵³ This was also noted by the department which stated:

There is also a significant change in that ministers will be requiring the NRM regions to deliver a minimum of 20 per cent of their funding directly to community groups and individual landholders. We see that as a

49 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 5.

50 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 3.

51 Mrs Glenys Stevenson, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 10.

52 Mr Mike Berwick, Chair, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 34.

53 See Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 13.

minimum benchmark and we expect that many of the regions are already doing that but there will be an improvement agenda for some regions.⁵⁴

5.66 The department commented that the policy change had been in response to concern from the community that not all regional bodies are doing as well as they could in community engagement. The Government considers that 'this provides a clearer point of accountability than the program has had previously. It is a clear communication of the government's expectations around the way in which community groups will be engaged through that funding'.⁵⁵

5.67 The department went on to state that its assessment was that the average investment is around 30 per cent to 40 per cent with some regions already well above, and a few regions below, that level of investment. The department considered that the 20 per cent level will be very easily achievable for the majority of regions, and probably in the order of fewer than 10 will have some difficulty or significant adjustment to be made. Particular circumstances played a part for those experiencing difficulty. For example, in the Rangelands, catchments are very large and the population base is very small so, typically, those NRM regions deliver quite directly to their landholders rather than to groups *per se*. The department indicated that it was consulting with those regions around how they manage the policy change.⁵⁶

5.68 Regional NRM organisations commented that they did not object to providing 20 per cent of the regional allocation from the Commonwealth to community groups.⁵⁷ However, there was general concern that this allocation came in addition to the overall funding reduction. The SWCC noted that, while it would continue to deliver the same percentage to community groups, the reduction in Australian Government funding to regional NRM bodies would result in significantly lower amounts reaching groups on the ground.⁵⁸ For example, it said that the 10 to 15 groups it supports would each get 'somewhere between \$50,000 and \$60,000' of its \$700,000 allocation this financial year, which is a notable decrease. It stated:

Where previously they would have accessed hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to run strategic projects in their locality, now they are looking at definitely less than \$100,000.⁵⁹

54 Ms Clare Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 60.

55 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 62.

56 Ms Clare Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 62.

57 See Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 30.

58 Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 13.

59 Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 13.

5.69 The Katanning LCDC reported that under CfoC it had been able to obtain grants for large projects of \$500,000. Under the National Landcare Programme, it will be able to apply for only \$70,000 through the SWCC.⁶⁰ Mrs Ella Maesepp from the Katanning LCDC commented that, nevertheless, the organisation worked well with its regional body and felt 'confident that our priorities are reflected enough in SWCC's regional plan'.⁶¹

5.70 QRNRMGC commented that its position was different in that, unlike groups in other jurisdictions where there is a heavy reliance on state funding, Queensland groups rely on Australian Government programs for more than 70 per cent of their funding. As a consequence, it will reduce Queensland's capacity to deliver the NRM outcomes desired by their regional communities as well as national priorities.⁶²

Community engagement and capacity building

5.71 Under the National Landcare Programme, regional NRM organisations are expected to build local engagement, skills and capacity in NRM.⁶³ Submitters pointed to the importance of community engagement. However, it was stated that not all regional organisations engaged effectively with the community. Landcare NSW observed:

Where the regional bodies have held a high value on community engagement, the model has flourished and worked very well. In areas where the regional bodies have not invested in communities, there has been wholesale decimation of community capacity.⁶⁴

5.72 In addition, it was argued that lack of engagement was, in part, due to government program objectives. The Upper Ovens Valley Landcare Group stated:

...the capacity and inclination of regional NRM organisations to develop an appropriate engagement process across the community is constrained by the objectives of the funding programs they have access to, and the culture which has evolved.⁶⁵

5.73 The department informed the committee that, as part of the consultation on the National Landcare Programme, the community had expressed concern that 'not all

60 Mrs Ella Maesepp Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 45.

61 Mrs Ella Maesepp Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 47.

62 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 5.

63 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 4.

64 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 44. See also, Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, pp 1–2; Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, pp 33–34; Dr Kathryn Rodden, Victorian Landcare Council, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 39.

65 Upper Ovens Valley Landcare Group, *Submission 32*, p. 2. See also, Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 8.

regional bodies are doing as well as they could in community engagement'. This feedback, the department stated, informed the requirement for regional NRM bodies not only to provide a minimum of 20 per cent of their funding to community projects but also to demonstrate their level of community engagement and support.⁶⁶

5.74 While regional organisations acknowledged the role of community groups and volunteers and the need to increase capacity, there was concern that the reduction in funding would work against increasing community involvement and capacity building. Landcare NSW, for example, stated that 'the provision of capacity support to networks is critical in building an enabled community that not only delivers small grants programs, but instead uses these to build long-term outcomes for regional improvement – one local step at a time'.⁶⁷ NRM Regions Australia added:

Seeing as capacity-building is a fundamental component of what NRM regions do, if we lose one fifth of our funding I would be surprised if it does not have some level of impact on our capacity to build capacity.⁶⁸

5.75 Submitters pointed to the lack of funding for facilitators and community support officers despite the important role that they play at the community level.⁶⁹ Dr Bill Pigott expressed concern that community support officer roles, such as the Regional Landcare Facilitator, would not survive due to funding cuts. The work that community support officers do to maintain Landcare networks, Dr Pigott suggested, is imperative for the success of those networks and their NRM work.⁷⁰ The Bass Coast Landcare Network also stated that funding for paid facilitators is a proven way of nurturing volunteers and without it Landcare would not thrive as it had done in the past.⁷¹

5.76 The role of facilitators was emphasised by other submitters. Submitters noted that community groups struggle with administrative tasks required to ensure that Landcare projects are well-planned, aligned with broader NRM strategies and reported on properly. Facilitators who assist community groups provide invaluable support to undertake these tasks and to provide stimulus, support and structure to enable volunteers to work at the local level.⁷² For example, the SWCC stated that:

In order for local delivery of complex projects, sufficient administrative and employment support is required to attract appropriate project managers. Community Landcare volunteers cannot be expected to design, deliver,

66 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 62.

67 Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

68 Mr Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 27.

69 See Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 5.

70 Dr Bill Pigott, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 38.

71 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 6. See also, Dr Kathleen Broderick, Natural Resource Management WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 23.

72 Mr Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 43; Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 4.

coordinate and acquit NRM projects to the quality expected by the Regions and the Australian Government without adequate NRM coordinators and facilitators support.⁷³

5.77 Facilitators also assist with communication between groups and between groups and local government. Connecting Country commented that:

Employing facilitators within community groups is efficient in terms of government spending and effective in terms of the facilitator's ability to work with the community. It creates links between Landcare group members, Catchment Management Authorities and government.⁷⁴

5.78 Connecting Country also made the point that, without Landcare facilitators, community groups can struggle to put together projects that align with Government priorities for long-term NRM management. It observed:

If the government wants groups to help to implement these strategies it needs to help the groups to do it.⁷⁵

5.79 However, Landcare NSW put a different view and commented that staff had not provided support for volunteers but instead focused on delivery programs:

Since the end of the Decade of Landcare Plan, the infrastructural support to volunteers in the Landcare sphere has waned significantly, and has been replaced with government based staff delivering biophysical focussed programmes, rather than investment in valuing and supporting volunteer input and building community capacity. This is not to say that these programme officers are not important, rather the point raised is investment into positions and mechanisms that support the volunteer uptake of programmes is a key factor upon which the success of other programmes depend.⁷⁶

5.80 Similarly, the Victorian Landcare Council called for inclusion of community Landcare in decision making at the regional level with genuine collaboration:

This is not simply a matter of Landcare being part of decision making on priorities or investment allocation. NRM in Australia needs genuine collaboration in the design of ways to maintain change in communities, programs that are specific to particular communities and particular landscapes. There are no cookie-cutter solutions in NRM – it's all about tailor-made support for change, and that's where community Landcare can make a contribution.⁷⁷

73 South West Catchment Council, *Submission 11*, p. 8.

74 Connecting Country, *Submission 7*, p. 5.

75 Mr Max Schlachter, Connecting Country, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 11.

76 Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 5.

77 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 10.

5.81 The Department of the Environment indicated that every regional body will be expected to employ one full-time equivalent facilitator and funding was available for that purpose.⁷⁸

Landholder engagement

5.82 Evidence received by the committee pointed to the importance of the engagement of farmers in Landcare. Mr Leach, NFF, provided the committee with the example of co-investment by farmers where private land adjoins public land. Where the productivity of the farmland is threatened by invasive species from the public land, partnership programs with investment in the public land and in the private land have helped to resolve the problem for both parties. Other joint investments aimed at eradicating pest animals, such as rabbits, foxes and indeed wild dogs, have resulted in improved productivity of farm land and improved environmental status of public land.⁷⁹

5.83 However, the engagement of landholders has fallen over the years with the National Landcare Network suggesting that there is currently more disengagement of the farming community than was the case in the 1980s. The NLN argued landholders were disempowered and even repelled by the top-down, disrespectful and remote NRM programs that have been implemented in recent years.⁸⁰ The NFF added that the initial National Landcare Program was very much about agriculture—the joint relationship between environment and production. However, there has been a movement away from that and 'we want to make sure that it does not lose its focus on the sustainable agriculture component'.⁸¹

5.84 The FTLA pointed to reduced funding as a cause of farmer disengagement, particularly under CfoC, and the substantial reduction in the number of groups active in the farming areas. The Association also noted a shift of focus in those groups that have survived away from sustainable agriculture to the environment. The Association commented that, particularly in farming areas, groups are vulnerable to changes in federal funding.⁸²

5.85 The cost to landholders, lack of time and the long timeframes for evidence of return on investment were also seen as contributing to disengagement.⁸³ The National Landcare Network commented:

We are certainly not doing enough. Any change involves risk and farmers are always very careful about risking their cash flow. This is where learning

78 Ms Michelle Lauder, Department of Agriculture, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 66.

79 Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 21.

80 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 9.

81 Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 19.

82 Ms Susi Johnson, Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, pp 35–36.

83 See Mr Dale Park, WA Farmers, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 70; Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, pp 16–17.

from their local peers is so important. There are farms that have adopted sustainable practices. They are effectively drought-proof and they are always more productive, yet they have neighbours who still have bare ground and are struggling. It is the local capacity building—getting people off their farms to look at how other people are doing it and convincing them it might be time to make a change—that is really important.⁸⁴

5.86 The National Rangeland NRM Alliance also commented on the cost of Landcare to farmers with Mr Andrew Drysdale stating that, ultimately, land managers foot the bill for practice change. He concluded that 'our job is to provide support by way of knowledge and also seed funding, to act as a catalyst to help them get the ball rolling if they need to do such things as fencing or the like'.⁸⁵

5.87 The NFF commented that the relationship between Landcare groups and NRM groups had improved significantly but the relationship between NRM groups and industry still had some way to go. The NFF is working with the NRM groups at a national level to improve linkages. However, Mr Leach stated that the risk of loss of key staff through lack of funding may hamper this process. In addition, he pointed to the need for coordination and stated:

...in terms of the relationship between industry groups and the NRM bodies, it is really important that we have better coordination on where we are in terms of what we want to achieve and, if we go together to government, how we can say that this is how government can get the best return on its investment.⁸⁶

5.88 The Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective submitted that there should be an increased focus on rewarding sustainable agricultural practices, given that 'governments are setting goals to double output and expand economic development for regional communities'. It suggested 'ecosystem services payments to landholders as a long-term response to the impact of these issues'.⁸⁷

Simple

5.89 Reviews of the Natural Heritage Trust and Caring for our Country, mentioned earlier in this report, identified monitoring, measurement and reporting as ongoing concerns for the Government's Landcare programs. At issue were:

- measuring outputs rather than outcomes;
- short-term funding cycles versus long-term results;
- the multiple environments being reported on;
- the capacity and skill of volunteers to meet reporting requirements; and

84 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 10.

85 Mr Andrew Drysdale, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 55.

86 Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 21.

87 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 5.

- the need to capture qualitative as well as quantitative data.

5.90 In response to these reviews, the department has moved towards better and more sophisticated reporting models including the monitoring, evaluation and reporting information tool (MERIT). The department commented that it had made a 'significant effort' to simplify the guidelines, application process and reporting documentation for the National Landcare Programme.⁸⁸ The simplification has focused on making access to the program easier for the NRM community. The department revealed that the feedback from the consultation process held in August 2014 was that the simplification agenda had been welcomed 'overwhelmingly' by the Landcare sector.⁸⁹

5.91 The department also noted that as part of the simplification agenda, as well as the localism agenda, there will be 'quite a light touch at the front end'. Regions will have a less detailed application form to complete. This will include a self-assessment of governance maturity of corporate governance, planning capability and community engagement capability. The department stated that this would be followed up by a rolling program of reviews.⁹⁰

5.92 The FTLA commented that it welcomed the guiding principles and that 'simplicity enables the greatest amount of effort to be focussed on on-ground efforts rather than dealing with bureaucracy, however the test is always in the detail which is not currently available'.⁹¹ Submitters pointed to the need to simplify monitoring and reporting requirements.

Monitoring and evaluation

5.93 As has already been noted in chapter 3, the monitoring and evaluation requirements for NRM programs have been viewed as onerous and burdensome. This has particularly been the case for small community groups. A further challenge, particularly with community groups, is the lack of sophistication or tools to be able to measure a range of indicators. In addition, many outcomes are only evident after a long time period.

5.94 As noted above, the department has moved to MERIT, to be used by recipients of natural resource management grants. MERIT was designed to 'easily capture, store and communicate' results, to increase information sharing and assist in the evaluation of outcomes, rather than outputs.⁹² The department acknowledged the reporting burden on Landcare groups in the past and stated that the new system would

88 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 59.

89 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 60.

90 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 63.

91 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 4.

92 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 6.

'significantly reduce that reporting burden'. It also recognised that, previously, the amount of information collected was not always useful, nor easily accessible.⁹³

5.95 The department also provided evidence on its consultations with regional bodies and explained the changes to their reporting requirements. As part of the simplified application process, regional organisations will be required to undertake 'a self-assessment of the governance maturity across three key areas'. Those areas are: corporate governance, planning capability and community engagement capability. Each year, the department will conduct detailed reviews of selected regions, including talking to the community 'about the standard of their community engagement'. The intent of this process, the department underlined, is to assess capacity and lift performance where needed, 'rather than be a stick or to punish'.⁹⁴

5.96 The commitment to more simplified monitoring and evaluation was welcomed.⁹⁵ Mrs Alexandra Anthony from NSW Local Land Services considered the Commonwealth reporting requirements to have been 'quite a burden in earlier times' but saw the MERIT reporting tool as less cumbersome and adequate to assist local groups to aggregate their reporting through regional groups and facilitators.⁹⁶

Reporting outcomes

5.97 Of longstanding concern has been the emphasis in reporting systems on outputs rather than outcomes. It was argued that reporting on outputs does not identify positive changes to landscape and thus whether the investment has been successful.⁹⁷ SWCC, for example, stated:

The importance of Monitoring and Evaluation to a standard above simple output reporting is fundamental to address lessons already learned from the previous programs so that the true benefits of the program can be demonstrated and its value appropriately assessed. Nationally consistent methodologies would be useful and should be developed consultatively.⁹⁸

5.98 Mrs Alexandra Anthony from NSW Local Land Services noted that reporting in the short-term on outputs rather than outcomes 'has been an age-long issue' and that long-term monitoring provides more value. She cited as an example a monitoring project undertaken in the Riverina region showing 'really solid results' and 'marked

93 Mr Gregory Andrews, Department of the Environment, *Estimates Hansard*, 27 May 2014, p. 92.

94 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 63.

95 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

96 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 3.

97 Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 28.

98 South West Catchment Council, *Submission 11*, p. 8.

changes over time in biodiversity, in vegetation cover and in the extent and condition of a number of species'.⁹⁹

5.99 Dr Kathleen Broderick, Natural Resource Management WA, pointed out that, over the period covered by the committee's terms of reference, there has been outputs-based reporting, activity reporting and reporting against national targets. She noted:

Outcome reporting is a bigger challenge because you need to add that up and make it mean something on a regional scale. A regional scale is the place for that to happen.¹⁰⁰

5.100 The Victorian Landcare Council observed that 'a failure to accurately measure and demonstrate change in environmental health' is one factor contributing to the reduction in government expenditure on community Landcare projects. The Council noted that, currently, different monitoring systems apply across the country. It argued that a 'clear set of purposes for accounting, negotiated with those who will use the accounts' would better serve the Landcare community and demonstrate on-ground achievements.¹⁰¹

5.101 The department stated that it had listened to the community's call for simplified reporting with more of a focus on outcomes and the ability to share the information collected. It stated:

There is also the clear call we have heard from the consultation process that the Natural Resource Management bodies, the community groups and Landcare groups on the ground want to be able to report on the outcomes for the money they have spent on the government's behalf. We know when they are able to do that and to put it in the public domain that they are in a better position to justify what they are doing and how they are using the money and the community is better informed about that as well. The rationale behind MERIT being available online as a public reporting tool is pretty important from our perspective. We will continue to try to drive it as much as possible towards outcomes rather than outputs.¹⁰²

5.102 The department also commented that while the type of data collected through MERIT is guided by the department's key performance indicators, it will also demonstrate the impact of the funding. The extensive collection of output data through MERIT allows for the establishment of baselines and will, over time, identify achievements in natural resource management. The data collected in MERIT will be made public from the end of 2014, which will also make it a central repository of

99 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 4.

100 Dr Kathleen Broderick, Natural Resource Management WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 20.

101 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 11.

102 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, pp 62–63.

information and allow for knowledge sharing in the Landcare and broader NRM community.

5.103 However, some submitters supported another mechanism for reporting outcomes. NRM Regions Australia acknowledged that 'with a few notable local exceptions we have been almost incapable of measuring the outcome' of NRM programs but pointed to the trial of an environmental accounting system devised by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists that has been undertaken over the past three years in 10 of Australia's 56 NRM regions.¹⁰³

5.104 The national environmental accounts system has been designed to:

- provide annual national, state/territory-wide and regional (catchment) scale reports which measure the health and change in condition of our major environmental assets;
- underpin the long-term catchment management and land use planning decisions by Commonwealth, state/territory and local governments, and regional authorities; and
- improve the cost effectiveness of public and private investments in environmental management and repair.¹⁰⁴

5.105 The accounting system uses indicators to set benchmarks for environmental assets in each region. Standardised measurement within a regional framework would see each of the 56 NRM regions producing annual reports on the health of the region.

5.106 The evaluation of the regional environmental accounting trial is currently being finalised, but NRM Regions Australia stated that 'we already know, from the results, that we have proved the concept'. It continued:

We now believe that we can develop what we have called a system of regional environmental accounts which measure the quality of our natural assets—our soils, water, fauna and native vegetation—and, in a very cunning way, convert the measures of quality into a common unit of currency.¹⁰⁵

5.107 NRM Regions Australia expressed the view that the system is ready to be implemented nationally, and gave the preliminary cost estimate of \$12 million a year. It stated:

That \$12 million is a little over one per cent of the total National Landcare program. We think that is an amazingly good investment. We think this work that we have been able to demonstrate is fundamentally transformative. Our view is that you would never contemplate trying to manage the national economy without a robust set of national financial accounts. You should not try to manage the national environment without a

103 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 24.

104 Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, *Accounting for Nature*, p. 1.

105 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 24.

comprehensive set of national environmental accounts. That is what we believe we have here at the moment.¹⁰⁶

5.108 The QRNRMGC called for reporting that links regional, state and national achievements. It suggested that this would work through the use of the national environmental accounts system.¹⁰⁷

5.109 Natural Resource Management WA, along with other submitters, stressed the importance of having a long-term, consistent nationwide monitoring and reporting system. It commented that the trial of the national environmental accounts system 'did not cost that much more than current activity'.¹⁰⁸

5.110 The Victorian Landcare Council also recommended an environmental accounts model. It stated:

...we urgently need to develop a set of environmental accounts that will meet the needs of government decision makers, land managers and the wider Australian community. Those accounts will inform choices about effective programs, and allow the NRM sector to make the case for public investment in the environment.¹⁰⁹

5.111 The Department of the Environment acknowledged that it was 'looking forward to seeing the results' of the evaluation of the national environmental accounts trial. However, it stated that it would continue to develop its own 'national indicator sets' to better demonstrate environmental outcomes.¹¹⁰

Reporting social outcomes

5.112 While reporting and evaluation mechanisms are being developed to quantify the environmental benefits of Landcare activities, the widely observed positive effects on society are harder to demonstrate in a quantitative way and are not included in reporting mechanisms.¹¹¹ This point was raised by the Katanning LCDC, which noted that it reported to Government on environmental outputs and some sustainable agriculture outcomes but that there was no mechanism to report on the social benefits of its activities. Mrs Ella Maesepp stated:

Where have we done something really great for building community resilience? Where have we assisted with mental health issues? I can think of one activity we did after a very, very dry year, when there were a lot of farmers feeling quite vulnerable, and a number of men actually commented

106 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 24.

107 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 6.

108 Dr Kathleen Broderick, Natural Resource Management WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 27.

109 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 2.

110 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 66.

111 See Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 6.

to me on the mental health benefits of what we had done. We had no avenue to report that benefit through.¹¹²

5.113 NSW Local Land Services commented that the social change 'is a very important part of natural resource and sustainable agriculture as a triple bottom line'. However, it noted that MERIT did not allow for reporting on social benefits:

I understand there is no measure in that tool to measure any sort of social change or impacts on social matters.¹¹³

Long-term

5.114 As noted in Chapter 4, many submitters argued that a long-term approach was fundamental to natural resource management. The FTLA noted the inclusion of the long-term principle is recognition that sustainable land management is an ongoing process that can take decades to show results from sustained improvements in management practices.¹¹⁴

5.115 The SWCC commented that feedback from the NRM sector over the course of previous programs was that four to five-year projects are needed in order to effectively plan, implement and coordinate projects, while undertaking comprehensive and meaningful monitoring and evaluation of project outcomes.¹¹⁵

5.116 Environs Kimberley illustrated the shared experience of different sectors in the Kimberley and the need for long-term commitment from Government:

...things like fired, non-pastoral weeds and feral animals are affecting every single community up here. They are affecting traditional owners; they are affecting pastoralists; they are affecting some of the farmers; they are affecting mining companies and conservationists. So you would hope that a strategic vision could be developed that has support from different parties and that that could be maintained through government changes, allowing ongoing vision and planning for the groups on the ground.¹¹⁶

5.117 However, it was argued that lack of long-term funding commitment to NRM had the potential to undermine environmental outcomes and worked against long-term buy-in and ownership of those who are going to be responsible for NRM projects.¹¹⁷

5.118 The department responded to comments about the need for long-term commitment and stated:

112 Mrs Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 48.

113 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 3. See also, Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 8.

114 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

115 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 6.

116 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 5.

117 Dr Kathryn Rodden, Victorian Landcare Council, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 39.

...we are very aware of the calls and the desire from a number of the groups for certainty, and almost in perpetuity, but we are trying to balance here the need to provide some certainty but at the same time to allow for improvement in the program and redesign, and also not binding future governments—locking them into a particular design or even contracts.¹¹⁸

Funding

5.119 The short-term funding cycle was seen as a major flaw in previous NRM programs which had an adverse impact on environmental outcomes.¹¹⁹ NRM WA noted that during the second phase of CfoC, there had been a move towards five year funding. It went on to state that 'to build the partnerships and regional capacity necessary to plan and delivery sustainable natural resource management programs takes time'.¹²⁰

5.120 The FTLA supported a three- to four-year time frame. It commented that:

Landcarers are often frustrated by short-term funding cycles of one to three years that mean that ongoing maintenance or monitoring cannot be funded, that valuable expertise and community enthusiasm is lost when a project is not funded in the next round, or that experienced support staff cannot be retained at either the community or agency level due to uncertainty of funding.¹²¹

5.121 In addition, the FTLA noted that one- to two-year grants 'can catch you out' as the arrival of the funding does not necessarily align with the planting season or the weather and does not allow time for planning. Allowing lead time for planning, it stated, 'is really the key'.¹²² It stated that:

Successful recipients are also frustrated by intractable project deadlines that do not recognise that on-ground work is often weather-dependent, meaning that sometime projects need another season to enable them to happen rather than losing the investment in developing the project and obtaining funds. The longer term the government's approach to Landcare funding, the more effort can be put into effective sustainable land management action on-ground.¹²³

5.122 NRM Regions Australia stated that 'time-defined' programs have two main effects on the Landcare community: they 'institutionalise uncertainty' and lead to 'significant transaction costs' in the move from one program to the next. NRM Regions Australia called for ongoing Government commitment to funding:

118 Mr Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 67.

119 See Dr Peter Ampt, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 25.

120 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 8.

121 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

122 Mr David Clark, Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 34.

123 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

Our contention is that NRM programs—NRM funding at the Australian government level—should be long-term funding. It should be funding that is fixed in the forward estimates in the same way as most other Australian government funding is done; it is fixed in the forward estimates so we know at least four years ahead, on a rolling basis, what is in front of us.¹²⁴

5.123 The department reiterated the Government's commitment to long-term funding. It confirmed that Government contracts with regional NRM groups would be for four years. It stated it has been, and continues to be committed, to multi-year funding contracts wherever possible and 'ministers have requested that we continue that focus'.¹²⁵

5.124 The department also confirmed that, although the new National Landcare Programme is a change from the previous policy and will require a mid-term review to assess its effectiveness, it is a continuing program. While the current funding allocation is for four years, this does not mean the program will cease at the end of the budgeted period. The department stated:

The National Landcare Program, as part of the Natural Heritage Trust, is an ongoing program; it is not a terminating program.¹²⁶

5.125 A further matter related to funding raised in evidence to the committee was that of aligning project funding with financial years or deadlines set by the Government rather than with the regional and/or seasonal requirements. The Hovells Creek Landcare Group described their experience of this:

The application deadlines, start and completion dates for NHT/CfC projects have been quite rigid and are usually aligned to Federal Budgets of financial years rather than climate/weather, rainfall, time for site preparation and conditions for planting which are the key parameters for successful Landcare projects. By and large, the NHT/CfC program administrators have been appreciative and accommodating of adverse seasonal conditions and approved reasonable project extensions when requested.¹²⁷

5.126 Mr Andrew Drysdale, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, argued that it was not only the length of time for funding contracts but the degree of flexibility within contracts. He noted that there were five year contracts in the second phase of Caring for Country, however, they still contained set milestones. As environmental conditions

124 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 23.

125 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 60.

126 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 67.

127 Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Submission 45*, p. 4. See also, Greening Australia, *Submission 19*, pp 9–10.

such as drought can impact on longer-term projects, Mr Drysdale stated that it would be helpful to be able to move milestones within the contract period.¹²⁸

5.127 The department indicated that the design of the new National Landcare Programme provides greater flexibility in the implementation of projects. Regional bodies are now required to put in place 'an investment strategy that aligns with their regional plan' and allows flexibility in the timing and location of activities. The department gave the example of a flood affecting a Landcare project and stated that 'there is more flexibility for the regions to deal with those unforeseen events as they occur, provided the high-level outcomes continue to be delivered'.¹²⁹

Committee comments

5.128 The committee welcomes the inclusion of the underlying principles in the National Landcare Programme: the principle of local recognises the need for, and previous successes of, a 'bottom-up' approach to natural resource management; the principle of simple recognises the need to ensure that funding is not expended on reporting, monitoring and evaluation for its own sake rather than a guide to learning and policy development; and the long-term principle recognises that environmental improvement requires long-term commitment, particularly commitment to funding.

5.129 However, the committee considers that there are factors which may work against the full implementation of these principles. The committee acknowledges that the national priorities approach of CfoC was criticised by many. However, while the committee received evidence that welcomed the local approach, the use of a regional model drew some criticism. The committee considers that there is opportunity under the National Landcare Programme to incorporate local priorities and input by local groups is a positive move to encourage the reengagement of communities, volunteers and landholders in NRM activities.

5.130 The committee acknowledges that there has been some instances of tension between regional NRM bodies and community groups. This has, in part, arisen because of the design of CfoC and, in part, competition for scarce funding. The committee considers that the continued reduction of funding may further tensions and disengagement of communities and landholders. The committee considers that further effort must be made to address the factors contributing to inclusion of landholders in NRM.

5.131 The committee also supports the principle of simple. For many years there have been concerns about the reporting burden on NRM bodies. Despite reviews of reporting mechanisms, there appears to still be room for further improvement. The implementation of the Department of the Environment's MERIT system should aid in this regard. However, the committee is mindful that not all community groups have

128 Mr Andrew Drysdale, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 57.

129 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 66.

access to computers or members with computer-based skills. Continuing support from regional NRM bodies for these groups will be required.

5.132 The committee also notes the continuing difficulties of reporting outcomes and considers that the trial of the national environmental accounting system developed by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists is an important innovation in this area. The committee is supportive of further examination of this system by the Commonwealth Government.

5.133 Many submitters commented on the need to ensure a long-term approach to NRM. The committee considers that the reduction in funding will undermine the Government's commitment to long-term environmental improvement through NRM programs.