
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Report on the Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry and Department of
Sustainability, Environment, Water,
Population and Communities Annual Reports
2011–12: Caring for Our Country and
Landcare

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry

May 2013
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Foreword

In November 2012, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry's resolved to inquire into the 2011-12 Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

In considering the two reports, the Committee was particularly interested in the Caring for Our Country (CfOC) initiative, jointly administered by both departments. The operation of Landcare, the grass roots natural resource management movement partially funded by CfOC, was also considered by the Committee.

CfOC is a large, complex program backed by significant investment from the Australian Government from 2008 to 2013 to assist in the management of natural resources. At the conclusion of its first phase a review was undertaken. The results of this review were considered when developing the second phase of CfOC. This second phase is supported by \$2 billion of Commonwealth funding and is due to commence in July 2013. In implementing the new phase, the Australian Government has sought to improve the clarity of program administration and decision making by channelling the initiative into two streams - agricultural sustainability and environment.

The Committee's inquiry canvassed the review of the CfOC program released in 2012. The review, while largely positive, found a number of areas that could be improved including:

- the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework;
- additional consultation in the setting of outcomes and targets, that should consider scientific and community experiences and account for the knowledge and expertise of regional natural resource management organisations
- uneven standards of governance and community engagement among regional natural resource management organisations; and

- changes to program design including broader consultation, establishing mechanisms to ensure the performance of natural resource management organisations, supporting partnership arrangements to increase leverage on funding and investment and increasing the community's capacity for effective action.¹

The Committee believes that the ongoing management of Australia's natural resources is a critical investment in our nation's future. In particular, the need to manage weeds and pests in natural environments warrants attention.

The Committee considers it vital that natural resource management projects must be monitored to ensure resources are spent wisely. In this regard, the Committee examined aspects of the National Reserve Scheme (NRS) – Australia's network of protected areas, conserving unique landscapes, plants and animals for the future. Evidence focussed on joint land acquisition arrangements for the scheme where the Commonwealth provides two-thirds of the purchase price and the land manager, the remainder. The Committee's report calls for clarity in circumstances where a land manager becomes unable to discharge their contractual obligations to conserve the designated land.

The Committee is acutely aware of the need for community engagement in the decision making process underpinning natural resource management. Local communities and local knowledge play a vital role in the identification of weeds, pests and other new conservation projects. They should also play a role in how resources are allocated to identified projects.


The Committee's report also encourages an improvement in mechanisms for sharing project outcomes. It is through the provision of this shared knowledge that future natural resource management projects can be better assessed and managed.

The Committee was pleased to see efforts by the departments embracing the use of new technology. In particular the use of mobile devices to engage with communities to identify potential projects was commendable. The Committee believes that such initiatives should continue and be improved as technology evolves.

In conclusion, I would like to thank staff of both departments for providing valuable input and clarification in the development of this report. It was clear to the Committee that both departments are committed to ensuring Australia's natural resource management framework is efficient and effective.

Hon. Dick Adams MP
Chair

1 Australian Government Land and Coasts, Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative, April 2012, p. 7.



Membership of the Committee

Chair Hon Dick Adams MP

Deputy Chair Mr Alby Schultz MP

Members Mr Darren Cheeseman MP

Mr Rob Mitchell MP

Mr George Christensen MP

Mr Dan Tehan MP

Mr Geoff Lyons MP

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Terms of reference

On Thursday, 29 November 2012, the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry resolved to inquire into the 2011–12 Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.



List of abbreviations

DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
SEWPaC	Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities
Committee	Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry
CfOC	Caring for Our Country
MERI	Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement
NRS	National Reserve System



List of recommendations

3 Issues and analysis

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that it be advised by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities once the Monitoring, Evaluation, Review and Improvement Strategy relating to the Caring for Our Country initiative has been published.

Introduction

Adoption of inquiry

- 1.1 On 28 November 2012, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry resolved to inquire into the Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC).
- 1.2 Standing Order 215(c) of the House of Representatives allows a standing committee appointed by the House to:
 - ... make any inquiry it wishes to make into annual reports of government departments and authorities and reports of the Auditor-General presented to the House.¹
- 1.3 In conducting this inquiry, the Committee chose to focus on the Caring for Our Country (CfOC) program along with Landcare, which are jointly administered by the two Departments.

The Committee's inquiry

- 1.4 Following the adoption of the Committee's inquiry, the Committee wrote to inform both the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and

1 House of Representatives Standing Order 215(c)

Communities that the inquiry would be conducted and Departmental witnesses called.

- 1.5 The Committee held a public hearing for the inquiry on 13 February 2013 at which representatives of both Departments appeared. Details of the submission to the inquiry appear in Appendix A. Details of witnesses who appeared before the Committee are in Appendix B.

Background

- 2.1 This Chapter will provide background information on the Caring for Our Country initiative and the Landcare program which falls in its remit. The joint and individual roles of the portfolio agencies involved will also be discussed.

Caring for Our Country

- 2.2 Caring for Our Country (CfOC) is the Australian Government's natural resource initiative, aiming to make 'a real and measurable difference to Australia's environment'.¹
- 2.3 The initiative, administered jointly by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC), funds projects aimed at enhancing the state of the natural environment. It does so by supporting communities, farmers and land managers to protect Australia's natural environment and sustainability. According to its website:

Caring for our Country aims to achieve an environment that is healthy, better protected, well-managed, resilient and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate [and funds] projects that improve biodiversity and sustainable farm practices.²

1 Caring for Our Country, *Caring for Our Country 2008 - 13* (13 March 2013) <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html>>

2 Caring for Our Country, *Caring for Our Country 2008 - 13* (13 March 2013) <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html>>

- 2.4 CfOC funds are used to provide grants to projects that improve biodiversity and sustainable farm projects.³ At present, CfOC is nearing the end of its first phase between 2008 and 2013. This period saw Australian Government investment of \$2 billion to support a range of National Priority Areas:
- National Reserve System;
 - Biodiversity and natural icons;
 - Coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats;
 - Sustainable farm practices;
 - Community skills, knowledge and engagement; and
 - Natural resource management in northern and remote Australia.⁴
- 2.5 From July 2013, the second phase of CfOC will commence, characterised by administration devolved into two streams – sustainable agriculture (administered by DAFF) and sustainable environment (administered by SEWPaC). This will see the Australian Government commit over \$2 billion to continue the program.⁵
- 2.6 To guide project funding for the 2013-14 year, the Australian Government has released the document *One Land – Many Stories: Prospectus of Investment*. This document:
- ...provides an overarching framework of the Australian Government's priorities for funding conservation and improving natural resource management in 2013-14. This Prospectus articulates the places (target areas), national priorities (investment themes) and the available grant funding to guide the development of project proposals in the 2013-14 round of biodiversity conservation and natural resource management investment across the Australian Government environment portfolio.⁶
- 2.7 The Sustainable Agriculture Stream will focus on:
- Sustainable production of food;

3 Caring for Our Country, *2008 – 13 Programs* (13 March 2013)
<<http://www.nrm.gov.au/funding/previous/index.html>>

4 Caring for Our Country, *2008 – 13 Programs* (13 March 2013)
<<http://www.nrm.gov.au/funding/previous/index.html>>

5 Caring for Our Country, *2008 – 13 Programs* (13 March 2013)
<<http://www.nrm.gov.au/funding/previous/index.html>>

6 Caring for Our Country, *One Land – Many Stories, Prospectus of Investment* (13 March 2013)
<<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/publications/prospectus/index.html>>

- Innovation in Australian agriculture and fisheries practices;
- Reduced impact of weeds and pests on agriculture;
- Improved management of agriculture and fisheries and the natural resource base; and
- A skilled and capable Landcare community.⁷

2.8 The Sustainable Environment stream will focus on:

... a broader range of Commonwealth priorities such as Commonwealth waters and marine biodiversity. It will support work that contributes to the Government's broader objectives for improved outcomes at land, seascape and ecosystem scales, while continuing to meet legislated responsibilities.⁸

2.9 Funding in the environment stream, will be available for the following project types:

- **Community Environment Grants** for local groups to take action to conserve and protect their natural environment
- **Environmental Stewardship Program** using a market-based approach to protect threatened ecological communities on private land
- **Reef Rescue** providing assistance to farmers and land managers in the Great Barrier Reef catchments to reduce nutrient runoff, pesticides and sediment from agricultural lands (delivered with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry)
- **Regional Delivery** for the identified regional natural resource management organisations (delivered with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry)
- **Target Area Grants** for medium to large-scale projects to deliver against the three strategic objectives of the Sustainable Environment stream of the second phase of Caring for our Country, including funding opportunities for protecting urban waterways and coastal environments
- **Working on Country** supporting local Indigenous communities to manage their land and seas and providing opportunities for Indigenous employment

7 Caring for Our Country, Caring for Our Country 2013 – 2018 (13 March 2013)
<<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/overview.html>>

8 Caring for Our Country, Caring for Our Country 2013 – 2018 (13 March 2013)
<<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/overview.html>>

- **Indigenous Protected Areas** program provides support for Indigenous communities to increase and manage Indigenous Protected Areas.⁹

Landcare

2.10 Landcare is a major grass roots movement which obtains some of its funding through CfOC, with some \$36.8 million provided by DAFF in 2011-12. Landcare is described as:

a community-based approach that has played a major role in raising awareness, influencing farming and land management practices and delivering environmental outcomes across Australian landscapes.

Caring for the land captures a range of activities such as soil conservation, management of erosion and salinity, sustainable farm practices, restoration of native habitats, revegetation, control of weeds and pests and the development of local natural resource management skills and knowledge.

While a key element of Landcare is the voluntary network of more than 6,000 groups across Australia, there are many farmers and landholders that undertake this important work but are not affiliated with any particular Landcare group.¹⁰

2.11 Under the second phase, Landcare will largely fall under the auspices of DAFF (in the overall CfOC framework). In guiding the progress of Landcare, an Australian Framework for Landcare has been developed by the community of those involved. It provides that the approach to Landcare involves:

- a philosophy, influencing the way people live in the landscape while caring for the land – the Landcare ethic
- local community action putting the philosophy into practice – the Landcare movement founded on stewardship and volunteerism
- a range of knowledge generation, sharing and support mechanisms including groups, networks (from local to national), facilitators and

9 Caring for Our Country, *One Land – Many Stories, Prospectus of Investment* (13 March 2013) <<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/publications/prospectus/index.html>>

10 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Landcare* (18 March 2013) <<http://www.daff.gov.au/natural-resources/landcare>>

coordinators, government and non-government partnerships – the Landcare model.¹¹

2.12 The Landcare movement involves significant contribution from the community itself as it is:

...based on the concept and practice of community members providing their time and energy to identify, plan and implement on-ground works.¹²

11 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Australian Framework for Landcare* (18 March 2013) <http://www.daff.gov.au/natural-resources/landcare/the_australian_landcare_framework >

12 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Australian Framework for Landcare* (18 March 2013) <http://www.daff.gov.au/natural-resources/landcare/the_australian_landcare_framework >

Issues and analysis

- 3.1 This chapter will discuss the key issues that were raised in evidence to the Committee. In particular, the following areas were examined:
- program administration and governance;
 - the 2012 review of Caring for Our Country (CfOC);
 - the monitoring of projects;
 - project funding; and
 - community engagement and local decision making.

Program Administration and Governance

- 3.2 CfOC is jointly administered by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC). The CfOC program has been conducted over two phases, the first from 2008 to 2013 and the second, scheduled to proceed between 2013 and 2018.¹
- 3.3 The Australian Government has committed \$2 billion to the second phase of the CfOC program, beginning in July 2013. In terms of program delivery, the CfOC website states:

The delivery of the second phase of Caring for our Country will be through separate Sustainable Agriculture and Sustainable Environment streams delivered by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and the Department of

¹ Caring for Our Country, *About* (20 March 2013)
<<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/index.html>>

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC) respectively.

Some aspects of Caring for our Country will continue to be delivered jointly between the two departments, such as regional delivery for the identified regional natural resource management organisations.²

3.4 DAFF told the Committee at its public hearing:

Caring for our Country will operate under two streams. It will be a sustainable agriculture stream, which DAFF will run, with decisions made by Minister Ludwig, and an environment stream, where Minister Burke will make decisions. We still coordinate closely and with an event like this we still appear jointly and coordinate on things. A big component of the program is delivery through regional NRM bodies. They deliver integrated programs. We are maintaining a very joint face to those regions so that they have simplified contracting and reporting arrangements.³

3.5 In response to the Committee's question about how the departments would work together under the two streams, DAFF told the Committee:

A decision was taken by the government on the two funding streams that trying to administer them jointly when it was such a broad field and also trying to link up with other programs like water and climate change, and in DAFF with our biosecurity programs and weeds and pests and those sorts of things – that instead of having a joint delivery arrangement we would go to a joint governance, coordinated delivery arrangement.⁴

3.6 In determining how decisions about funding are made, SEWPaC highlighted that the government had recently released priorities for targeted investment in certain areas.⁵ In allocating funding, SEWPaC stated:

... the advice on where that funding will be targeted came from a variety of sources, from our own science, our own social analysis

2 Caring for Our Country, *Caring for Our Country 2013 – 2018* (1 March 2013) <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/overview.html>>

3 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 1.

4 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 1.

5 Caring for Our Country, Target Area Grants (21 March 2013) <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/funding/environment/tag/index.html>>

and economic analysis, as well as expert advice through the review process ... It was also influenced from the biodiversity side of the business by the corridors work ... The corridors plan was released last year. The intent with that plan is to look at how corridors become investment priorities rather than necessarily something that is statutory or legislated. So it is a mix of information and drivers, and policy drivers as well as science, saying, 'Here are some of the priority areas around the continent.'⁶

Committee comment

- 3.7 The Committee is pleased with the decision taken by the Australian Government to transition the internal operation of CfOC into two streams from July 2013 – sustainable agriculture administered by DAFF and environment administered by SEWPaC. The Committee believes that the arrangements should bring greater clarity and transparency to the decision making process, while allowing both departments to work jointly where required.
- 3.8 However, maintaining a single point of delivery from the perspective of external stakeholders is critical for continued success. The Committee was pleased to see that this was the intention of both departments, and hopes that this is delivered in practice.

Funding and coordination of projects

- 3.9 The Committee was interested in the interplay between Commonwealth and state and territory funding for CfOC projects. DAFF told the Committee about the responsibilities allocated to governments in terms of weed management:

Under most state legislation, landholders or local government are responsible for the control of weeds on their property. The Commonwealth role has predominantly been around coordination and paying for facilitators to organise plans of action. But we will provide funds – including through agricultural environmental

6 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 2.

grants – to protect particular assets of importance or control lines. We have had state cooperation.⁷

- 3.10 DAFF discussed the difficulties in providing a coordination effort for weed and pest management. In part, this has been due to declining numbers of staff made available by state and territory governments:

... there have also been reductions in state numbers of people employed on the ground at the same time. In all states their budgets have changed and they have had to move priorities from people helping people to action on the ground or focusing people from Landcare to weed and pest management or something else. So there are certainly less facilitators and coordinators than there were in 2000 but ... there was a lot of community pressure to say, 'Let's put money into doing things as opposed to just planning things.'⁸

- 3.11 DAFF suggested that state and territory budgets for weed management were under considerable pressure, noting that:

It is very difficult to unpick state budgets but every indication would be that state budgets for weed and pest management have been under very large pressure. In Queensland they have certainly declined. I do not know about Tasmania but in Queensland money for weed and pest management went down. New South Wales is also under a lot of pressure.⁹

- 3.12 DAFF also suggested that machinery of government changes made by states and territories also had an impact on the funding of projects. Using the example of recent changes in NSW where functions including livestock health protection, catchment management and agricultural extension services were merged. It was suggested that a move such as this causes a blurring of the lines of responsibility, for example:

It is a controversial issue in New South Wales about where the boundaries would be, who would control the expenditure, what sorts of people would be appointed and what their priorities should be. From a Commonwealth point of view we have invested a lot of money in New South Wales and we continue to have a lot

7 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 6.

8 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 4.

9 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 6.

of money there. It is very difficult now, without knowing what the borders look like, what the control is, what the governance is, what the appointments process might be and what the state commitment of its money to the non-core state business is, for the Commonwealth to be able to commit at this point in time to long-term funding. So we are watching it very closely.¹⁰

Committee comment

- 3.13 The Committee is conscious of the budgetary pressures faced by all governments in sustaining efforts towards natural resource management. Community empowerment and action on environmental issues requires long term and predictable support, and all governments should be mindful of this as a guiding principle.
- 3.14 The Committee believes that it is critical that all levels of government work together to achieve tangible on the ground outcomes. However, they must also focus their funding towards issues that are relevant to their areas of responsibility. For example, the Commonwealth's efforts should be focussed on national priorities such as those outlined in their Prospectus of Investment.¹¹
- 3.15 The Committee was concerned to hear about state and territory funding, governance and potential priority changes that may impact the effective delivery of CfOC and Landcare projects.
- 3.16 However, the Committee was pleased to hear that DAFF and SEWPaC were conscious of these challenges, were focusing on national priorities and were monitoring the situation closely.

Review of Caring for Our Country

- 3.17 Due to the significance of the CfOC program it is important that effective evaluations take place and that performance is continually monitored and reported upon.
- 3.18 Prior to the 2012, a series of 'Report Review Cards' were released annually as a way of measuring progress against outcomes for CfOC. The last

10 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 7.

11 Caring for Our Country, *One Land – Many Stories: Prospectus of Investment* (21 March 2013) <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/prospectus.html>>

CfOC report review card was published in 2009-10.¹² DAFF's annual report notes that the most recent report card was due to be released in 2012. At the time of writing, this had not occurred.¹³

- 3.19 The Committee notes that there have also been a range of previous evaluations linked to either CfOC or other natural resource management projects administered by the Commonwealth.¹⁴
- 3.20 During 2011, a review of CfOC was conducted by DAFF & SEWPaC.¹⁵ The outcomes of the review, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative* was published in April 2012.¹⁶ The review aimed to evaluate the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the CfOC initiative.
- 3.21 The reviews findings were largely positive. However, it also identified several areas that could benefit from further development and improvement. These were:
- the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework;
 - 'more consultation should accompany the setting of outcomes and targets, which ought to reflect an amalgam of scientific and community experiences and take into account the knowledge and expertise of regional natural resource management organisations';¹⁷
 - 'uneven standards of governance and community engagement among regional natural resource management organisations';¹⁸ and
 - changes to program design including:
 - ⇒ broader consultation with the community in our setting of outcomes and targets so that gaps are addressed and duplication is further reduced

12 Caring for Our Country, *Caring for Our Country Report Cards* (21 March 2012) <
<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/report-card/index.html>>

13 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Annual Report 2011-12, p. 68.

14 Australian Government Land and Coasts, Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative, April 2012, p. 122.

15 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Annual Report 2011-12, p. 68.

16 Australian Government Land and Coasts, Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative, April 2012, p. 3.

17 Australian Government Land and Coasts, Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative, April 2012, p. 6.

18 Australian Government Land and Coasts, Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative, April 2012, p. 6.

- ⇒ establishing mechanisms to ensure more consistency and continual improvement in the performance of regional natural resource management organisations
- ⇒ supporting partnership arrangements better so that the Australian Government can leverage other sources of funding and make additional returns on its investment
- ⇒ increasing community capacity to undertake strategic and effective on-ground actions.¹⁹

3.22 DAFF's Annual Report comments:

The review has highlighted some aspects of Caring for our Country that could benefit from further refinement, including the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework and consultation around the setting of outcomes and targets. Review findings and stakeholders' comments have also emphasised national priority areas where a more strategic approach to investment may be required in the future, such as the management of weeds and pest animals.²⁰

3.23 SEWPaC's Annual Report stated:

The review found the initiative on track to meet its goals and to support the community to protect and conserve the environment and increase the adoption of sustainable land management practices.²¹

3.24 The Committee was interested to gain an understanding of how the Australian Government would respond to each element highlighted for improvement in the review. In a joint response to this question, the Department's responded:

In response to the Review a new Monitoring, Evaluation Reporting and Improvement (MERI) Strategy is being developed and will apply to Caring for our Country and the Biodiversity Fund. The new MERI strategy continues to draw on the principles set out in the *Natural Resource Management MERI Framework (2009)*, while aiming to provide a significantly streamlined, simplified, more consistent, integrated and comprehensive approach to

19 Australian Government Land and Coasts, Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative, April 2012, p. 7.

20 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Annual Report 2011-12, p. 68.

21 Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Annual Report 2011-12, p. 35.

monitoring, evaluating and reporting. Many stakeholders and particularly regional bodies have well developed MERI plans and maintaining this framework will facilitate a smooth transition to the requirements of the new program.

The Departments are working together to improve internal systems and processes to support the collection and communication of project and program data and information to underpin a commitment to better information sharing and accountability. The MERI strategy sets out the roles and activities that will be undertaken by both the Australian Government and those receiving funds to implement Caring for our Country projects, and provides important information to guide MERI projects at all scales.²²

- 3.25 The response from the Department also highlighted the extent to which consultation occurred in developing the second phase of CfOC:

Stakeholder feedback during the Caring for our Country Review suggested that more consultation should accompany the setting of outcomes and targets, reflecting a combination of scientific, community and regional experiences ... Consultation was undertaken in a variety of ways, including online discussions, videos, and ministerial roundtables hosted by Minister Ludwig and Minister Burke, written submissions and quick polls. One hundred and thirty eight written submissions were made on *Caring for our Country: An outline for the future 2013–2018* and on the discussion papers provided.²³

Committee comment

- 3.26 CfOC is a large, complex and multifaceted program and the Committee was pleased to see that the findings of 2012 review were largely positive. It was particularly pleasing to note the significant level of positive stakeholder input to the review.
- 3.27 The Committee notes that the review was conducted by the Australian Government Land and Coasts team – the cross departmental team that

22 Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Submission 1, p. 1.

23 Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Submission 1, p. 1.

manages CfOC.²⁴ Although not passing judgement on the appropriateness of this approach, the Committee was concerned that such evaluations could be criticised for not being objective; and feels that this risk should be taken into consideration before conducting future evaluations.

- 3.28 Although the review's findings were largely positive, it also listed a number of areas that could be improved. In particular these included monitoring, evaluation, reporting, and community consultation on outcomes and targets.
- 3.29 Unfortunately, evidence provided to the Committee at the public hearing did not provide a transparent indication of the actions that were taken in response to the review, and the Committee notes that no formal response has been issued. However, the Committee was pleased to receive responses to questions on notice that committed to develop a new Monitoring, Evaluation, Review and Improvement (MERI) strategy.
- 3.30 The Committee hopes that MERI strategy is completed in a timely fashion and leads to on the ground improvements to administration, especially due to the recent extension of the program.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that it be advised by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities once the Monitoring, Evaluation, Review and Improvement Strategy relating to the Caring for Our Country initiative has been published.

Monitoring of projects

- 3.31 One of the issues discussed in some detail at the Committee's public hearing was how, for example, pests and weeds are monitored to enable targeted allocation of resources and the identification of projects.
- 3.32 In response to a question on how projects are monitored in the longer term, DAFF advised:

24 Caring for Our Country, *Australian Government Land and Coasts* (21 March 2013) <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/aglc.html>>

there are loose monitoring arrangements for the major weed pests. Information will come back through state authorities. In the case of gorse and blackberries we have national coordination mechanisms where control actions have taken place and the committees will feed that back.²⁵

- 3.33 The Committee had a specific interest in the National Reserve System (NRS) and how issues in reserves are both monitored and managed. The NRS:

... is Australia's network of protected areas, conserving examples of our unique landscapes, plants and animals for future generations.

It forms the nation's natural safety net against our biggest environmental challenges: climate change and declining water resources.²⁶

- 3.34 The Committee was interested in understanding how decisions to allocate land into the NRS were made. DAFF advised that strict criteria are applied whereby the Commonwealth contributes two-thirds of the purchase price and the land manager assumes the remaining cost.²⁷ SEWPaC told the Committee's public hearing NRS decisions are:

... done through normal calls for proposals. They are evaluated in terms of value of the money and ecological value. There is a process that underpins that and then the department will provide advice to the minister, who makes determinations in terms of available budget.²⁸

- 3.35 Asked about the current system of management and monitoring for the NRS, the Department's responded that the:

Australian Government funding to a partner for an investment in a property that is to be included in and managed as part of Australia's National Reserve System (NRS) requires that partner to monitor and manage their property to protect and conserve its

25 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 7.

26 Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, About the National Reserve System (21 March 2013)
<<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/nrs/about/index.html>>

27 Ms Lauder, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 1.

28 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 10.

biodiversity. As part of their Funding Agreement with the Australian Government, the partner is required to manage the property consistent with international conservation standards, including by preparing interim management guidelines (within three months) and then a plan of management (within two years). These timeframes provide for consultation (as needed) with neighbours, traditional owners, natural resource management professionals and others, ensuring a plan of management is agreed that, once implemented, will support and protect the property's biodiversity values. Monitoring arrangements are normally established as part of this process.²⁹

- 3.36 The Departments were also asked about the opportunities that existed for ongoing monitoring of properties that form part of the NRS but for a variety of reasons can no longer be managed by those allocated responsibility for it. SEWPaC responded:

Part of that management and conservation in perpetuity is built into the contract negotiations and agreement making earlier. There is some monitoring of the standard of management, but that is probably something that has been raised now. It is very much a live issue in public debate – how do we make sure that we just do not declare things as part of the conservation estate; how do we make sure that we are managing that to a standard ...³⁰

- 3.37 The Committee also asked the departments about the improvements that were either planned or in progress in relation to the NRS. The departments' responded:

Australia's Strategy for the NRS 2009-2030 (NRS Strategy), agreed by the Australian and state and territory governments in 2009, provides a national framework for improved cross-jurisdictional coordination to enhance the NRS. The NRS Strategy identifies national targets and priority actions to improve integration of the NRS in the international and national context, improve the design and selection of protected areas, accelerate the establishment of the NRS, support effective planning, management, monitoring and reporting, and strengthen partnerships and community support. The NRS Strategy complements the *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2030* and the recently released

29 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Submission 1*, p. 2.

30 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, pp. 10-11.

Australia's Native Vegetation Framework (2012). The Australian Government is working towards aligned delivery of these strategies with the states and territories to achieve agreed national policy outcomes for biodiversity.³¹

Committee comment

- 3.38 The Committee is of the view that the monitoring of projects is important to ensure that the Commonwealth receives value for its investment and also that agreed outcomes are delivered. The Committee notes the range of strategies being developed to ensure improved monitoring of projects (such as the MERI) and hopes that these are translated into strong outcomes from both natural resource management and program administration perspectives.
- 3.39 The Committee believes that there is a need for an ongoing capacity to monitor and manage weeds and pests in the NRS. The NRS strategy as agreed between the Commonwealth, state and territory governments is a positive step to ensuring the longer term monitoring of the NRS. The Committee hopes that the aims of the strategy, once fully implemented, will ensure that all properties falling under the NRS will be monitored through relevant partnership agreements.
- 3.40 The Committee expresses some concern for the circumstances that may arise where a party to an agreement under the NRS strategy is unable to fully carry out its obligations. The Committee's understanding is that while these obligations form part of contractual agreements, the Australian Government should ensure that there is an ongoing system of monitoring or reporting under those arrangements to ensure project outcomes are delivered.

Community engagement and local decision making

- 3.41 Local communities have had a strong history of involvement in the CfOC program and the Landcare movement. Illustrating this, DAFF estimates that some 120 000 are active Landcare volunteers alone.³²

31 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Submission 1*, p. 2.

32 Ms Michelle Lauder, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 7.

- 3.42 Areas that were of most interest to the Committee included community engagement and how decisions are made at a regional and local level. A number of issues were raised at the Committee's public hearing including:
- how projects identified by communities can be proposed and local knowledge utilised;
 - how communities are engaged to contribute to projects; and
 - how the outcomes of projects can be shared.

Projects identified through local knowledge

- 3.43 The Committee was interested to learn about how communities could identify and have projects of local concern addressed. Evidence to the Committee suggested that communities played a strong role in the identification of projects through local knowledge. SEWPaC emphasised the point that local knowledge was an important tool in identifying localised issues for consideration and that research had found:

... that the qualitative stories should be read in conjunction with the quantitative data and that should be the story. We are talking about Indigenous knowledge all the way through to farmers' knowledge and to local people's knowledge – those who have a really good understanding. There is a great anecdote about a gully just near Pialligo. The ACT government had been trying to fix this gully erosion. It was terrible – the land practice changed and we have caused this gully erosion. An environmental history researcher went back and found that one of the early shepherds, just when the land had been opened up, kept a diary. He was a very good artist with pencil. Sure enough, they found pictures of exactly this gully – it had been in place in 1822. We had seen it as something we had to invest heavily in to restore it to its pre-1770 state when it was just part of the natural landscape. How we pick up those stories now that it is not around charcoal and a diary – it is about moving forward with how we capture those stories. The new social media gives us a huge opportunity to make sure that we are not in the last century with that.³³

- 3.44 DAFF told the Committee that local knowledge was extremely important for example, in terms of identifying new weeds:

33 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 8.

New weeds are actually easier to find on farmland than in national parks – you have to rely on some bushwalker to see it and then remember. But a farmer or a local community group will see it and note that it is odd, report it to their local government authority or their local agriculture department in most cases and their biosecurity people. Then someone will confirm that it exists and they will think about whether they can do something about it or not. A community group might do something or a larger group might do something about it.³⁴

- 3.45 Further to this, DAFF noted that new advances in technology meant that it was now even easier for local communities to highlight areas of concern:

The Victorian government are ... telling bushwalkers that, if you see a weed – because where bushwalkers walk is where the weeds probably are – they all have a GPS or a smartphone, so they should photograph it, map it and send it in to the National Parks Service and we will work out what we can do with it. So we are building those systems.³⁵

- 3.46 In highlighting an example of how communities can use technology in the monitoring of weeds and pests, DAFF told the Committee:

The internet, the web, Smartphones and the like provide great opportunities for community groups, the public, scientists and everybody to actually collate that information into a format so that we get hard knowledge of where things are and anecdotal information that can be checked. We can pick up new incursions and all of the effects and put it up there for the world to see. In weeds and pests there is an ideal opportunity for crowd-based sourcing of information.³⁶

- 3.47 The Committee also took evidence that suggested how technology could assist local communities to share the knowledge that they have developed with other communities. This will be addressed later in this report.

34 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 8.

35 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 9.

36 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 7.

Decision making and local engagement

3.48 Empowering and engaging communities to contribute to natural resource management, biodiversity and conservation projects in their local area is an important element of ensuring continued success against threats such as pests or weeds. The Committee was interested to learn how decisions were made that affected local areas. SEWPaC told the Committee's public hearing:

In part that depends on which funding stream you are talking about. If they are small grants from an area, they are competitive against the national mix. At regional level there is some capacity for regional organisations in the previous tranche of funding to make decisions based on their regional planning processes that are ground up in terms of the priorities for that region. It is a mix of funding that goes to regional organisations as well as independent advice going to the minister in terms of project approvals. So it is a mix of both.³⁷

3.49 SEWPaC provided the Committee with an example of how decisions can be made that affect local areas by providing:

... a quick snapshot of a process that is currently in train, which is a targeted investment in Northern Australia. There were 180 applications received in that round through an expression of interest process. They were reviewed by both an external person that was on the list of external assessors and an internal assessor. Those are then put to a moderation panel that contains me, a chair who is independent plus three other independent people who have knowledge of both community social and Indigenous and environmental perspectives. That is then moderated. So there is very much a degree of hands-off from the ministers in terms of that assessment process. And then advice goes to the minister from the department based on that process.³⁸

Sharing knowledge and outcomes

3.50 Another important facet of community engagement is to ensure that knowledge is shared amongst communities not only to highlight achievements but also to educate other communities when approaches to

37 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 2.

38 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 2.

natural resource management are unsuccessful. The departments commented on how knowledge will continue to be shared:

The Australian Government will continue to consult and collaborate with local, regional and state partners; increase the use of social media and other existing channels to link projects and communicate Caring for our Country information to stakeholders; investigate ways to provide greater access to the reporting of achievements; and present examples of good projects on the Caring for our Country website (www.nrm.gov.au).³⁹

3.51 In terms of sharing local knowledge, DAFF provided a number of examples at the Committee's public hearing:

Our objective is to have all of the information come back to the Commonwealth and then get that fed out. It works much better to have the community sharing their information amongst themselves. We had a good example of a project which has received money for the region. It has had Landcare involvement and probably some Coastcare involvement. It has also had some competitive funding in an environmental management system for all of the dairy farmers in the Bega Valley. It improved their production, it saved water and it improved effluent. The oyster farmers like it because the water quality has gotten better, so they are closely involved. The water quality is better for recreationalists. They are concerned about that whole catchment, so they are trying to save potoroos while they are at it, because they can target that as an issue. They are sharing information amongst themselves. It was not until someone actually goes down there and has a look that you can see how it all fits together. But they all knew that and they are putting that information together. What we would like to do is capture all of those stories and that information and have them available for everybody so that people can share it without having to come to us or a university to ask; it is just information that is exchanged at the community level.⁴⁰

39 Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Submission 1, p. 3 .

40 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 8.

Committee comment

- 3.52 The Committee believes that engaging communities and accessing local knowledge are vital aspects ensuring natural resource management projects are successful. The Committee's public hearing highlighted a handful of the likely thousands of examples of how local knowledge could be used to address a local environmental issue.
- 3.53 The Committee views as important that CfOC and projects funded by the program continue to engage with local organisations and interest groups to create linkages with existing local projects.
- 3.54 Communities must remain engaged and interested in local natural resource management issues so that these are highlighted and ultimately progress to being resolved. One way of this occurring is through an understanding of what other communities have achieved. The Committee was particularly pleased to see that the use of technology such as smartphones and YouTube⁴¹ videos are being utilised to both highlight issues and share knowledge. The Committee considers that while such methods are a good start, there must be a systematic and easily accessible method for distributing it. The CfOC website, for example, is a valuable resource for information and the relevant departments must continue to ensure that information sought by communities is easy to access.⁴²

Conclusions

- 3.55 In conclusion, the Committee believes that the CfOC and Landcare initiatives are a valuable part of Australia's overall natural resource management framework. These programs are large and complex, with billions of dollars of funding, diverse delivery mechanisms and thousands of stakeholders spread across the country. The Committee was pleased to find that overall the programs are managed well and that stakeholder reports are positive.
- 3.56 The Committee was pleased with the outcomes of the review of CfOC. A range of very worthwhile achievements were highlighted, that should be both celebrated and built upon.

41 Mr Ian Thompson, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Transcript of Evidence, Canberra, p. 8.

42 Caring for Our Country, *Home* (21 March 2013) <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/index.html>>

- 3.57 The review did however highlight several areas for improvement, including: monitoring, reporting, evaluation and stakeholder engagement on targets. The Committee hopes to see that DAFF and SEWPaC ensure that the improvement strategies being implemented, including the MERI strategy, result in tangible on-the-ground changes rather than simply more paperwork. In particular, the Committee believes actions should include improved effort in the monitoring of weeds and pests and also ensuring continued monitoring within the NRS. The Committee further hopes that the findings of future reviews show improvements in these areas.
- 3.58 The Committee notes that the decision to split the CfOC and Landcare administration into separate agricultural and environmental streams is designed to simplify management of a very complex program. The Committee hopes that this new arrangement will allow more streamlined administration; clearer decision making responsibilities; joint collaboration to continue where necessary; and importantly a seamless transition from the perspective of external stakeholders. If the separation of administration functions leads to community groups and farmers having to deal with a web of complexity this would be a backwards and unacceptable step.
- 3.59 In closing, the Committee was pleased with the efforts of CfOC in engaging communities about local natural resource management issues. DAFF and SEWPaC should continue to build on these efforts, particularly in the area of encouraging communities to use technology to provide better and more accurate information for weed and pest management.



Appendix A - Submissions

- 1 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry / Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities



Appendix B – Public hearing

Wednesday, 13 February 2013 – CANBERRA

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry:

Mr Ian Thompson, First Assistant Secretary, Sustainable Resource Management

Ms Michelle Lauder, Assistant Secretary, Landcare

Mr Peter Creaser, Director, Landcare Section, Sustainable Resource Management

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

Mr Sean Sullivan, First Assistant Secretary, Biodiversity, Conservation Division

Ms Claire Howlett, Assistant Secretary, Biodiversity Policy Branch

