

Additional Comments by Government Senators

1.1 Government Senators note the recommendations and make the following comments.

1.2 The Rudd Government designed Caring for our Country in response to criticisms, namely from the Australian National Audit Office, that the funding programs under the previous Government did not clearly demonstrate real, measurable on-ground outcomes. Therefore funding was targeted to tackle serious environmental challenges, such as those faced by the Great Barrier Reef. Were it not for this targeted approach, it would not have been possible to deliver the highly successful and widely welcomed \$200 million Reef Rescue program, for example.

1.3 Witnesses that appeared before the Committee have recognised that the targeted approach under Caring for our Country was a sound policy-response. For example, Mike Berwick, [position] of the Queensland Collective of NRM Groups, said:

“We support the need for national priorities and a targeted outcome. That was clearly a deficiency of the previous program and it is an improvement”¹.

The Minerals Council of Australia also supported the new approach under Caring for our Country:

“The MCA strongly supports the Commonwealth being more proactively involved in developing and establishing long term strategic approaches to natural resource management, especially natural resource management that is integrated across the landscape.”²

1.4 The introduction of certainty of funding for regional NRM bodies has also been praised as a significant positive change introduced by Caring for our Country, as Kate Andrews, Chair of the NT NRM Group, recognised:

“I would like to acknowledge the positives in Caring for our Country. It is fantastic that we have guaranteed minimum funding for regional bodies, it is great that national priorities have been established and the government has been really good at giving us an opportunity to provide feedback on Caring for our Country. It is also good that there has been recognition of the range of players and their needs to assess funds.”

1.5 The opening of up funding to any organisation that wishes to apply through the competitive process was also welcomed by industry:

1 Mike Berwick, Transcript of hearing, 13 November 2009

2 MCA, Submission

“With improved alignment between government and industry initiatives, there will be increased capacity to deliver on-the-ground outcomes...The acceptance under Caring for our Country that funding is available to any party that can demonstrate nationally significant outcomes is an important first step to developing better integrated approaches.”³

1.6 A simpler grants system that combined programs such as Natural Heritage Trust or National Landcare Program has also been seen as a further improvement introduced by Caring for our Country:

“ACF, WWF and HIS were especially pleased to see in the CFOC package announcement the integration of a number of previous programs; the clear identification of priority areas; and the increased focus on national led action and on outcomes”⁴.

1.7 Various other significant improvements were also commended by witnesses and submissions, including the focus on indigenous engagement⁵ and designating northern and remote Australia a priority⁶.

1.8 However, whenever there are significant changes to Government grants programs, it is always beneficial to review and improve in light of feedback from the community. Since the release of the 2009-10 Caring for our Country Business Plan, the Department and the Government have consulted extensively with the natural resource management community and other stakeholders such as primary industries to ascertain areas of Caring for our Country that can be improved or strengthened⁷. A number of witnesses during the hearings commended the consultation process and the support of the Departments involved.

1.9 However, the commentary in this report is excessively and unduly critical of Caring for our Country, even to the point of being incorrect. For example, it is incorrect to say that projects that address salinity are not eligible for funding under Caring for our Country. In fact, as Mr Ian Thompson explained during the hearings:

“Salinity can be addressed under Caring for our Country insofar as it impacts on the national priorities, for example, salinity that might be affecting agriculture, wetlands or waterways or rivers or coastal spots.”⁸

1.10 Another example is the statement the report⁹ that base level funding to regional NRM bodies “is a source of great uncertainty”. Given Caring for our

3 MCA Submission

4 WWF Submission

5 Kate Andrews, Transcript of Hearings, 13 November 2009; Submission of Nyoongar Nation (SW Western Australia)

6 Kate Andrews, Transcript of Hearings, 13 November 2009

7 Transcript, Mary Colreavy and Ian Thompson

8 Transcript of Hearings, Ian Thompson, 13 November 2009

Country provided certainty of funding by providing guaranteed funds until 2013, this statement is incorrect and contradicts submissions referred to above.

1.11 The recently released 2010-11 Business Plan has clearly attempted to respond to feedback received. The joint media release by Minister Peter Garrett and Minister Tony Burke states that the application process under the Business Plan had been improved to reduce transaction costs and greater flexibility regarding activities eligible for funding had been introduced as a result of feedback received from the natural resource management community.¹⁰

1.12 In addition, the report ignores the new Community Action Grants – the \$5 million small grants program under Caring for our Country. These grants are available to community groups who missed out on contestable funding under the Business Plan to enable them to continue to take action to conserve and protect their natural environment. A further round is expected to open in July this year.¹¹

1.13 Labor Committee Members generally support the recommendations made in this report but we note that Recommendations 4, 5 and 7 have already been achieved.

Senator Glenn Sterle
Senator for Western Australia

Senator Kerry O'Brien
Senator for Tasmania

9 At [1.18]

10 7 January 2010, Joint media release

11 Joint Minister Garrett and Burke media release, 7 January 2010

