

The Senate

Environment and Communications
References Committee

National Landcare Program

March 2015

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ISBN 978-1-76010-184-8

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This document was printed by the Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, Canberra

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Committee members from 1 July 2014

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Senator Anne Ruston, Deputy Chair	LP, South Australia
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Senator James McGrath	LP, Queensland
Senator the Hon Lisa Singh	ALP, Tasmania
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Committee members to 30 June 2014

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1

8.14 The committee recommends that the Government provide funding to the National Landcare Programme to the same level as provided under Caring for our Country.

Recommendation 2

8.16 The committee recommends that the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Programme be maintained as a continuing small grants program over the forward estimates.

Recommendation 3

8.22 The committee recommends that the further information about Green Army projects be made publicly available. This information should include project timeframes, project status, and an assessment of the environmental outcomes both immediately following completion of the project and after a suitable monitoring period.

Recommendation 4

8.25 The committee recommends that a comprehensive review of the Green Army Programme and the 20 Million Trees Programme be undertaken by June 2016 to ensure that the programs are meeting their stated goals and that the Commonwealth Government is receiving good value for money from its investment.

Recommendation 5

8.33 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government consider avenues to ensure the continuation of landscape scale projects and to foster further collaboration between stakeholders on long-term landscape scale strategic planning and action.

Recommendation 6

8.38 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government review the funding model for the National Landcare Programme with a view to reinstating funding for facilitators and community support staff.

Recommendation 7

8.40 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government conducts a review of factors contributing to disengagement of landholders in NRM activities with a view to addressing those factors and increasing landholder engagement.

Recommendation 8

8.41 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government works to further foster linkages between regional NRM bodies and industry groups.

Recommendation 9

8.44 The committee recommends that reporting be proportionate to the size of a project or grant. Notwithstanding that accountability and good governance is expected at all levels, there should be flexibility in reporting so that the requirements for small-scale projects are commensurate with the size of the project.

Recommendation 10

8.46 The committee recommends that investigation be undertaken to further decrease the focus of reporting on outputs and increase reporting of outcomes.

Recommendation 11

8.49 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government examine the outcomes of the trial of the national environmental accounting system developed by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, with a view to investigating the feasibility of implementing that system, or a similar system, and incorporating it in the MERIT reporting process.

Recommendation 12

8.51 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government establish a system of reporting the social outcomes of investment in natural resource management so that the full benefits of that investment are identified.

Recommendation 13

8.56 The committee recommends that a review be undertaken to investigate any potential efficiencies of NRM bodies. The investigation may consider adopting a shared services model using existing resources and ways for NRM bodies to reflect effective boundaries. This should be undertaken on a state-by-state basis with due consideration of the importance of community engagement.

Recommendation 14

8.60 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government ensures that the National Landcare Programme incorporate sufficient flexibility and investment mechanisms to maintain Indigenous engagement in natural resource management.

Recommendation 15

8.61 The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment undertake consultation with Indigenous groups active in natural resource management to ensure that Indigenous views are incorporated in any modifications of the National Landcare Programme.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABARES	Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
BRCMA	Border Rivers Catchment Management Association
CfoC	Caring for our Country
CMAs	Catchment Management Associations
DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
FTLA	Farm Tree and Landcare Association
IPA	Indigenous Protected Areas
Katanning LCDC	Katanning Land Conservation District Committee
KLC	Kimberley Land Council
MERIT	Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool
MYEFO	Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook
NACC	Northern Agricultural Catchments Council
NAP	National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality
NCSSA	Nature Conservation Society of South Australia
NFF	National Farmers' Federation
NHT	Natural Heritage Trust
NHT1	Natural Heritage Trust phase 1 (1996–97 to 2001–02)
NHT2	Natural Heritage Trust phase 2 (2002–03 to 2007–08)
NLN	National Landcare Network
NLP	National Landcare Program
NRM	Natural Resource Management
QRNRMGC	Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective
SEWPaC	Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities
SWCC	South West Catchments Council
TSRA	Torres Strait Regional Authority

Chapter 1

Introduction

Referral of the inquiry

1.1 On Thursday, 26 June 2014, the Senate referred the following matter to the Environment and Communications References Committee (the committee) for inquiry and report by 29 October 2014:

- a) the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;
- b) the establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program;
- c) the outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for Our Country;
- d) the implications of the 2014–15 budget for land care programs, in particular, on contracts, scope, structure, outcomes of programs and long-term impact on natural resource management;
- e) the Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs;
- f) analysis of national, state and regional funding priorities for land care programs;
- g) how the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture have, and can, work together to deliver a seamless land care program;
- h) the role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and
- i) any other related matters.

1.2 The reporting date for the inquiry was subsequently extended to 25 March 2015.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 The committee advertised the inquiry on its website and wrote to relevant organisations inviting submissions by 8 August 2014.

1.4 The committee received 73 submissions. These are listed at Appendix 1. The committee held public hearings in Canberra, on 29 August 2014; in Perth, on 7 October 2014; and in Melbourne, on 13 October 2014.

1.5 The committee would like to thank all the organisations and individuals that contributed to the inquiry and the witnesses who attended the public hearings.

Context

1.6 The recognition of Landcare as both a philosophy and a model began in the 1980s, reflecting growing community concern about sustainable land management practices. An Australian Government initiative, the Decade of Landcare, was announced in 1989. Since then, Australian Government support for Landcare projects,

groups and networks has been provided through the National Landcare Program (established in 1992), the Natural Heritage Trust (established in 1997) and Caring for our Country (established in 2008). In the 2014–15 budget, a new National Landcare Programme was established.

1.7 The Australian Framework for Landcare, authored in 2010 by a working group representing the Landcare community, explains the Landcare ethos:

Landcare is a unique 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 for many years. Largely, local group involvement has been the catalyst for voluntary community engagement, understanding and action in the development and adoption of sustainable land management practices and the acknowledgement of our shared responsibility for conserving biodiversity.¹

1.8 Currently, there are an estimated 6,000 Landcare, Bushcare and Coastcare groups across Australia.² Landcare remains largely a community-based movement, with funding support from government. In 2012, a survey on the health of Landcare was undertaken by the National Landcare Facilitator. It found that, of the 550 Landcare and related groups and 1,000 primary producers surveyed, 95 per cent felt that Landcare was still relevant. However, the majority of respondents—76 per cent—agreed that Landcare needed to evolve.³

1.9 In the regional stream, 56 natural resource management (NRM) organisations are tasked with working with local Landcare groups to identify local and regional priorities, as well as allocating funding to them and providing support.

1.10 In its submission to the inquiry, Landcare New South Wales summed up the status quo:

...Landcare is a crowded space—there are many organisations, programs, and structures that make up the complex picture that is Landcare. This confused and crowded space has impacted upon the delivery of programs over the past decades.

The 25 year anniversary provides an ideal time to review the structures that support landcare—what was set up 25 years ago may no longer be appropriate. A review provides an excellent opportunity to ensure efficiencies in delivery occur.

However it is also important in undertaking any review, that the views and needs of those on the ground, as well as those operating within the

1 Australian Framework for Landcare Reference Group, *Australian Framework for Landcare*, 2010, p. i.

2 Landcare Australia, *What is Landcare?* http://www.landcareonline.com.au/?page_id=26 (accessed 3 September 2014).

3 Brett de Hayr, National Landcare Facilitator, *Health of the Landcare Movement: Survey Results*, August 2012, p. 1.

structures of Landcare and within government are incorporated into such a review.⁴

Structure of the report

1.11 Chapter 2 summarises the Decade of Landcare and discusses the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust.

1.12 Chapter 3 discusses the establishment and performance of Caring for our Country.

1.13 Chapter 4 examines the implications of the 2014–15 budget for Landcare, including the changes to Landcare policy and the anticipated short- and long-term impacts.

1.14 Chapter 5 examines the new National Landcare Programme, the underlying guidelines and response by stakeholders.

1.15 Chapter 6 canvasses issues related to the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees.

1.16 Chapter 7 considers the role of Commonwealth departments and regional resource management bodies, the perception of the public and private benefits of Landcare, including social benefits; Indigenous participation in Landcare and research and development issues.

1.17 Chapter 8 contains the committee's conclusions and recommendations.

4 Landcare New South Wales, *Submission 47*, p. 10.

Chapter 2

Landcare from 1989 to 2008

Introduction

2.1 This chapter outlines the history and development of Landcare from 1989 to 2008, including the Decade of Landcare; the establishment of the National Landcare Program; and the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT). The discussion identifies the lessons that have been learned from these programs.

2.2 The chapter concludes with an overview of evaluations and reviews of Landcare programs undertaken to 2008.

Decade of Landcare

2.3 'Landcare' is considered to have developed in Victoria in the 1980s, although the ethos existed long before that, as concerned individuals around the country took action to arrest the degradation of Australia's land and waterways. The Victorian Government, through the efforts of the then Minister for Conservation, Forests and Land, the Hon Joan Kirner AC, launched an initiative in 1985 to encourage a sustainable, integrated approach to agriculture and environmental management through local Landcare groups.

2.4 In 1989 an alliance between the National Farmers' Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation produced a national plan for environmental management in rural areas and the Australian Government adopted the concept at a national level. In July of the same year, the Government's 'Decade of Landcare' commenced, with a funding commitment of \$320 million.¹ At its launch, the then Prime Minister, the Hon Bob Hawke AC, emphasised the need for government and the community to work together to address environmental degradation:

...the solutions...are to be found through co-operation at all levels of government and by community groups who care for the land, who want to repair our damaged environment.²

2.5 The focus of the first half of the Decade of Landcare was on encouraging a coordinated approach by community groups to address land degradation in rural areas, including encouraging landowners to integrate sustainable practices into the management of their land. The Government's role was to:

- stimulate private investment of financial resources and labour in Landcare activities; and

1 Department of Agriculture, *Making a difference: A celebration of Landcare*, 2012, p. 7, http://www.daff.gov.au/natural-resources/landcare/publications/making_a_difference_a_celebration_of_landcare.

2 The Hon Bob Hawke, Prime Minister, 'Launch of statement on the environment', 20 July 1989, p. 1, <http://www.bobhawkelandcareaward.com.au/bob-hawke-speech.pdf> (accessed 22 September 2014).

- facilitate public investment and community involvement in off-farm Landcare activities which were seen as having a high level of public benefit.³

2.6 The early Landcare program was described by the Victorian Landcare Council as a 'wildly successful' way to mobilise local action.⁴ Between 1985 and 1992, the number of Landcare groups increased from 76 to more than 1,300. In addition, by 1992 it was estimated that the membership of Landcare groups was over 39,000 or about 30 per cent of Australia's farm population.⁵

2.7 Dr Peter Ampt of the University of Sydney Faculty of Agriculture and Environment noted that a key strength of the early Landcare program was that the Government provided financial support to Landcare groups but did not dictate the focus of their activities.⁶ Dr Ampt stated:

Landcare was one of the first NRM [natural resource management] programs in Australia which not only brought together the concepts of conservation and production, but devolved governance and management of resources to local communities.⁷

2.8 The National Landcare Network (NLN) also pointed to the investment in farmers and the community and stated that a decade of farm productivity growth had been achieved: rather than investment in programs, the Landcare program asked farmers 'what they needed to address the land degradation and productivity issues that impacted upon them'.⁸ The Victorian Landcare Council also commented on research during this early period which found that:

Most farmers wanted to look after their land. What they needed was a way to learn how to do that. Landcare groups fostered a process of group learning that generated new norms of landholder practice and supported learning between peers. Landcare groups then functioned as repositories of local knowledge on good practice, handing on that knowledge to and mentoring new people settling in their local area.⁹

2.9 The certainty of funding was seen as a feature of early Landcare with the Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) commenting that 'you might not have

3 Department of Agriculture, *Decade of Landcare Plan, National Overview*, 1995, p. 4, <http://www.daff.gov.au/natural-resources/landcare/publications/decade-plan>.

4 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 8.

5 The Hon Simon Crean, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 3 November 1992, p. 2419.

6 Dr Peter Ampt, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

7 Dr Peter Ampt, *Submission 24*, p. 1.

8 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 8.

9 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 8.

had a ten-year project but you had ten years of the program and so you knew what was coming'.¹⁰

National Landcare Program 1992–1996

2.10 The National Landcare Program (NLP) was established in 1992 and replaced a range of existing programs. In response to concerns about the diversity and complexity of government programs and their lack of integration, the Commonwealth sought a more coordinated approach to its land, water and vegetation management programs under Landcare.

2.11 The *Natural Resources Management (Financial Assistance) Act 1992* consolidated the former funding mechanisms, including funding for Landcare groups, under one piece of legislation. The Act enabled the Commonwealth and the states and territories to enter into partnership agreements with a shared list of priority strategic outcomes and complementary initiatives to achieve them, to set up the means for state and territory funding of community Landcare projects and to monitor the results of those projects.¹¹

2.12 The three main components of the NLP were:

- The Sustainable Industry Initiatives;
- Natural Resource Innovation Grants; and
- The National Landcare Program Sustainable Practices component.¹²

2.13 The *Natural Resources Management (Financial Assistance) Act 1992* also established the National Landcare Advisory Committee. The Committee provided advice on national issues, strategic directions and policy priorities to be addressed in the National Landcare Program and provide the means through which community views on Landcare related issues can be provided to government.¹³ The committee comprised a majority of non-government members, from agriculture, conservation, Indigenous and other community groups, as well as representatives from federal, state and local governments.

Outcomes of the National Landcare Program

2.14 The second half of the Decade of Landcare focused as much on natural resource management (NRM) as on sustainable agricultural practices. Raising awareness, sharing information and building skills in Landcare groups were given greater prominence. Government funding also began to be more closely tied to

10 Ms Susi Johnson, Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 34.

11 The Hon Simon Crean, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 3 November 1992, p. 2419.

12 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, p. 4.

13 The Hon Simon Crean, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 3 November 1992, p. 2419.

catchment and regional priorities, with the idea that projects implemented by catchment management authorities would build on local Landcare activities.¹⁴ The Victorian Landcare Council commented on the application of government funding on the ground:

NLP [National Landcare Program] funding supported local group coordination and administration, property and catchment planning and demonstration projects, but excluded direct funding for new works or practices, on the expectation that farmers should invest their own money in putting into practice the changes they learned through their local Landcare group.¹⁵

2.15 By 1997, the number of Landcare groups had increased to 4,000 assisted by government support. Engagement with farmers was high with around 40 per cent of farmers in NSW and Western Australia being members of Landcare. Community involvement was also high. Small, localised groups were involved in both identifying areas of need and implementing projects to lessen environmental degradation. Landcare NSW was of the view that:

This approach saw the proliferation of Landcare groups, widespread involvement and support from the community, and a sense of joint ownership for the significant natural resource management problems faced. Group members felt their efforts and involvement to be valued by their neighbours, their community and by the government.¹⁶

2.16 The NLN commented on the contribution that the NLP made to changing attitudes as well as practices:

It was this basis of the original National Landcare Program, and its emphasis on building the capacity of local communities to take ownership of their NRM issues and the responsibility of 'fixing' them, that resulted in the transformation of attitudes and action towards addressing land degradation and improving landscape productivity and resilience that characterised the 'Decade of Landcare'.¹⁷

2.17 Mobilisation of volunteers was a further factor in the success of the program with Landcare NSW stating:

...the original National Landcare Programme, guided by the Decade of Landcare Plan provided the resourcing that supported and enabled volunteerism to be mobilised to achieve results. The value of volunteerism should not be underestimated.¹⁸

14 Department of Agriculture, *Decade of Landcare Plan, National Overview*, 1995, p. 4, <http://www.daff.gov.au/natural-resources/landcare/publications/decade-plan>.

15 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 8.

16 Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission No. 47*, p. 3.

17 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 6.

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

2.18 The informal observation was that Landcare activities were achieving results on the ground, through revegetation, weed control, fencing of waterways and changes to stock management. Reporting on those achievements in a standardised way in order to obtain or maintain funding was, however, difficult for many small Landcare groups.

2.19 Landcare groups also began to form networks across regions as advantages were seen in larger scale Landcare organisations. These advantages included more efficient project administration and increased credibility of funding bids. In addition, networks took learning from projects and made this available across member groups.¹⁹

2.20 The Victorian Landcare Council submitted that Landcare entered an integrated catchment management phase from 1995. It stated:

Encouraged by the success of Landcare, government NRM managers began to consider whether the cooperation and planning of action that worked well at local level could be reproduced for whole catchments. A second motivation for what came to be called Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) was the need to integrate the activity now happening across private and public sectors and focus it on priorities within a catchment. Local Landcare groups changed practices, but it was difficult to notice improvements in resource condition at landscape level. The time required to fix land degradation was starting to sink in—integration of effort was needed.²⁰

Natural Heritage Trust 1996–97 to 2007–08

2.21 The Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) was established in June 1997 by the *Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997*. The preamble to the Act expressed, in stark terms, the view held at the time about the state of Australia's environment:

The Parliament of Australia recognises the need for urgent action to redress the current decline, and to prevent further decline, in the quality of Australia's natural environment.

There is a national crisis in land and water degradation and in the loss of biodiversity.

There is a need to conserve Australia's environmental infrastructure, to reverse the decline in Australia's natural environment and to improve the management of Australia's natural resources.²¹

2.22 In establishing the NHT, the Government acknowledged both the need for national leadership and the importance of the Commonwealth Government working cooperatively with state governments so that 'effective outcomes in matters relating to environmental protection, natural resources management and sustainable agriculture' could be achieved.²²

19 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 8.

20 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 8.

21 *Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997*, preamble.

22 *Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997*, preamble.

2.23 The NHT was to be a comprehensive, integrated program to conserve, repair and replenish Australia's natural capital infrastructure.²³ The NHT's objectives were :

- biodiversity conservation – the conservation of Australia's biodiversity through the protection and restoration of terrestrial, freshwater, estuarine and marine ecosystems and habitat for native plants and animals;
- sustainable use of natural resources – the sustainable use and management of Australia's land, water and marine resources to maintain and improve the productivity and profitability of resource based industries; and
- community capacity building and institutional change – support for individuals, landholders, industry and communities with skills, knowledge, information and institutional frameworks to promote biodiversity conservation.²⁴

2.24 The NHT provided funding for environmental activities across three tiers of government:

- national investment, delivered in accordance with the National Strategic Plan;
- regional investment, delivered in conjunction with the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality; and
- local action, delivered through the Commonwealth Government Envirofund.

2.25 The Act established the Natural Heritage Ministerial Board, giving the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Agriculture joint oversight of the NHT and a forum in which to discuss all matters relating to its operations and effectiveness. The Natural Heritage Trust Advisory Committee was also formed, comprising experts in biodiversity conservation, land and water management, native vegetation, river and wetland ecology, and coastal and marine systems. The committee's role was to advise the ministerial board on the integration of environmental protection, NRM and sustainable agriculture and the effectiveness of projects funded by the NHT account.

Funding

2.26 The NHT was delivered in phases: the first phase, NHT1 (1996–97 to 2001–02) allocated \$1.5 billion to NRM and environmental activities. The second phase, NHT2 (2002–03 to 2007–08) allocated \$1.3 billion to NRM activities. In 2007, the Government committed a further \$2 billion to extend the NHT until 2012–13.²⁵

2.27 The NHT made available larger amounts of funding from a single source. State and territory government agencies, local governments and community groups

23 *Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997*, s. 3.

24 Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, *Framework for the Extension of the Natural Heritage Trust*, October 2002, p. 1.

25 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, pp 34–35.

could apply for funding in partnership, which enabled Landcare groups to become involved in larger scale projects. Funding was available for national partnerships, regional strategies and community grants.²⁶

National Heritage Trust Phase 1

2.28 NHT1 was favourably received by Landcare and community groups. The Shire of Capel stated that locally-determined priorities were coordinated by existing local catchment and Landcare groups. In addition, funding was provided for the 'upskilling' and resourcing of local community members to work with landholders to do on-ground landcare works. The Shire noted that this created good up-take of funds for fencing of waterways, off-stream watering of stock, weed control and revegetation projects.²⁷

2.29 The South West Catchments Council (SWCC) noted that under NHT1 significant numbers of coordinators and facilitators were employed by local Landcare groups, which resulted in increased capacity to support landowners and community groups.²⁸ It concluded that Landcare was changed from 'a kitchen table landcare through to a more professional industry'.²⁹ The Shire of Capel also commented on the contribution of Landcare coordinators with a good understanding of their community and local issues. Skilling and resourcing community members, it stated, to work with landholders on the ground, contributed to building relationships and networks.³⁰

2.30 It was also noted that the application and funding process for community groups was simple and easy with one submitter stating:

The application forms were direct, were easily completed and achieved goals for restoration of waterways and vegetation well beyond the expectations of most groups. The dollar return for government was well matched by both community volunteer time and funds from corporate sponsors. It followed well the decade of landcare.³¹

2.31 Environs Kimberley provided evidence that the NHT saw 'a very important investment in cultural and natural resource management across Australia but also in the Kimberley'. It noted that the NHT was a 'bottom-up approach' that allowed local

26 Australian Government, *Final Evaluation of the First Phase of the Natural Heritage Trust*, 2005, p. ii.

27 Shire of Capel, *Submission 9*, p. 1. See also, Esperance Regional Forum Inc, *Submission 42*, p. 1.

28 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 2. See also, Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc, *Submission 33*, p. 1; Chittering Landcare Group, *Submission 40*, p. 1.

29 Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchment Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 16.

30 Shire of Capel, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

31 Name Withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 1.

groups to prioritise funds, which led to 'great community building' and 'really empowered a lot of people in the local area'.³²

2.32 Environs Kimberley, while supportive of the flexibility the NHT afforded grassroots organisations, noted that it 'lacked an overarching kind of strategy' to assist larger scale projects.³³ It was also noted by submitters that under NHT1 there was no systematic or nationally consistent monitoring and evaluation framework and protocols to capture, record, and store data to assess the impact and effectiveness of on-ground works. It was thus difficult to determine the outcomes of the investment of funds.³⁴ NHT1 was also criticised as being piece-meal, non-strategic and taking a 'vegemite' approach: 'spreading funds thinly across landholders and landscapes'. As a consequence, it was difficult to ensure investments were making 'a valid and measureable contribution towards improving the condition of natural resources'.³⁵

2.33 Evaluation of NHT1 undertaken by the Government, found that it was successful in fostering partnerships between the different levels of government and community stakeholders and in raising landholders' awareness of sustainable property management. Managers of Landcare projects were able to report on significant levels of on-ground activity. These included 1.57 million hectares of native vegetation works undertaken, 63 million seedlings planted and a reduction of 206,000 kg per year in the amount of nitrogen entering waterways.³⁶

2.34 The evaluation found that, as had been observed during the Decade of Landcare, the environmental outcomes of these activities could not be accurately predicted without 'good baseline data and appropriate monitoring systems' and that outcomes take time and may vary over time.³⁷

Natural Heritage Trust Phase 2

2.35 In the 2001–02 Budget, the Government foreshadowed the extension of the NHT, with funding of \$1 billion to be provided from 2002–03 to 2006–07. In addition, the Government sought funding contributions from state and territory governments.³⁸ A further \$300 million was committed in the 2004–05 Federal Budget to extend NHT2 until 30 June 2008.

32 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 2.

33 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October, p. 2.

34 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 2. See also, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 3.

35 Cited in B Clarke, 'NRM and the Coast: Past, Present and Future', Australian Coastal Society, *Submission 8*, Attachment 3, p. 4.

36 Australian Government, *Final Evaluation of the First Phase of the Natural Heritage Trust*, 2005, p. v.

37 Australian Government, *Final Evaluation of the First Phase of the Natural Heritage Trust*, 2005, pp v and viii.

38 Australian Government, *Investing in our Natural and Cultural Heritage*, Chapter 2: Budget Overview, 22 May 2001 http://www.budget.gov.au/2001-02/minst/html/enviro-02.htm#P168_12542.

2.36 In announcing phase two, the Government highlighted the successful implementation of the NHT. State and community investment in the NHT was estimated to be three dollars for every dollar provided by the Commonwealth. The Government stated:

The Trust is leading the world in terms of government delivery of integrated environmental and sustainable agriculture outcomes.³⁹

2.37 The three primary objectives of the NHT remained the same. However, the then Minister for the Environment and Heritage, the Hon Dr David Kemp MP, noted that lessons had been learned from the first phase of NHT operations and that the Trust extension would have a simpler structure, more targeted investment and an increased regional focus.⁴⁰ The regional focus was selected for NHT2 as:

...it offered a framework for NRM planning and action that suited the specific circumstances of different regions and allowed the social, economic and environmental dimensions to be considered in an integrated way. Further, a regional focus was also considered the most suitable for determining priorities, sharing investment arrangements and for coordinating actions over a large area involving many people.⁴¹

2.38 The adoption of the regional model was also based, in part, on the outcome of the mid-term review of the first phase of the NHT which identified concerns about lack of planning and priority setting for biodiversity conservation.⁴²

2.39 The process of regionalisation culminated in the formation of 56 regional NRM bodies. The regions varied considerably in size, population density and environmental management challenges.⁴³ Each regional body had responsibility for the preparation of a regional NRM plan, with the Commonwealth Government investing resources to assist in this process. Each plan was accredited by Commonwealth and state and territory governments according to a set of agreed criteria. A regional investment strategy provided the details of the funds required to implement the plan. Activities funded at the national level included major resource assessment, research, industry strategies and innovative management.

2.40 At the local level, small-scale grants of up to \$30,000 were made available to local groups through the Australian Government Envirofund. These funds were

39 Australian Government, *Regional Australia: Partners in Growth*, May 2001.

40 Australian Government, *Towards a Sustainable Australia: Commonwealth Environment Expenditure 2002–03*, 14 May 2002, p.8, http://www.budget.gov.au/2002-03/budget_ministerial/index.html.

41 Standing Committee on Agricultural and Resource Management, p. 33, cited in Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, p. 35.

42 Joint Team, *Mid-Term Review of the Natural Heritage Trust: Review of Administration*, November 1999, p. 5.

43 Australian Coastal Society, *Submission 8*, Attachment, B Clarke, 'NRM and the Coast: Past, Present and Future', *Paper presented at NSW 20th Annual Coastal Conference*, p. 5.

available to individuals or groups to carry out work targeting local issues or to build their capacity to manage these issues. Projects were required to meet at least one of the NHT's stated priority areas and be able to clearly demonstrate NRM benefits.⁴⁴

Evaluation of NHT2

2.41 This second phase of the NHT was viewed positively by most submitters. For example, the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council noted that, in Western Australia, the NHT delivered structural improvements including:

- increased funding and cooperation from the states;
- the development of regional strategic plans and targets, allowing for community input, a sense of regional autonomy and the measurement of achievements; and
- the development of regional NRM not-for-profit groups with strong governance and accountability mechanisms.⁴⁵

2.42 The provision of funding under NHT2 for paid staff to administer funding and to assist with project plans and applications was also seen as a positive step with one submitter commenting:

This is why the NHT 2 funding was very successful – it recognised that to gain the maximum benefit from volunteers there needs to be a paid officer to deal with all the paperwork and pre planning required for projects.⁴⁶

2.43 The regional model under NHT2 was supported by submitters. For example, Border Rivers CMA stated that regional plans offered a higher level of coordination, prioritisation and rigour to NRM investment, and the administration by regional groups additionally provided local technical expertise that replaced lost government services.⁴⁷ The SWCC similarly observed that the pooling of state and federal money for distribution via one source—the regional body—was 'a very structured system' but it encouraged smaller groups to collaborate to achieve an outcome.⁴⁸

2.44 GeoCatch commented that the model provided a flexible approach to local delivery. In the case of GeoCatch, a model of 'subsidiarity' was used, where NRM was delivered at the lowest level possible for effective outcomes. GeoCatch concluded that

44 Australian Government, *Towards a Sustainable Australia: Commonwealth Environment Expenditure 2002–03*, 14 May 2002, p.10, http://www.budget.gov.au/2002-03/budget_ministerial/index.html.

45 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 1.

46 Name Withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 2. See also, Mr Francis Smit, Landcare SJ Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 59.

47 Border Rivers Catchment Management Association, *Submission 21*, p. 2.

48 Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 14.

the 'result was a "ground up" approach, with an engaged, active and vibrant local NRM community'.⁴⁹ The SWCC added that the regional model:

...further developed and cemented the formation of a passionate and interconnected professional Landcare and NRM network, with improved project delivery at both the local and regional strategic levels. It was guided by the principles of subsidiarity, which is a principle still shared and highly regarded by the South West Catchments Council (SWCC). It enabled and facilitated investment into "self-determined" priorities, based upon the accredited Regional NRM Strategy. It was also the first time that NRM investment included a real focus on the engagement of Aboriginal people and Local Government into regional priority setting.⁵⁰

2.45 The SWCC concluded that a professional and collaborative NRM sector was developed as it moved away from volunteer-driven works and solely local priorities. The NRM sector was 'well-resourced, empowered, and was delivering much more strategic projects with far greater rigour in appropriately scaled project management, data collection, monitoring and reporting'.⁵¹

2.46 Other submitters, while recognising the positive aspects of the NHT, such as adequate resources and flexibility, noted that these aspects also led to negative outcomes in some cases. For example, the Condamine Alliance commented that poor governance and performance standards in some community groups led to an inability to clearly demonstrate results.⁵²

2.47 The Shire of Capel also pointed to concerns with NHT2 including that:

- the shift to federal priorities and catchment councils alienated active local Landcare groups from the decision-making process and many folded or lost funding for projects;
- many decisions on local priorities at the new catchment council were made behind closed doors due to confidentiality. This alienated the smaller active local groups who were excluded from the process even further;
- Landcare coordinators, who had built up networks, lost their positions and projects lost their on-going funding; and
- the administrative workload increased due to an extra tier of administration between the on-ground work and the Commonwealth Government.⁵³

2.48 The Australian Coastal Society also commented that the regional model under NHT2 did not fit well in those states where local councils were not part of the NRM

49 Geographe Catchment Council, *Submission 10*, p. 1. See also, South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 1.

50 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, pp 2–3. See also, Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 2.

51 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3.

52 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 2.

53 Shire of Capel, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

regional governance structure such as in Queensland and NSW. It was suggested that local government was marginalised with the Australian Local Government Association asserting that local government was the 'missing link' in NRM.⁵⁴

2.49 As with NHT1, there were continuing concerns with monitoring and evaluation and accountability including reporting based on outputs rather than outcomes that could be used to quantify improvements.⁵⁵ However, the Chattering Landcare Group observed that towards the end of NHT2 the Government was trialling a Performance Story Evaluation using the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) process and it argued that this told a different story about Landcare outcomes.⁵⁶

2.50 In summing up the NHT, Professor Allan Dale commented on the moves to address environmental problems:

In the NAP [National Action Plan] and NHT time we were probably getting the closest to a very serious nationally, leadership oriented, natural resource management framework for the Australian landscape. While it was fairly experimental and, to a certain extent, embryonic, I believe that in the four, five or six years when that was starting to operate, we were actually seeing the potential of dealing with some very serious landscape problems that we have nationally. We were not fixing them immediately but we were certainly starting to see those things become more tractable. That meant we were getting a step closer towards some serious long-term solutions. We did it also, I believe, in a way that was starting to move us towards real recognition of the role of the voluntary sector and also recognition that that sector, particularly the Landcare sector, is a part of the puzzle as opposed to a solution to the puzzle in total.⁵⁷

Evaluations and reviews

2.51 During the first period of Landcare programs, a number of evaluations and reviews were undertaken. This section provides a brief overview of the reports of the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) and the independent review undertaken in 2006.

1996–97 – ANAO Report – Commonwealth NRM and Environment Programs

2.52 In 1996–97, prior to the introduction of NHT, the ANAO examined a range of relevant NRM programs. The ANAO review commented on issues related to the measurement of outputs and monitoring and evaluation. While acknowledging that some work was being done by agencies in an attempt to measure outputs, the ANAO found that, generally, accounting was limited to specific items such as increases in the number of Landcare groups or the quantity of fencing erected to protect vegetation.

54 Australian Coastal Society, *Submission 52*, p. 4.

55 Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 2.

56 Chattering Landcare Group, *Submission 40*, p. 1.

57 Professor Allan Dale, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 50.

The ANAO commented that agencies were still 'unable to indicate in any detail the outcomes that had been achieved from any of the programs examined'.⁵⁸

2.53 The ANAO made specific suggestions in relation to the reporting framework being established under the then draft Partnership Agreements between the Commonwealth and the states and territories for purposes of the intended NHT program. The ANAO suggested that any performance reporting framework should:

- identify appropriate mechanisms for Commonwealth and state/territory monitoring and evaluation of projects and programs;
- allow the relevant parties to evaluate the extent to which actions or activities of governments and project proponents result in progress against NHT objectives; and
- provide for audits to ensure that agreed monitoring and evaluation measures would be effective.⁵⁹

2.54 In addition, the ANAO commented that there was scope and capability to make significant improvements to the performance and financial accountability of the programs examined; less resources should be devoted to input controls; and greater attention should be given to essential program-level financial and performance monitoring, evaluation and reporting. The ANAO concluded that:

- there were significant problems in relation to duplication of projects, and the responsibilities of groups/agencies/organisations for project outputs and outcomes were unclear;
- program objectives were broad and difficult to measure across all programs; and
- a single, comprehensive management information system for collecting and collating data, which allows information to be processed and reported on in a customised format, was required.⁶⁰

ANAO Report – 1997–98 – Preliminary Inquiries into the Natural Heritage Trust

2.55 In 1998, following concerns raised by the then Leader of the Opposition, the Hon Kim Beazley MP, the ANAO undertook preliminary inquiries into the allocation of funding and the adequacy of the approval process under the NHT.

2.56 The ANAO found that the membership of state and regional assessment panels needed to be broadened 'to counter any perceptions that recommendations to

58 Australian National Audit Office, *Commonwealth NRM and Environment Programs*, Audit Report No. 36, 1996–97, p. 3.

59 Australian National Audit Office, *Commonwealth NRM and Environment Programs*, Audit Report No. 36, 1996–97, p. 70.

60 Australian National Audit Office, *Commonwealth NRM and Environment Programs*, Audit Report No. 36, 1996–97, pp 24–27.

the Commonwealth might be oriented towards particular interests'.⁶¹ The report noted, should this not occur, it could be 'a potential factor influencing decisions about the greater proportion of NHT funding distributed to rural regions'.⁶²

2.57 The ANAO reported that, while 90 per cent of approved funding in the first round of NHT went to projects in Coalition electorates, this aligned with the proportion of project recommendations made by the regional and state assessment panels. Further, the ANAO found that the selection model for NHT projects favoured areas with established Landcare groups and Catchment Management Committees, which 'tended to be in rural regions held by the Coalition members of Parliament.' The ANAO noted that both departments with oversight of the NHT had moved to address this design problem by promoting the formation of Landcare and catchment groups in metropolitan areas.⁶³

2.58 The ANAO concluded that the NHT decision-making process was fundamentally sound in providing transparency and rigor. However, there was scope to enhance the geographic reach of the programs, to seek an increase in the level of biosecurity conservation expertise on state and territory assessment panels and to more clearly communicate the emphasis placed on particular selection criteria.⁶⁴

ANAO Report – 2000–01 – Performance Information for Commonwealth Financial Assistance under the Natural Heritage Trust

2.59 In June 2001, the ANAO released the findings of an audit conducted to examine:

- the performance information used to support the administration of the \$1.5 billion in Commonwealth financial assistance under the NHT; and
- compliance with legislative requirements for performance monitoring and reporting.⁶⁵

2.60 The ANAO found that, while the performance information used had strong design features, there were significant management and reporting challenges. The challenges included:

- determining suitable performance information can be technically difficult when measuring change in environmental conditions;

61 Australian National Audit Office, Audit Report No. 42, *Preliminary Inquiries into the Natural Heritage Trust*, 1997–98, p. 8.

62 Australian National Audit Office, *Preliminary Inquiries into the Natural Heritage Trust*, Audit Report No. 42, 1997–98, p. 10.

63 Australian National Audit Office, *Preliminary Inquiries into the Natural Heritage Trust*, Audit Report No. 42, 1997–98, p. 22.

64 Australian National Audit Office, *Preliminary Inquiries into the Natural Heritage Trust*, Audit Report No. 42, 1997–98, p. xii.

65 Australian National Audit Office, *Performance Information for Commonwealth Financial Assistance under the Natural Heritage Trust*, Audit Report No. 43, 2000–01, p. 11.

- the absence of baseline data on environmental condition in much of Australia;
- lack of agreement on funding resulted in problems in implementing the performance information system including the absence of an integrated national database to manage the program from application through to project acquittal; and
- lack of consistent data across the states and territories.⁶⁶

2.61 The ANAO's report acknowledged that, with the large number of people and organisations involved in the delivery of NHT, it can be a challenge to demonstrate the achievement of outcomes. However, the report went on to state that 'the complexity of delivery arrangements does not absolve Commonwealth agencies from their responsibility to demonstrate accountability to the Parliament'.⁶⁷

2.62 The ANAO made a number of recommendations including the development of baseline data and targets, performance indicators linked to the allocation of sufficient resources for effective monitoring and reporting; implementation of performance measures; and consideration of the development of a shared project/program management information system between the Commonwealth and states and territories to enhance and streamline the collection and analysis of performance information.⁶⁸

ANAO Report – 2004–05 – The Administration of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality

2.63 The objective of the ANAO's audit of the administration of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) was to examine and report on the planning and corporate governance for the new regional delivery model of the NAP, jointly administered by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of the Environment and Heritage (the agencies).⁶⁹

2.64 The ANAO's report acknowledged that significant progress had been made in reaching agreements between governments and introducing a new regional delivery model. However, it was noted that it had taken almost four years for this progress to be achieved. The report went on to comment that, if longer-term outcomes for salinity and water quality were to be achieved:

...close attention must be paid to building on recent research initiatives and actively encouraging regions to put in place measures that are well targeted

66 Australian National Audit Office, *Performance Information for Commonwealth Financial Assistance under the Natural Heritage Trust*, Audit Report No. 43, 2000–01, pp 11–15.

67 Australian National Audit Office, *Performance Information for Commonwealth Financial Assistance under the Natural Heritage Trust*, Audit Report No. 43, 2000–01, p. 79.

68 Australian National Audit Office, *Performance Information for Commonwealth Financial Assistance under the Natural Heritage Trust*, Audit Report No. 43, 2000–01, pp 28–30.

69 Australian National Audit Office, *The Administration of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 17, p. 13

and appropriate for the formidable challenges being presented to the NAP regions of Australia.⁷⁰

2.65 The ANAO stated that the monitoring and reporting framework for NAP was generally sound. However, the delays in establishing the framework, had resulted in performance reporting based on estimates rather than on actual performance. The ANAO stated that high priority should be given to ensuring a consistent quality of actual performance outputs for the remainder of the program. In particular, the ANAO pointed to the importance of reporting on the extent to which concentrated action under the program has led to significant land or water use change over time.⁷¹

2.66 The report acknowledged that the delivery of NAP through regional bodies was a new, and evolving, process for agencies, but the joint delivery approach of the agencies had also demonstrated the advantages of presenting a simplified 'face of government' to clients.⁷² In terms of managing program risks, however, the report concluded that:

...at the regional level, strong and concerted action by all stakeholders is required if the program risks are to be effectively managed. In particular, there are substantial residual risks in small, newly established, community-based bodies having primary responsibility for delivering challenging outcomes and managing substantial allocations of Australian Government funds.⁷³

Ministerial Reference Group for Future NRM Programme Delivery – 2006

2.67 In recognition of the scheduled cessation of funding, in June 2008, for both the NAP and NHT, an independent reference group (the Reference Group), chaired by Mr Kim Keogh, was commissioned by the Natural Heritage Ministerial Board to give consideration to the future of NRM programs.

2.68 The Reference Group was required to review the regional delivery of the government's NRM programs and to provide independent advice on:

- the strengths and weaknesses of current NRM programs' regional delivery arrangements;
- improving the effective delivery of NRM programs regionally, including possible actions to streamline processes; and

70 Australian National Audit Office, *The Administration of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 17, p. 15.

71 Australian National Audit Office, *The Administration of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 17, p. 17.

72 Australian National Audit Office, *The Administration of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 17, p. 16.

73 Australian National Audit Office, *The Administration of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 17, p. 18.

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- enhancing regional community engagement in NRM, including through involvement of local government, Landcare groups, volunteers and other stakeholders.⁷⁴

2.69 Following consultation with key stakeholders, the Reference Group reported in March 2006 and concluded that:

- there was strong community support for continuing the regional delivery of NRM across Australia;
- the past five years have seen a giant shift in Australia's approach to NRM with greater emphasis on regional priorities;
- significant human capital, time and financial resources have gone into building the necessary links between communities, industry and government for the successful regional delivery of NRM programs;
- some key sectors, such as the primary industry sector and local government, are yet to be wholly engaged;
- security of funding is an essential ingredient to the long-term success of NRM; and
- a commitment by the Commonwealth Government to continue funding the regional delivery of NRM programmes would be welcomed.⁷⁵

2.70 The Reference Group found overwhelming support for the regional delivery of NRM across Australia. Stakeholders indicated that, compared with the way in which previous programs and projects were managed, the regional delivery approach had resulted in a greater level of professionalism and strategic thinking in the way natural resources were managed. It had also 'led to an increased understanding of natural resources by both those directly involved and the general community'.⁷⁶

2.71 The Reference Group concluded that the regional NRM model had been successful in engaging volunteers and, as a consequence, provided good value for money. The value of the volunteer contribution was estimated by the Australian Landcare Council to be worth more than three times that provided through formal investor funding.⁷⁷

74 Ministerial Reference Group for Future NRM Programme Delivery, *Review of Arrangements for Regional Delivery of Natural Resource Management Programmes, Final Report*, March 2006, p. 5.

75 Ministerial Reference Group for Future NRM Programme Delivery, *Review of Arrangements for Regional Delivery of Natural Resource Management Programmes, Final Report*, March 2006, p. 13.

76 Ministerial Reference Group for Future NRM Programme Delivery, *Review of Arrangements for Regional Delivery of Natural Resource Management Programmes, Final Report*, March 2006, p. 23

77 Ministerial Reference Group for Future NRM Programme Delivery, *Review of Arrangements for Regional Delivery of Natural Resource Management Programmes, Final Report*, March 2006, p. 6.

2.72 However, it was noted that stakeholders had raised concerns about the regional delivery model including:

- problems with the way in which investment was delivered;
- NRM programs being delivered outside the regional model; and
- problems obtaining sufficient baseline data and science underpinning regional target-setting.⁷⁸

2.73 The Reference Group made 28 recommendations relating to areas such as government support for NRM, community engagement including volunteer and Indigenous engagement, and improvements to delivery, communication and capacity building, as well as information and knowledge, and monitoring and evaluation.⁷⁹

ANAO Report – 2006–07 – The Conservation and Protection of National Threatened Species and Ecological Communities

2.74 The 2006–07 ANAO audit, while primarily designed to report on the range of measures to protect and conserve threatened species and ecological communities in Australia, included the implementation of recovery actions and conservation through programs such as the NHT.⁸⁰ Between 2002 and 2006, approximately \$251 million funding under the NHT targeted threatened species and ecological communities.⁸¹

2.75 The ANAO reported that the administering agency's evaluation of the program had found that there was a 'lack of standard, meaningful and quantified monitoring and evaluation systems for the national investment stream'. The ANAO came to a similar conclusion. As a consequence, reporting to Parliament on the extent to which NHT initiatives, funded at the national level, have contributed to program objectives had been limited.⁸² However, the ANAO went on to state that 'without Commonwealth funds, delivered through the NHT, many more species and ecological communities would have no actions undertaken to protect and recover them'.⁸³

78 Ministerial Reference Group for Future NRM Programme Delivery, *Review of Arrangements for Regional Delivery of Natural Resource Management Programmes, Final Report*, March 2006, pp 5–8.

79 Ministerial Reference Group for Future NRM Programme Delivery, *Review of Arrangements for Regional Delivery of Natural Resource Management Programmes, Final Report*, March 2006, pp 9–12.

80 Australian National Audit Office, *The Conservation and Protection of National Threatened Species and Ecological Communities*, Audit Report No. 31, 2006–07, pp 14–15.

81 Australian National Audit Office, *The Conservation and Protection of National Threatened Species and Ecological Communities*, Audit Report No. 31, 2006–07, p. 21.

82 Australian National Audit Office, *The Conservation and Protection of National Threatened Species and Ecological Communities*, Audit Report No. 31, 2006–07, p. 22.

83 Australian National Audit Office, *The Conservation and Protection of National Threatened Species and Ecological Communities*, Audit Report No. 31, 2006–07, p. 27.

ANAO Report – 2007–08 – Regional Delivery Model for the National Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality

2.76 In February 2008, the ANAO reported on its audit of the regional delivery model for NHT and NAP. The audit focused on:

- the implementation of the regional delivery arrangements;
- governance and financial management for regional delivery; and
- monitoring, evaluation and report on the programs' performance.⁸⁴

2.77 The ANAO found that the design of the regional delivery model had taken into account a wide range of stakeholder views and the lessons learned from the program evaluations conducted by the administering departments.⁸⁵ It stated that the model was supported by well-designed bilateral agreements between the Australian Government and the states and territories, and included a comprehensive planning and accreditation process based on the 'best available' science.⁸⁶

2.78 Progress in implementing improvements in administration following the 2004–05 ANAO report had 'been comprehensive and well-focused on significant risks'.⁸⁷ The report also noted that there were still a number of issues that needed to be addressed, including significant areas of non-compliance by state agencies with the bilateral agreements that would require attention leading into the proposed next phase of NHT (NHT3).

2.79 In addition, the ANAO commented that measuring achievement adequately was still proving complex, not least because the 56 NRM regions used a variety of measuring and reporting systems. While acknowledging the extensive activities undertaken to promote conservation and address salinity and erosion, the ANAO stated:

There is little evidence as yet that the programs are adequately achieving the anticipated national outcomes or giving sufficient attention to the "radically altered and degraded Australian landscape" highlighted in the 1996 *Australia: State of the Environment Report*.⁸⁸

84 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, pp 14–15.

85 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, p. 15.

86 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, p. 15

87 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, p. 15.

88 Australian National Audit Office, *Performance Audit Report No. 21 2007–08, Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, p. 16.

2.80 The ANAO concluded that performance measurement has been an ongoing issue highlighted in ANAO audits since 1997–98 and should be a priority for attention in the lead up to NHT 3.⁸⁹

2.81 In relation to the implementation of regional delivery, the ANAO found that while the regional delivery was well supported by stakeholders, documentation on the economic costs and benefits of difference 'on-ground' actions needed to be substantially improved and that there was little information as to what options are best to deliver value for money outcomes. The ANAO also found that there were significant limitations in regional plans, though it recognised that these plans were based on best available information at the time. In addition, it noted that 'the ability of regions to quantify what the investments will achieve against program outcomes is constrained by the absence and general nature of some targets and the lack of relevant monitoring and/or modelling systems'.⁹⁰

2.82 In terms of NRM governance arrangements, the ANAO noted that they were inherently complex and challenging because of the number of organisations involved in service delivery. However, it found that administrative arrangements had been subject to substantial review and improvement since raised in the 2004–05 ANAO audit. Improvements included formalising arrangements, independent evaluation and development of a regional governance checklist.⁹¹

2.83 In relation to monitoring, evaluation and reporting, the ANAO noted that while a monitoring and evaluation framework had been endorsed by the NRM Ministerial Council in 2002, implementation had been stalled by the lack of agreement on appropriate performance indicators. In addition, reporting largely focused on activities and outputs rather than progress towards outcomes.⁹²

2.84 The ANAO made four recommendations to improve the delivery of the regional model through the better management of risks, greater transparency and efficiency in the management of funds, closer compliance with bilateral agreements and more accurate reporting to the Parliament.⁹³

89 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, p. 16.

90 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, p. 19.

91 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, pp 19–20.

92 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, pp 22–24.

93 Australian National Audit Office, *Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, Audit Report No. 21, 2007–08, pp 27–28.

Committee comment

2.85 Over the three decades from small beginnings in 1989, natural resource management grew to encompass 56 regional bodies, many hundreds of community groups and thousands of volunteers and landholders. The Government's investment in NRM returned significant dividends through contributing investment by landholders and volunteers, changes in attitude to NRM and environmental improvement.

2.86 The committee notes that, with the implementation of the NHT, national leadership was acknowledged and the NHT aimed to develop a comprehensive and integrated program. The 'bottom up' approach under NHT1 allowed local groups to prioritise funds and so facilitate engagement and to build capacity among stakeholders. The establishment of the regional model under NHT2 was generally seen as a positive step towards greater coordination of effort and a more professional approach to NRM.

2.87 While there were significant strengths in the NHT model, weaknesses were also identified including the lack of an overarching strategy and the need for national coordination to enable better integration of regional, state and national priorities.

2.88 The committee notes that a continuing problem of both the NLP and NHT was the monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems. While improvements were seen over the three decades, there remained concerns that further enhancements were needed to provide greater consistency of accountability and governance and a more meaningful and consistent approach to monitoring and evaluation. One area highlighted in many evaluations was the need for baseline data and underlying science to inform target setting and to contribute to an understanding of the condition of NRM resources.

Chapter 3

Caring for our Country

Introduction

3.1 This chapter provides an outline of Caring for our Country (CfoC) and the evidence received in relation to the operation and outcomes of the program. The chapter concludes with an overview of the reviews of CfoC.

Establishment

3.2 CfoC was established in 2008 as the Government's 'flagship natural resource initiative'.¹ CfoC 'established national priorities to focus investment on protection of the environment and sustainable management of our natural resources'.²

3.3 The first phase of CfoC ran from 2008 to 2013, with an investment of \$2.5 billion over the five-year period. The second phase was scheduled to commence in July 2013. CfoC was administered jointly by the then Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and the then Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC).

3.4 CfoC integrated previous natural resource management programs including:

- Natural Heritage Trust;
- National Landcare Program;
- Environmental Stewardship Program;
- Working on Country (Indigenous land and sea ranger programs);
- Community Coastcare; and
- World Heritage.

3.5 With the integration of these programs, six national priorities were established: National Reserve System; biodiversity and national icons; coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats; sustainable farm practices; Northern and remote Australia; and community skills, knowledge and engagement. Each priority area identified what were termed 'ambitious but achievable outcomes'.³

3.6 The CfoC recentralised national resource management under a single goal:
Caring for our Country aims to achieve an environment that is healthy, better protected, well-managed, resilient and provides essential ecosystem

1 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, p.3.

2 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 9.

3 Australian Government, *Caring for our Country 2008–13*, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html> (accessed 18 August 2014).

services in a changing climate [and funds] projects that improve biodiversity and sustainable farm practices.⁴

3.7 In designing CfoC, the Government sought to address weaknesses identified in previous programs which had been outlined in reviews conducted by both the ANAO and the Keogh Ministerial Reference Group. CfoC sought a business approach to investment with clearly articulated outcomes and priorities and improved accountability through target setting. The key aspects of CfoC involved:

- establishing five-year program outcomes and shorter-term (one to three year) targets to guide priorities for investment;
- an annual CfoC Business Plan, inviting proposals from all relevant organisations to undertake activities that will contribute to achieving the national priorities, outcomes and targets;
- a streamlined and integrated system for managing information, funds, contracts, acquittals and reporting;
- providing certainty for long-term decisions by supporting programs of investment that span multiple years;
- introducing a consistent assessment process to select investments;
- establishing clear and uniform requirements for monitoring and reporting on progress (to be included in all funding agreements) and the framework for the annual Caring for our Country report card; and
- introducing improved web-based tools for accessing and sharing data and information about investments, outcomes and natural resource management activity across Australia.⁵

3.8 The initiative also allocated 'at least 60 per cent of historical average funding' for regional bodies.⁶

Second phase of Caring for our Country

3.9 The second phase of CfoC commenced in July 2013. Administration was to be devolved into two streams – sustainable agriculture administered by DAFF and sustainable environment administered by SEWPaC. Stage 2 re-emphasised the importance of community, skills, knowledge and engagement. NRM WA commented that these elements had been lacking in Stage 1.⁷

4 Australian Government, Caring for our Country 2008–13, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html> (accessed 18 August 2014).

5 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Submission 37*, pp 3–4.

6 Australian Government, Budget Paper No.2, 2008–09, <http://www.budget.gov.au/2008-09/content/bp2/html/expense-10.htm> (accessed 18 August 2014).

7 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 3.

Evaluations of Caring for our Country

3.10 Submitters held contrasting opinions on the operation of CfoC with their position largely determined by their evaluation of the introduction of national priorities and a greater emphasis on accountability than had existed under previous NRM programs.

National priorities

3.11 The focus on national priorities was seen as providing a 'top-down' approach to NRM.⁸ Some submitters saw this as a more beneficial approach. The Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, for example, commented that CfoC was 'hugely successful' and provided a coordinated approach to ensure that work was undertaken in areas of national importance and with a scientific rationale.⁹ The Trust for Nature also commented that CfoC had been 'a significant and effective NRM program in delivering effective NRM outcomes on private and public land in a targeted and integrated way'. The Trust for Nature pointed to strengths of the program including: an emphasis on enduring outcomes lasting beyond the timeline of the project; emphasis on landscape connectivity projects; clarity around cost-benefits and risks of project proposals; and the direct funding of groups, not just through NRM bodies.¹⁰

3.12 Wild Matters also commented that CfoC 'went a long way to realising a holistic, strategic and connected approach to national resource management, the capacity for which was created under NHT'.¹¹

3.13 CfoC was also seen as being more beneficial to Indigenous concerns with the Torres Strait Regional Authority stating that the six national priorities under CfoC 'more holistically addressed the key issues and aspirations of Indigenous Australians, particularly in remote northern regions'. The Authority concluded that this was a significant improvement on the NHT era.¹² CfoC included several Indigenous-specific NRM elements, including the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas, the Working on Country program and the Indigenous emissions trading program. These programs were administered separately from the open call process.¹³

3.14 The 'top-down' approach under CfoC was seen as an advantage to larger scale conservation projects.¹⁴ Environs Kimberley also noted that it 'allowed much greater coordination, especially where it involved collaborative project partners and cross

8 See Dr Jill Wilson, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 36.

9 Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, pp 1 & 2.

10 Trust for Nature, *Submission 39*, p. 2.

11 Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 2.

12 Torres Strait Regional Authority, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

13 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, pp 120–121, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/review/>. (Accessed 18 August 2014).

14 See Mrs Rosanna Hindmarsh, Chittering Landcare Group, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 3.

regional, cross-state and cross-territory boundaries kind of projects'. Dr Malcolm Lindsay went on to state that the five- and 20- year strategic visions for CfoC captured many important aspects of NRM management, as well as social and Indigenous aspects of NRM.¹⁵

3.15 However, other submitters were not as supportive of CfoC and pointed to a number of concerns including lack of inclusion of local priorities, disenfranchisement of communities and unintended consequences of funding priorities. For example, the South West Catchments Council (SWCC) stated that CfoC had 'inadvertently undermined Australia's regional model of NRM, and eroded gains made under NHT and related programs in building a collaborative, vibrant, passionate and locally empowered professional NRM sector'.¹⁶ Dr Beverley Clarke also commented that CfoC 'narrowed the agenda of NRM, reinforcing politically favourable short-term, measurable outputs'.¹⁷

3.16 Professor Allan Dale put the view that CfoC 'was probably more informed by political drivers and less informed by governance theory and evidence, although there were some evidential components'. He went on to comment that CfoC was 'not a complete disaster, in my view—I think there were some strong aspects of it—but the framing of the entire agenda, in my view, was not well informed by governance evidence'.¹⁸

3.17 The Upper Barwon Landcare Network submitted that the outcomes of CfoC were less than ideal, 'mainly because the objectives were confused and outcomes therefore not properly measured or audited'.¹⁹ The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association commented that CfoC 'has produced mixed results and had unintended consequences particularly for local Landcare groups'. The Association went on to comment that there was sometimes insufficient flexibility to allow local problems to be addressed, which resulted in some perverse environmental outcomes.²⁰

3.18 As a result of lack of inclusion of local priorities, it was argued that CfoC disenfranchised the Landcare community. This meant that projects considered significant at a local level could only be considered for funding if they aligned with national priorities. NRM Regions Australia commented:

It had a significant effect in the early stages of Caring for our Country, where there was a very marked focus on just matters of national environmental significance as specified under the EPBC Act. That meant a whole raft of things that were previously funded by the Australian

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

16 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

17 B Clarke, 'NRM and the Coast: Past, Present and Future', Australian Coastal Society, *Submission 8*, Attachment 3, p. 7.

18 Professor Allan Dale, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 52.

19 Upper Barwon Landcare Network, *Submission 36*, p. 2.

20 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 4.

government—water quality, salinity and so forth—were no longer funded. It also had the effect that we were not able to fund the capacity-building of NRM communities.²¹

3.19 Other submitters were of a similar view. For example, the Shire of Capel commented that even though the catchment council developed the local priorities, they had to be in line with the priorities set by the Commonwealth 'which often did not take into account previous projects that needed on-going support'.²² The Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC) submitted that CfoC 'ignored the regional plans developed under NHT' and imposed priorities which were often 'illogical at the regional and local level'.²³

3.20 Landcare Tasmania also agreed that CfoC national priorities largely negated and stifled locally developed, innovative solutions for local issues. Project promoters attempted to realign projects to national priorities, however, 'good projects were then compromised when re-shaped to fit national targets in an attempt to receive CfoC funding'.²⁴

3.21 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW, went further and commented that:

Unfortunately, since the end of the decade of Landcare, resourcing has shifted away from enabling and mobilising the efforts of the community to co-own and co-invest in the solution, to investing in the regional process to buy what I call natural resource management outputs.

Natural resource management has become a public works program. This approach does little to effect practice changes.²⁵

3.22 The Border Rivers Catchment Management Association (BRCMA) commented that CfoC resulted in inefficiencies with regard to the expenditure of funds. For example, 80 per cent of Landcare group funding in the border rivers region went to on-ground activities, whereas only 40 per cent of funds distributed by the regional group were attributed to on-ground activities. The BRCMA went on to comment that the regional delivery of NRM funding was a concern as Landcare groups and land managers become frustrated with processes, inefficiencies and expectations. Further, as land managers became disengaged and disenchanted, the regional group's capacity to delivery its contract milestones diminished.²⁶

3.23 Similarly, Landcare Tasmania stated that the combination of CfoC Business Plans and a regional model created significant additional bureaucracy and expense,

21 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 26.

22 Shire of Capel, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

23 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 1. See also, South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

24 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 4. See also, South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3.

25 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, pp 42–43.

26 Border Rivers Catchment Management Group, *Submission 21*, p 3.

frustrating the Landcare community which wanted to progress on-ground projects.²⁷ Landcare Tasmania went on to state:

The current system has created a culture where the NRM regions are very loyal to federal program deliverables. Their involvement in community projects, and their investment in time or money is predicated on a return that can be measured as a target and reported against. This decreases real engagement with the local community and the ability of NRM regions to respond to local needs (unless it fits with a national priority).²⁸

3.24 Many other submitters also noted the disengagement with local communities, loss of momentum in local projects and loss of volunteers.²⁹ The Chattering Landcare Group, for example, expressed the view that small community groups felt that their contributions and capacity, which had been built up under previous Landcare and NHT programs, were not valued under CfoC:

Caring for Country did not recognise that community support and capacity would be lost. That previous years of landcare would not be built upon. The fact that the good brand name of Landcare was dropped as being outdated and tired made a mockery of the hard work done by countless people both as landholders, paid officers and volunteers for more than a decade previously. Community groups were shown to be 'value for money' but now they had been made valueless. Many of the successful groups struggled on doing the best they could.³⁰

3.25 However, it was noted by NRM WA, that in the second stage of CfoC, regional plans were again recognised as planning for climate change developed. In addition, community skills, knowledge and engagement as an end in itself was recognised.³¹

Two streams in second phase

3.26 The Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) drew attention to the introduction of two separate streams, Sustainable Environment and Sustainable Agriculture, in the second phase of CfoC. In the opinion of the FTLA, this division was 'inconsistent both with the stated intention of an integrated whole of government approach and with the underlying principle of Landcare with which the FTLA is

27 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 4.

28 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 7.

29 See, for example, Name Withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 2; Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1; South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3; NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 12; Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 2; Border Rivers Catchment Management Association, *Submission 21*, p. 3; Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 2; Upper Barwon Landcare Network, *Submission 36*, p. 2; Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 2.

30 Chattering Landcare Group, *Submission 40*, p. 2.

31 Dr Kathleen Boderick, Natural Resource Management WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 20. See also, National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

principally concerned, namely the indivisibility of healthy ecosystems and sustainable productive landscapes.³²

Funding

3.27 Some submitters, such as the Condamine Alliance, commented positively on the stability that CfoC introduced, with funding agreements changing from yearly to three- to six-yearly. Submitters commented that the stability of funding led to structural stability in regional bodies and assisted the development and maintenance of regional plans as well as allowing for future planning and facilitated longer-term outcomes to be sought.³³ In addition, longer-term funding arrangements reduced costs for regional NRM bodies.³⁴

3.28 The Esperance Regional Forum South Coast NRM also commented positively on the funding arrangements, stating that it encouraged the establishment of strong working relationships between groups including community based Landcare/NRM groups, non-government organisations and government organisations. In addition, CfoC funding was successful in leveraging significant amounts of other funding into Landcare–NRM projects from local government, private landowners and other groups.³⁵

3.29 The Kimberley Land Council (KLC) provided a very positive evaluation of the program design of CfoC and submitted that it allowed greater Indigenous participation in NRM activities because it allowed regional Indigenous organisations to directly access funding. The KLC stated that this arrangement allowed for effective engagement of the Indigenous community in the program:

The engagement of Indigenous people in NRM activities requires effective community engagement and consultations, and Native Title Representative Bodies, who have close working relationships with their Indigenous constituents, are in a strong position to facilitate this engagement, ensuring free, prior and informed consent. Through direct funding relationships, without intermediary NRM bodies, CfoC is able to efficiently deliver on outcomes as funding is targeted at regional Indigenous projects without being affected by additional administrative processes.³⁶

3.30 Further, the KLC believed that the Indigenous-specific programs included in CfoC allowed Indigenous communities to 'access funding for projects that incorporate cultural values into NRM priorities and align with community aspirations, while simultaneously delivering on national conservation priorities.' In this way CfoC was

32 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

33 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 2. See also, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

34 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2.

35 Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 3; South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 2.

36 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 3. See also, Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2.

able to encourage projects that contributed both to identified national NRM priorities and cultural outcomes for Indigenous communities.³⁷

3.31 However, FTLA submitted that the introduction of CfoC proved to be damaging to Landcare groups, with a reduction in the availability of small grants and a 'significant loss of Landcare support staff at both the agency and local group level.'³⁸ The FTLA noted, as did other submitters, that funding and support of small community groups improved over the life of CfoC:

Over the first five years of Caring for Our Country the Community Action Grants opened up the program to many Landcare groups and the application processes became more streamlined, although still requiring significant volunteer effort. The introduction of the Regional Landcare Facilitators was a welcome development, although not adequately replacing the loss of personnel and expertise lost in the transition. The recognition of capacity building as a separate funding priority was an important recognition of the importance of sustaining group health.³⁹

3.32 It was also noted that funding provided to NRM regions under NHT2 was reduced substantially with the introduction of CfoC. SWCC argued that this reduction led to the loss of staff. This created high levels of instability and uncertainty within the professional NRM/Landcare sectors and inadvertently resulted in a significant loss of knowledge and capacity at the local level.⁴⁰

Competitive funding model

3.33 A range of issues were identified with the competitive funding model under CfoC including the impact on partnerships and access to funds by small groups.

3.34 The CfoC funding model, based on competitive grants, was criticised as it led to multiple groups competing directly for funding and 'worked against collaborative partnerships forming, as groups were eager to independently obtain any funds targeted within their local areas'.⁴¹ SWCC commented:

It also meant that groups no longer collaborated to the same extent. Projects became intellectual property, so you did not want to share that with the group next to you, because they might go apply for the same thing, and that was your uniqueness. That stopped groups talking to each other and looking at the whole system, saying, 'What can we do as a whole to achieve an

37 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 3.

38 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 2.

39 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

40 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

41 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3. See also, Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2; Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 4; Esperance Regional Forum Inc, *Submission 42*, p. 2; Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 14.

outcome?' It made it very siloed, especially in our region, which is quite a complex region socially.⁴²

3.35 As a consequence, the quality of investment decision was affected by the lack of regional expertise and local community knowledge.⁴³ A further matter raised by the Condamine Alliance was the 'opening up' of investment to a wider group of stakeholders – that is, not NRM groups. The Condamine Alliance stated that many of the new players had little understanding of environmental systems or how to achieve on-ground practice change. As a result, 'much of the investment was wasted on initiatives and tools which by their nature could not achieve the required results'.⁴⁴

3.36 The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association also commented on this issue and stated that funding applications were approved:

...notwithstanding that the proponents had no skills or previous history in dealing with on-the-ground environmental issues and, in many cases, were not community based or focussed. Coupled with the concern around failure to critically measure changes and impacts over time, this disjunct has left the program with dubious credibility.⁴⁵

3.37 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective (QRNRMGC) also submitted that the competitive grants process proved to be detrimental to the ability of regional bodies to address state, regional and local priorities. QRNRMGC pointed to a number of reasons for this outcome:

- it undermined trust that had built up between stakeholders, land managers and the community at large;
- it failed to achieve a strategic and integrated delivery of NRM; and
- it resulted in a wasteful direction of resources to the development of applications, over 150 from Queensland for the first round of the open grant process, only a few of which eventually received funding.⁴⁶

3.38 The effects of the competitive grant process were addressed in more detail by NRM Regions Australia which stated:

The first stage of the Caring for our Country program proposed a fundamental change to the role of regional NRM bodies in that they were regarded more as a service delivery agency rather than a partner in the process of determining investments. Agencies felt compelled to honour the competitive neutrality principles and so were unable to receive advice from regional NRM bodies on regional priorities (alignment of projects with regional NRM plans) nor access the "local knowledge" of regional NRM groups in allocating funding to organisations.

42 Mr Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 14.

43 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 2.

44 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 6.

45 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 4.

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

The competitive process also resulted in: high transaction costs – with many organisations chasing fewer grants; and competition between regional NRM bodies and other regional organisations undermining partnerships that are essential to the long-term sustainable management of natural resources.⁴⁷

3.39 NRM Regions Australia further argued that, although this strict interpretation of competitive funding principles had been relaxed over the course of the program, it remained an inhibitor to the use of local knowledge in investment decision making.⁴⁸ South Coast NRM also acknowledged that the arrangements initially resulted in significant competition and damaged relationships, however, these had been rebuilt over time.⁴⁹

3.40 Greening Australia, however, submitted that the funding arrangements under CfoC allowed for direct government investment in innovative programs, for example, the Grassy Groundcover project in Victoria and the Whole of Paddock Rehabilitation program in Southern NSW, ACT and Western Australia. In the opinion of Greening Australia, these programs 'provided breakthroughs in land repair that fill significant knowledge and capacity gaps in the "how to" of restoration.' Despite this apparent success, the programs have not attracted continued support from regional NRM bodies and only sporadic support from the Australian Government.⁵⁰

3.41 Contrary to the view that CfoC disadvantaged smaller community groups, Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc submitted that the funding arrangements provided much-needed flexibility in that it was possible to bypass regional NRM bodies and to apply for funding as part of a partnership:

CfoC was important because it allowed community Landcare groups to apply for funding in partnerships not dependent on the NRM regional bodies. CfoC was a lifeblood for numerous groups who were not able to get support from their Regional NRM body. It is important to support multiple options for partnerships, on-ground works and community capacity building. CfoC provided options and projects for Landcare to be involved with that were large enough to avoid the "short termism" of just small community grants.⁵¹

Monitoring and evaluation

3.42 While some improvements were noted, monitoring and evaluation remained a continuing issue under CfoC. Wild Matters commented that CfoC created more structure in the selection, delivery and reporting of projects, thus addressing some of the shortcomings of the NHT.⁵² Submitters, including the Nature Conservation

47 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, pp 4–5.

48 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 5.

49 South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 2.

50 Greening Australia, *Submission 19*, p. 3.

51 Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc, *Submission 33*, p. 1.

52 Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 2.

Society of South Australia (NCSSA), pointed to the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) components of CfoC. NCSSA indicated that it strongly supported MERI 'in terms of providing a framework for more effective evaluation of project activities and investment'.⁵³

3.43 However, concerns with monitoring and evaluation under CfoC were raised. The SWCC commented that issues with evaluation of NRM investment included the need for a sound level of knowledge of asset condition and health. The decrease in funding for research and development under CfoC hindered development in this area and reduced the capacity of groups to objectively assess the effectiveness of their on-ground projects in a consistent manner.⁵⁴

3.44 Landcare Tasmania added its view on the lack of baseline data available to identify priorities or measure changes over time and/or following the delivery of programs. It stated that:

Robust science within the context of conservation management and sustainable farming must be applied to ensure priorities are appropriate to protect and enhance systems and benefit landscape-scale connectivity.

CfoC attempted to measure outcomes at a national scale in the context of long term (i.e. 20 year) projections within a significantly shorter reporting period (i.e. 18 months to two years).

Under this, long term outcomes are impossible to assess and many benefits are not seen within the short reporting periods of project timeframes. Time is also needed to keep reinforcing messages and principles and Landcare, as a trusted long-term community movement, has the capacity to continue reinforcing messages and principles, however, secure funding support is essential to achieving this and is now looking unlikely in any new NLP.⁵⁵

3.45 In addition, the emphasis on outputs was criticised with one submitter commenting that under CfoC 'bureaucratic processes became more pronounced – statistics appeared to be favoured over outcomes'.⁵⁶

3.46 Some submitters indicated that reporting requirements were not difficult. NRM WA, for example, commented that the seven regional bodies that comprise its membership 'maintain company standards of governance and reporting' and that the reporting and evaluation systems of its members have increased in sophistication over the years.⁵⁷

3.47 However, other submitters criticised the reporting under CfoC with the NACC submitting that the reporting mechanisms for regional groups had become 'very

53 Nature Conservation Society of South Australia, *Submission 56*, pp 2–3. See also, Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 3.

54 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

55 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 4.

56 Name Withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

57 Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*, p. 1.

onerous' and were absorbing an 'unacceptable proportion' of funds.⁵⁸ Requirements were also an additional burden on smaller Landcare groups with limited staff capacity.⁵⁹ The Shire of Capel stated that the administrative workload was often higher than the work required for the on-ground action for small projects.⁶⁰

3.48 The difficulties of reporting by small groups was also noted by Mrs Sonia Williams, Landcare NSW, who commented that their reporting was draconian:

If a Landcare group needs to spend three days doing a MERI plan before they can even go out and do the first bit of work and then take a day to report six monthly, that is not why Landcare volunteers join; they join to make a difference.⁶¹

3.49 The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association concluded:

Caring for Our Country's focus on national scale outcomes in short and less than ideal timeframes has compounded the concern surrounding measurement failure.⁶²

3.50 A further issue identified was that in addition to the onerous nature of reporting, there has been little impact of that reporting on policy development. Mr Mike Berwick, QRNRMGC, commented that 'the fact that we do huge amounts of reporting but that it does not seem to translate into political action tells us there is something wrong with our reporting'.⁶³ The point was also raised by the Victorian Landcare Council which commented that rather than just sending in reports and moving to the next funding round, there needs to be a review of what works and does not work: 'we need rapid learning that is drawn back into the redesign of programs of action'.⁶⁴

3.51 Landcare NSW was of a similar view and stated:

The complexity and frequency of reporting has increased exponentially over the subsequent changes to programmes. It is now often the case of the "tail wagging the dog" with more effort and expenditure spent on compliance than delivery. It is acknowledged that there needs to be monitoring evaluation and reporting, however 25 years of increasingly complex reporting formats, has given little in the way of accessible data

58 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 1.

59 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 3.

60 Shire of Capel, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

61 Mrs Sonia Williams, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 48.

62 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5.

63 Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 28. See also, Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 47.

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

sets and access to lessons of the past. Many reports are lost in archives, and never used other than to tick the box of acquittal.⁶⁵

Outcomes under Caring for our Country

3.52 The committee received varying submissions on the outcomes achieved by CfoC. The Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, for example, stated:

Despite some of the difficulties and frustrations under CfoC, the outcomes have been excellent, and the various programs and projects will continue to deliver good results.⁶⁶

3.53 The KLC provided a summary of significant achievements including the establishment of:

- seven new Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA), which are areas of Indigenous-owned land or sea on which traditional owners have voluntarily agreed to protect important natural and cultural heritage values, covering 91,504 km²;
- IPA plans of management covering 16 million hectares of the West Kimberley National Heritage area, which has streamlined NRM activities and addressed local, community and national priorities; and
- the Kimberley Ranger Network, which employs 69 full time and 250 casual Indigenous rangers to work on cultural and natural resource management while also completing TAFE qualifications.⁶⁷

3.54 The South Coast NRM submitted that CfoC had enabled the achievement of significant outcomes, including: over 1,000 hectares of revegetation; removal of foxes, cats and rabbits; reduction of wild dog attacks; protection of 600,000 hectares of land from feral pigs, including RAMSAR wetlands; weed control over 3,800 hectares; restoration and protection of cultural heritage places; and increasing community participation and capacity.⁶⁸

3.55 Esperance Regional Forum stated that significant outcomes had been produced in the South Coast region under CfoC including investment in almost 250 projects involving 50 major partners and over 7000 farmers, volunteers and community members. Revegetation of over 1000 ha had been undertaken, over 5000 foxes, cats and rabbits had been removed and wild dog related attacks on livestock were reduced by 90 per cent. At the same time, weed control on over 3800 ha had been completed and over 100 projects that increased community knowledge, skills and participation in natural resource management had been undertaken.⁶⁹

65 Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 7.

66 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, *Submission 67*, p. 1.

67 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, pp 3–4.

68 South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 2.

69 Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 3.

Reports and reviews

3.56 The CfoC incorporated monitoring in its design including annual report cards. In addition, a number of reviews were undertaken and the program was the subject of two Federal parliamentary inquiries.

Report cards

3.57 As part of the monitoring framework for Caring for our Country, annual report cards were published from 2008–09 to 2011–12. The report cards summarised the program's achievements and provided a snapshot of overall progress.

Review of Caring for our Country 2012

3.58 A major review of Caring for our Country was completed in 2012.⁷⁰ The review evaluated the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of CfoC from 2008 to 2011. It found that CfoC had exceeded its targets in almost all of the national priority areas.⁷¹

3.59 Consultations undertaken as part of the review showed that community groups thought that CfoC took a top-down approach and that the national priorities did not always align with local priorities.⁷² As discussed above, this view was also expressed in many of the submissions from community groups to this inquiry.

3.60 The review set out findings on the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of CfoC as follows:

- *appropriateness* – the initiative is appropriate as national-scale natural resource management issues require a national perspective and commitment to address them effectively. It is also appropriate that the Australian Government provide leadership and guidance on natural resource management with the program supporting and addressing the achievement of Australian Government priorities and helping it to meet a number of international commitments;
- *effectiveness* – the initiative is effective as real progress is being made towards a healthier, better protected, well managed, resilient environment and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate. It was found that the five-year outcomes had been exceeded in nearly all national priority areas with the outcomes and targets approach effective in setting and delivering Australian Government investment priorities. The initiative has recognised that community groups have different needs and has met these needs by providing numerous funding options. It was found that generally regional natural

70 Caring for our Country Review Team, *Report on the Review of Caring for our Country*, April 2012.

71 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, p. 5,

72 Australian Government, *Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative*, April 2012, p. 18,

resource management organisations are effectively building and maintaining relationships with natural resource management groups in their region and are providing leadership. However, it was found that there were uneven standards of governance and community engagement among regional natural resource management organisations; and

- *efficiency* – efficiency has been improved over time with the combining of programs and a focus on continuous improvement in the setting of strategic outcomes, monitoring and reporting requirements, program administration and annual business planning. Changes to the program design, including broader consultation with the community in setting outcomes and targets to address gaps and avoid duplication, would improve efficiency.⁷³

Caring for our Country Achievements Report 2008–2013

3.61 In 2013, a five-year Achievements Report was released at the conclusion of the first stage of CfoC.⁷⁴ The report outlined progress towards the outcomes and objectives of the program. The achievements under the six national priority areas were provided against each set of intended five-year outcomes. The achievements included:

- expansion of the National Reserve System by over 27 million hectares including the declaration of 34 new Indigenous Protected Areas;
- management of over 10.8 million hectares of native habitat and vegetation projects to conserve native species and enhance the condition and connectivity of landscapes;
- improvements in the Great Barrier Reef's water quality;
- engagement of over 4,500 community groups to protect, restore and conserve coastal and critical aquatic habitats; and
- control of feral camels near areas of known high conservation and cultural value.⁷⁵

3.62 An independent synthesis was also provided and explored some of the key characteristics, successes and challenges of the initiative. Four key characteristics were identified as critical for success:

- people and partnerships – the individuals, Landcare groups and organisations involved in NRM are key drivers of outcomes;
- integrated efforts and benefits – integrated approaches are appropriate given the scale and long-term nature of NRM challenges;

73 Caring for our Country Review Team, *Report on the Review of Caring for our Country*, April 2012, pp 3–7.

74 Caring for our Country Achievements Report 2008–2013, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/publications/achievements-report>

75 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 10.

- innovation – innovative approaches in design and implementation can be drivers of project success; and
- a scientific basis for prioritising and evaluating – the best available information should be accessed and integrated to inform investment and evaluate achievements.⁷⁶

3.63 The synthesis commented that 'many of the Caring for our Country projects have created a legacy that is likely to endure' and the achievements provided a sound basis for the next phase of Caring for our Country. However, it was noted that natural resource management issues were complex and that 'to make improvements and sustain them over time is no easy matter'. It concluded that:

Continuity of effort, investment and commitment is required to continue to improve NRM and meet the 20-year goal of Caring for our Country in another 15 years.⁷⁷

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee 2010

3.64 In its report, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee considered NRM issues including future needs and conservation challenges. The committee concluded that CfoC fell well short of achieving an environment that is healthy, well-managed and resilient and addressing the issues identified in previous NRM programs.⁷⁸

3.65 The committee expressed concern about the transitional arrangements for implementation of CfoC noting delays in the release of the Business Plan and the monitoring and evaluation framework. In addition, the committee noted that the transition was a disruptive and anxious time for many people involved in NRM as they sought to secure ongoing financial resources.

3.66 It was concluded that the development of national priorities and targets without adequate consultation had resulted in difficulties in aligning local and regional priorities with the national priorities and targets. The committee was therefore of the view that changes were required to foster an integrated and longer-term approach to land management and to ensure that the states' and territories' roles in NRM were recognised and encouraged. The committee recommended:

- a more rigorous and comprehensive approach to identifying national priorities, including engaging regional and local expertise to ensure priorities are relevant at the regional and local level; and

76 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 10.

77 Caring for our Country 2008–2013 Achievements Report: Synthesis. Independent summary to Caring for our Country, 2013, p. 59.

78 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, p.67.

- bilateral agreements with state and territory governments be pursued to increase investment and drive reform.⁷⁹

3.67 The committee also made a range of recommendations addressing funding, community engagement and capacity building:

- the role of regional NRM organisations be more clearly defined, and the level of institutional and financial support be reviewed;
- incentives be provided for stakeholders to collaborate with a range of project partners on long-term landscape scale planning and action;
- the evaluation of competitive funding applications be modified to give greater consideration to the likelihood of projects achieving defined and measurable environmental outcomes; and
- the funding model be reviewed and consideration be given to increasing overall funding.⁸⁰

3.68 In relation to the application process, the committee found evidence of complexity, uncertainty and high transaction costs. Lack of transparency and accountability in the evaluation process was also identified. The committee recommended the application process be reviewed including opportunities to reduce the costs of submitting applications and that a framework for providing consistent support and feedback to applicants be established.⁸¹

3.69 The committee also commented on monitoring and evaluation and noted there were ongoing concerns about this aspect of the program despite claims that the design of CfoC would address monitoring and evaluation issues identified in ANAO reports. The committee recommended that a working group be convened to develop a framework for auditing the condition of Australia's natural resources. The committee considered that this would provide a means of establishing benchmarks against which to monitor and evaluate investment in NRM.⁸²

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry –2013

3.70 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry into the 2011–12 Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of

79 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, p.69.

80 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, pp 70–71.

81 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, pp 71–72.

82 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, February 2010, pp 72–73.

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities included consideration of CfoC.⁸³

3.71 The committee inquiry canvassed the 2012 review of CfoC and identified the following areas for improvement:

- the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement 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 NRM organisations;
- uneven standards of governance and community engagement among regional NRM organisations; and
- changes to programme design including broader consultation, establishing mechanisms to ensure the performance of NRM organisations, supporting partnership arrangements to increase leverage on funding and investment and increasing the community's capacity for effective action.

Committee comment

3.72 The committee notes that the Government aimed, in the design of CfoC, to address the issues raised in the many reviews of the NLP and the NHT. It appears that CfoC was less than successful in achieving this and, indeed, introduced features which caused unintended consequences particular at the community level.

3.73 The committee received a range of views regarding the introduction of national priorities. Supporters of this approach pointed to the lack of an integrated and coordinated approach to NRM under the NHT. National priorities were seen as being beneficial for larger projects and were welcomed by Indigenous groups as it allowed for greater collaboration and coordination and 'addressed the key issues and aspirations of Indigenous Australians'.

3.74 However, the committee received evidence that the national priorities caused significant difficulties for NRM groups. Witnesses pointed to the need to align funding applications to meet the priorities. As a consequence, many worthwhile projects did not receive funding and community groups and landholders were alienated and disengaged. This latter outcome has significant implications for NRM as community efforts and the engagement of landholders is vital for long-term environmental improvement.

3.75 Competitive funding under CfoC impacted on partnerships, staff retention, and access to funds by smaller groups. The committee notes evidence that the funding structure of CfoC led to less collaboration at the regional and local level as groups

83 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry, *Inquiry into 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*, May 2013, http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=arff/daffsewpac/report.htm

sought funds to progress their projects. Competitive funding also increased the time and resources expended in developing applications – many of which failed to gain funding approval.

3.76 Evidence also pointed to increased costs and bureaucracy at the regional level. Added to the reduction in funding for the program as a whole, the result was less spending on on-ground projects.

3.77 Monitoring and evaluation remained a concern during CfoC. The committee notes the introduction of the MERI tool which was seen as providing a framework for more effective evaluation of project activity and investment. However, evidence pointed to continuing reliance on output data rather than outcomes, the onerous nature of reporting and an on-going lack of baseline data. As a consequence, the committee regards CfoC as being less than successful in addressing the problems of monitoring and evaluation identified in ANAO reports and by stakeholders.

3.78 The committee was also concerned that there was a view that, after all the reporting, there has been little impact on policy development.

3.79 The committee considers that the outcomes of CfoC point to the complexities of program design and delivery of natural resource management across Australia. The early successes of the NLP and NHT underlined the need for a consistent and long-term approach to funding, the need collaboration and cooperation, and the importance of engagement at all levels: government, industry, the community and landholders. While acknowledging that changes were made over the life of CfoC, the committee considers that CfoC introduced difficulties to natural resource management and failed to carry on the momentum and build on the successes of earlier NRM programs.

Chapter 4

Landcare and the 2014–15 Budget

Introduction

4.1 As part of the 2014–15 Budget, major changes were announced to Landcare, in particular a decrease in funding and the funding of complementary programs including the Green Army and 20 Million Trees. This chapter considers the impact of funding changes, the policy rationale for the changes to the Landcare program and the perceived long-term impact on natural resource management and communities.

2014–15 Budget and Landcare

4.2 On 26 August 2013, the Hon Greg Hunt MP, then Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage, stated in an election campaign media release that:

The Coalition will place Landcare back at the centre of our land management programs. We will merge Caring for Country and Landcare to create a single National Landcare Program to reflect local and regional program priorities.¹

4.3 It was indicated that the Coalition's policy was based on principles sought by Landcare and local conservation groups and the full Caring for Country (CfoC) and Landcare budgets would be maintained and merged with Landcare having access to a greater share of the new National Landcare Program. In addition, the state and national Landcare Networks would receive a combined base operational funding of \$1 million per annum 'to give the Landcare Networks much-needed support to co-ordinate their volunteer operations'.²

4.4 The *Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2013–14* (MYEFO) was released in December 2013 and indicated that the new Abbott Government had redirected funding from CfoC to two other measures: \$1.2 million to provide assistance to farm businesses in NSW and Queensland with installing water-related infrastructure; and \$6.7 million for the Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Programme.³

4.5 In October 2013, the Abbott Government established the National Commission of Audit to review and report on the performance, functions and roles of the Commonwealth Government. The Commission released its first report in February

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- 1 The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage, 'National Landcare Program', *Media release*, 26 August 2013, p. 1. http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2686939/upload_binary/2686939.pdf;fileType%3Dapplication%2Fpdf (accessed 3 September 2014).
 - 2 The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage, 'National Landcare Program', *Media release*, 26 August 2013, pp 1–2.
 - 3 Australian Government, *Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2013–14*, December 2013, pp 117, 140.

2014 and recommended halving the funding for National Landcare Programme with the Commission stating that the Programme should also be better aligned to the goals of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.⁴

4.6 In the 2014–15 Budget, the Government announced the establishment of the National Landcare Programme (the Programme) through the merger of Caring for our Country and Landcare. The new program aimed at delivering 'a simple, local and long term approach to national funding for the environment and will comprise a regional and a national component'.⁵

4.7 The Budget provided \$1,028.1 million over the four years of the forward estimates to establish the Programme. The Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture (the departments) in their joint submission noted that, together with complementary programmes, the total investment in NRM would be \$2 billion over four years. This funding represents a reduction of \$471 million over the next four years, in addition to a reduction of \$12.8 million for 2013–14.⁶ In addition, savings are to be achieved through the termination of the *National Produce Monitoring System* in June 2014 and funding reduction and early termination of the *Environmental Stewardship Programme*.⁷

4.8 The departments also noted that the Programme framework underpins the delivery of several other election commitments, including:

- support for national and state Landcare networks;
- recognising Peel-Harvey Catchment Council and OceanWatch as regional NRM organisations; and
- 20 Million Trees (\$50 million over four years).

4.9 In addition, the Reef 2050 Plan and the Green Army (\$525 million), are linked to the Programme as well as the Government's wider NRM policy settings including: the outcomes of the white papers for Agriculture and Developing Northern Australia; drought policy and programmes; the Government's clean water plan, especially in the Murray-Darling Basin; and Biosecurity Incursion Management.⁸ Complementary programs include Working on Country (\$210.2 million) and the Land Sector Package (\$203.6 million).⁹

4 National Commission of Audit, *Towards Responsible Government, Appendix to the Report of the National Commission of Audit, Volume 2*, February 2014, p. 10.

5 Australian Government, Budget Paper No. 2, *Budget Measures 2014–15*, 13 May 2014, p. 107.

6 Australian Government, Budget Paper No. 2, *Budget Measures 2014–15*, 13 May 2014, p. 107.

7 Australian Government, Budget Paper No. 2, *Budget Measures 2014–15*, 13 May 2014, p. 107.

8 Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture, *Submission 53*, p. 5.

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

4.10 Both the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture are responsible for the Programme with the Department of the Environment receiving approximately 70 per cent of the budget.¹⁰

4.11 Issues raised in relation to specific program components are discussed in Chapter 5.

25th Anniversary Landcare Grants 2014–15

4.12 On 19 September 2015, the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Agriculture launched the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants 2014–15. These are one-off small grants under the national stream of the National Landcare Programme. Funding of \$5 million was provided to assist community groups and individuals to undertake projects to conserve and protect their local environment and/or to manage the natural resource base. A total of 291 projects received funding of between \$5,000 and \$20,000. Of these, 148 projects had a strong agricultural focus and 143 focused on delivering positive environmental outcomes.¹¹

Responses to the Budget announcement

4.13 The evidence received by the committee in relation to the Budget announcement, addressed the Coalition's pre-election commitment to Landcare and the subsequent reduction in funding. Submitters expressed concern about the immediate and long-term adverse effects on Landcare across Australia as a result of the reduction in funding. In addition, submitters commented on the establishment of two complementary programs: the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees.

Pre-election commitment

4.14 It was stated that many people in the Landcare sector had welcomed the Coalition's pre-election commitment to Landcare, in particular the commitment to maintaining the budgets of CfoC and Landcare.¹² One submitter commented that the Landcare sector was convinced that Landcare had a good future under the Coalition Government.¹³

4.15 However, submitters expressed surprise and disappointment at the 2014 Budget announcement and viewed it as a broken pre-election commitment.¹⁴ Mr Matthew Pitt, for example, commented that assurance was given 'right up until the

10 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 64.

11 The Hon Greg Hunt, Minister for the Environment and the Hon Barnaby Joyce, Minister for Agriculture, 'Christmas comes early for Landcare', *Joint Media Release*, 18 December 2015.

12 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 2;

13 Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 5.

14 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3; Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 3; Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 6; Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 14.

budget was delivered that there would not be major changes to the policy and delivery'.¹⁵ The National Landcare Network (NLN) pointed to earlier commitments:

The decision by the Australian Government to implement the Commission of Audit recommendations to cut the National Landcare Programme budget by 40% completely abrogated the commitment by the Environment Minister that the full Caring for our Country and Landcare budgets would be maintained. This came as a shock to many in the Landcare community who had embraced the rhetoric around "simple, local and long-term" and put their trust in the Minister.¹⁶

4.16 Wild Matters added that the Budget announcement came as a surprise to the sector and had 'seriously affected morale' and commented that 'it is a widely held view within the NRM community that these are the darkest days that the sector has experience in over 25 years'.¹⁷ The NLN went onto comment that the commitment to 'place Landcare back at the centre of our land management programmes' was not possible when half the funds had been removed.¹⁸

Reduction in funding

4.17 The committee received extensive evidence about the level of funding available to the new Programme following the Budget announcement and the effect of the reduction on natural resource management activities and environmental outcomes.

4.18 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, noted that there had been no guarantee at the expiration of CfoC that the Government would provide another round of funding. He went on to comment that 'the regional bodies around Australia were very happy that the new government decided to invest in a new National Landcare Program and a new NRM program'.¹⁹

4.19 However, NRM Regions Australia also stated that the budget 'has resulted in a 26% reduction in funding over the next four years for regional NRM and Landcare compared with the former Caring for our Country funding for the same period'.²⁰ This loss in funding, NRM Regions submitted, was compounded by the previous Government's redirection, in May 2013, of \$213 million worth of NRM funding from the Biodiversity Fund. In addition, the Biodiversity Fund had now been abolished to save \$152 million.²¹

15 Mr Matthew Pitt, *Submission 23*, p. 1. See also, Mr Nev Reis, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Ms Kate Watson, *Submission 69*, p. 1; Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 5.

16 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

17 Wild Matters, *Submission 26*, p. 3.

18 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

19 Mr Max Kitchell, NRM Regions Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 23. See also, Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, *Submission 67*, p. 2.

20 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 6.

21 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 7. See also, Queensland Regional Natural Resource Management Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 6.

4.20 Other submitters also pointed to the compounding effect of reduction in funding over time with the Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective stating that funding for regional NRM bodies had been effectively frozen for the last five years with the 'increased cost of delivery driven by inflation having to be absorbed into stationary budgets'.²² South West Catchment Council (SWCC) added that the level of funding currently provided is approximately 20 per cent of that annually provided through NHT2.²³

4.21 In addition to the reduction in the level of funding, it was noted that the remaining funding needed to cover a greater number of programs. Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) commented that this further reduces the amount of money available to Landcare groups. The FTLA also argued that programs such as \$0.5 million over two years for cane toad eradication in the Kimberley, \$9 million of fishing programs, the \$40 million Reef 2050 Plan and the diversion of funds for drought relief which, while worthy initiatives, are not generally Landcare activities.²⁴

4.22 The Government's reasons for the reduction in funding were questioned by submitters, particularly in light of the continuing need for environmental improvement and the significant direct and indirect benefits arising from Landcare.

4.23 Some submitters argued that the reduction came through a lack of understanding of the myriad of benefits arising from investment in Landcare. Mr David Walker, NLN, commented:

The cuts came from a strong intention to cut expenditure. There has been a lot of debate about the budget emergency and whether or not revenue should have been looked at as well as expenditure. The Commission of Audit took a very strong position. They were the ones who recommended a 50 per cent cut to Landcare. We were actually quite staggered at the disconnect between reality and their, I guess, strong doctrinaire economic view, in that investment in community actually returns so much money.²⁵

4.24 Mr Walker went on to outline the wider benefits of Landcare:

I made the particular point about investing in farmers being private benefit. In terms of catchment, improved water quality, improved biodiversity through conservation on farms and for the wider economy in terms of more productive farms the benefit is a lot wider than just on farms. We were quite insulted by that. I think the comment was made that the people who put that report together might know the cost of everything but know the value of nothing.²⁶

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

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

24 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

25 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 14.

26 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 14.

4.25 Similar views were expressed by other submitters. It was argued that the reduction of funding showed 'a lack of understanding of the critical role that Landcare has made and should make to the environment and agricultural health of Australia'.²⁷

4.26 The Victorian Landcare Council commented that there had been 'disbelief' at the funding reduction given the 'overwhelming evidence that Landcare investment delivers change to landscape in a cost effective way and delivers value of money to the Government'.²⁸ To underscore this point, the committee was provided with evidence of the significant improvements in pasture, habitat and watercourses and transformation of landscape achieved under NRM programs.²⁹ For example, the Victorian Landcare Council provided evidence from six of its Landcare groups which have restored local environments including revegetation of non-arable land and replanting around creeks to improve habitat and water quality.³⁰

4.27 In addition to environmental benefits, submitters noted that Landcare has worked to improve agricultural productivity from improvements in sustainable agriculture practices which have occurred over the last 25 years.³¹ These activities include works to protect soil; conserve moisture; and reduce the use of pesticides and fungicides and chemical fertilizers.³² Landcare Tasmania concluded:

Landcare's contribution to ensuring Australia's farming systems are both productive and sustainable, and assisting Australia's farming community to be innovative, collaborative and resilient cannot be under estimated. Indeed, the basis of farmers increasing productivity on their land is an increased understanding of the basic land function and ecosystem processes that underpin their productive capacity. Landcare has provided Government with a remarkable return on investment by enabling farmers to identify, implement and manage their sustainability and productivity issues.³³

4.28 Other submitters also pointed to the significant value derived from every dollar of government investment in Landcare through volunteer and primary producer contribution. The Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc commented:

Changes in policy reflect a failure to comprehend the value of the independent community movement and the vast volunteer resource it brings to land stewardship and community education. The 'bang for your buck' benefits of investing in Landcare are well documented. Estimates, including

27 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5.

28 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 3.

29 Greening Australia, *Submission 19*, pp 4–8; Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Submission 45*, pp 8–24; NSW Local Land Services, *Submission 63*; Attachment 3.

30 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, pp 4–6.

31 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 3; Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5; Ms Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 52.

32 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 2.

33 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 9.

from ABARE, show that for every \$1 invested by government, the Landcare community and land holders respond with between \$2.80 and up to \$12.00.

Why wouldn't you invest in Landcare?³⁴

4.29 A further benefit of Landcare has been its longevity with submitters pointing to a 25-year history of engagement with community and regional groups to bring about improvements across the Australian landscape. Through community and farmer engagement, supported by Government funding, there has been maintenance of gains and lasting, positive improvements. Kimberley Land Council submitted:

Improvements in landscape health and resilience of ecosystems requires lasting commitments from communities and government. Restructuring conservation priorities to align primarily with current political policy priorities will have an adverse impact on the resilience of ecosystems across all of Australia, and undermine the certainty required to forward-plan on successful NRM activities.³⁵

Effect of funding reduction

4.30 Many submitters argued that the environmental achievements and the additional benefits accruing from Landcare are now under threat through lack of adequate funding.³⁶ The Condamine Alliance submitted that 'because of the interconnectedness of productivity and environmental issues; and the thresholds involved in achieving beneficial outcomes, even small changes in the availability or targeting of resources can have a devastating result'.³⁷

4.31 Landcare Tasmania argued that the reduction in funding could undermine past achievements of Landcare. It was noted that:

It needs to be remembered that the Landcare movement has been instrumental in achieving long-term, positive impacts on sustainable agriculture, increasing agricultural productivity, managing soils, vegetation and water resources, conserving and protecting biodiversity and actively engaging with local communities and contributing to the social fabric of rural, urban and peri-urban Australia. In the absence of funding, these issues are likely to cost significantly more to the Australian economy in the long term if not addressed now in a timely, proactive and cost effective manner. A reduction in funding risks of [sic] undermining the good work already carried out by the Landcare movement over the last 25 years.³⁸

4.32 Similar views were put to the committee by the NLN which commented:

34 Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc, *Submission 33*, p. 2. See also, National Landcare Network, *Submission 4*, p. 4.

35 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 4.

36 Condamine Alliance Group, *Submission 3*, p. 8; Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

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

38 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

The significant reduction of the funds available to the Landcare movement by cuts to the National Landcare Programme coupled with the redirection of some of those funds to other Government Environmental initiatives has the potential to severely impact on the capacity of Landcare groups to deliver the vital outcomes of landscape-scale nature conservation and more productive and resilient farming systems.³⁹

4.33 Submitters provided the committee with examples of the direct effects of the funding cuts on the programs that they are delivering leading to undermining of the aims of Landcare in both the short- and long-term. In addition, there will also be adverse effects on capacity building, volunteer and community engagement, social cohesion and local industry.

Effects on the ground

4.34 Evidence was received which pointed to concerns that the reduction in funding would result in fewer projects being undertaken and as a consequence, there will be adverse impacts on the environment.⁴⁰ For example, Bass Coast Landcare Network commented that it has delivered changes through landscape, establishing over 2 million indigenous plants over 120,000 ha. However, the reduction in funding has resulted in:

The Projected budget implication in the 2014/15 year include a 73% reduction in on ground activity for revegetation, remnant protection and sustainable agriculture. For the past ten years we have annually established 180,000 plants and protected 150 ha of remnant vegetation. Momentum has been established in the community and we fear that this will be lost with the recent changes to the Landcare Program.⁴¹

4.35 Bass Coast Landcare Network went on to state that it expected a decrease in staff numbers and to be unable to undertake large-scale projects 'because they are simply too expensive'.⁴²

4.36 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee (LCDC) also provided evidence of the effect of the implementation of the National Landcare Programme on its operations in 2014–15:

Obviously being forced into this equivalent of another interim year, in terms of funding, has hurt us a fair bit. We basically have no tree orders at this stage, which we normally place in November ready for next year. We have none because we have no funding there.⁴³

39 National Landcare Network, *Submission 4*, p. 4.

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

41 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 3.

42 Mrs Nichols, Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 48.

43 Mrs Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 44.

4.37 A further example of the impact was provided by the FTLA which stated that its group of 100 members had been undertaking about 30 to 40 ha of revegetation on private land every year. While the group had funds for seeding, the cost of fencing was prohibitive without funding. As a result of funding cuts, it was now only undertaking about one third to one quarter of the revegetation work that it had capacity to do.⁴⁴

4.38 The SWCC gave evidence that regional funding currently supports both small-scale local activities and strategic larger scale projects. However, it predicted that it would be unable to support large scale projects such as storm water intervention to improve water quality. Mr Damien Postma, SWCC, concluded:

Those really big strategic projects that can achieve amazing outcomes have to be let go.⁴⁵

4.39 NSW Local Land Services was also of the view that there would be a shift away from large grant projects such as major landscape projects aimed at biodiversity and water quality.⁴⁶

4.40 Evidence on the impact of funding cuts on activities in the vast areas of rangelands was provided by Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance:

The size of the areas that these boards, local land services and organisations in Queensland work over are quite substantial. There are six million square kilometres to cover. When there is a reduction in budget, it substantially reduces their ability to work on the ground with people. Even being able to afford the vehicles to visit landholders and those sorts of things is impacted on by the cuts. The impact of the cuts is not just that there will be a reduction in programs; it will be a reduction in ability to provide the support that is required by these landholders who undertake work that provides a large number of ecosystem services for the country, whether it is dust reduction, monitoring water quality in rivers or just maintaining our level of biodiversity in the Australian rangelands, which is recognised around the world as substantial. There are some big advantages to continuing to fund the rangelands. The NRM Alliance offers a way of dealing with some very large issues which can be quite confronting if you are looking at them as a whole. It is 80 per cent of the country. The regions understand how to deal with those issues.⁴⁷

4.41 A further matter raised by submitters was the potential loss of continuity of activities such as pest animal and weed control due to a reduction in funding. It was

44 Mr David Clark, Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 33.

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

46 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, NSW Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 5.

47 Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 58.

argued that this will result in a loss of previous years' gains and achievements and will impact adversely on volunteer engagement.⁴⁸ SWCC added its concern that important work on threatened species and communities will be reduced and the status of these important biodiversity assets will worsen. In addition, many monitoring programs will cease and 'our ability to measure the state of our environment, at an important time associated with a changing climate, will reduce'.⁴⁹

4.42 Environs Kimberley commented that remote communities will be disadvantaged as it would now be undertaking projects closer to Broome because of a lack of funds. As a consequence, there will be an impact on capacity and an impact on some of the relationships which are being built between Aboriginal groups and pastoralists. Dr Malcolm Lindsay concluded that 'it is hard to see how the major funding cuts will not have large consequences through the region'.⁵⁰ The Rangeland NRM Alliance also commented on the impact in remote areas:

The regional NRM bodies involved with the Alliance carry a high degree of concern regarding any changes to policy and investment which negatively impact their ability to maintain relationships with the people in their regions who manage the natural resources of Australia. Supporting the people in remote areas to manage and improve the natural environment they live and work in revolves around developing understanding and relationships with those people as their decisions will have the greatest impact on natural resource condition. The need for continuity is particularly high in these sparsely populated areas.⁵¹

4.43 The committee sought evidence from the Department of the Environment on the impact of the reduction in funding on on-ground activities. The department responded that the Budget reduction occurred in parallel with the program redesign from CfoC to National Landcare Programme, and the allocation of funding to new environment and natural resource management programs, including Green Army, Reef Trust and 20 Million Trees. As a consequence:

The shift to the National Landcare Programme and the introduction of these new programmes will have different implications for on ground activity and at regional scale – therefore it is not possible to itemise the impact of the funding reduction in the National Landcare Programme announced in the 2014–15 Budget. The Budget also contained a \$2 billion commitment to environment and natural resource management over the forward estimates. Given this, and the Government's focus in the new National Landcare Programme on giving regional bodies the autonomy to set investment priorities, it will be a matter for these bodies to determine how they manage the adjustment to their business.⁵²

48 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1

49 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 5.

50 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 8.

51 Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 2.

52 Department of the Environment, *Answer to question on notice No. 1*.

4.44 The impact of funding reductions on the viability and effectiveness of some groups was also raised in evidence. For example, the Rangeland NRM Alliance stated there was now 'a very critical level of funding, where viability is somewhat questioned'.⁵³ The SWCC submitted as a result of the reduction in funding several groups in its area will become marginal and are likely to cease operations.⁵⁴

4.45 The Leschenault Catchment Council also commented on the need for funding to maintain viability and the possible impact if this was not available:

If the Leschenault Catchment Council struggles for survival, there will be a noticeable ripple effect across the community in a major national growth area...our capacity to fulfil the wishes of the NLP is severely and fundamentally compromised by the level of public moneys being made available through this program.⁵⁵

Effects on staff levels and engagement

4.46 Access to funding to maintain staff levels was also addressed in many submissions. It was noted that organisations may have to decrease the number of staff employed and uncertainty of future funding is forcing staff to seek employment elsewhere.⁵⁶ This, together with the loss of staff with specialist skills, has a direct impact on the number of projects which can be delivered and the provision of support for community groups.⁵⁷

4.47 Dr Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, provided evidence on the effect on staff retention in his organisation. While Environs Kimberley had been able to secure a long-term grant from CfoC until June 2016, Dr Lindsay commented that, if further funding after that time was not available, it was possible that 75 per cent of staff would have to be laid off.⁵⁸

4.48 The SWCC emphasised the importance of a long-term funding commitment to the retention of staff:

Professional paid staff—for example, Landcare officers—to support voluntary community effort is a strength of the model, yet increasingly this is the hardest funding for community groups to secure. It is essential that NLP funds are made available for community groups to employ staff with

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

54 South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 5. See also, Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 3.

55 Mr Bill Bennell, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 11.

56 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1; GeoCatch, *Submission 10*, p. 3; Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 3; Chittering Landcare Group, *Submission 40*, p. 2; Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 4;

57 Mr Justin Bellanger, South Coast NRM, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 31. See also, Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 32; Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 58.

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

some level of long-term commitment. It is these paid staff who predominantly engage with business and local industry, who leverage co-investment and participation and who work with agribusiness.⁵⁹

4.49 NRM WA also pointed to the potential loss of staff and volunteers with 'incredible expertise' who are 'critical to the long-term success of NRM'. To avoid this loss, it suggested funding levels need to be maintained to assist retention of skilled staff and to engage new volunteers and young landholders to ensure the continuation of work on the ground.⁶⁰

4.50 A number of submitters emphasised the importance of the contribution of facilitators within Landcare organisations and for volunteers. Dr Bill Pigott stated:

We are particularly concerned that cuts to funds are going to mean a reduction of the community support officer type roles that Landcarers all over the state, and particularly in our area, have felt were essential to their survival.

Our regional Landcare facilitator did a brilliant thing with Caring for Our Country funding. He developed a program called Tending the Grassroots, which pulled all of the Landcare groups into a joint proposal so that we all did small amounts. It was effectively devolved funding but it led to an acceptable level of achievement in NRM outcomes.⁶¹

4.51 Mr Brendan Sydes, Connecting Country, commented that the value of the Landcare facilitator role was that it encouraged more long-term planning and capacity development in Landcare groups. Mr Sydes went on to state:

For many Landcare groups to put together a project that aligns with a regional strategy and national strategies and targets is quite difficult. Unless they have an NRM professional in the group on their committee they really struggle with it. They are ordinary people who are not in this world of NRM and all that kind of thing. To try and produce projects that align strongly is difficult for them. I think that is another reason why coordinators or facilitators or whatever they are called in other parts of Australia are quite helpful. If the government wants groups to help to implement these strategies it needs to help the groups to do it.⁶²

4.52 It was also argued that the loss of these staff could compromise the engagement of farmers and volunteer as professional staff provide support and advice; provide assistance to ensure that appropriate financial management systems and

59 Ms Christine Kershaw, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 10. See also, Mr Keith Hyde, Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 40.

60 Dr Kathleen Broderick, NRM WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 25. See also, Wild Matters, *Submission 26*, p. 3; Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5.

61 Dr Bill Pigott, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 37.

62 Mr Brendan Sydes, Connecting Country, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 12.

governance are in place; and, reduce volunteer burnout through support and guidance.⁶³

4.53 The impact on volunteers was also highlighted. It was argued that with less money available, and fewer projects being funded, both landholders and volunteers will be less inclined to continue in Landcare.⁶⁴ Ms Susi Johnson, FTLA, commented that people put a lot of effort into a grant but with so few chances of succeeding in their funding request, 'not on the merits but just simply because there is not enough funding available, there is a lot of disengagement'.⁶⁵

4.54 The FTLA pointed to the significant contributions by volunteers compared to public investment. However,

...in many areas any reduction or patchiness in available funding significantly impacts the amount of work able to be accomplished and undermines gains already achieved in natural resource management. The gap in funding this year is already affecting Landcare groups and networks who are reporting significant loss of momentum and a reduction in capacity to achieve works on-ground.⁶⁶

4.55 Similar views were provided by other submitters including the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association which stated:

In essence, the significant reduction in funding for Landcare is counterproductive as the new programs do not engage local people in projects and so do not capture the in-kind and other voluntary contributions that have been the hallmark of Landcare since its inception. In the long term, this will force future generations to pick up the cost of our short sightedness.⁶⁷

4.56 The Department of Agriculture confirmed in evidence that funding would continue to be provided to regional NRM organisations to support a Regional Landcare Facilitator, either as one full-time position or several part-time positions.⁶⁸ This was reiterated in the Government's response to the community consultation process, which stated:

Long-term funding will be available to regional NRM organisations through multi-year contracts that provide surety of investment. This will

63 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 1; South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 3; Landcare SJ Inc, *Submission 28*, p. 3; Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

64 Border Rivers CMA, *Submission 21*, p. 3.

65 Ms Susi Johnson, Farm Tree and Landcare Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 31.

66 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

67 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5. See also, Landcare Tasmania Inc, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

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

enable them to maintain regional infrastructure for NRM planning and delivery and retain key staff, including a Regional Landcare Facilitator.⁶⁹

Effects on wider benefits of the Landcare movement

4.57 It is well recognised that an investment in the Landcare community through a national Landcare program will have benefits far beyond improved environmental outcomes. A 2010 study commissioned by the Australian Landcare Council found that involvement in Landcare, and NRM more broadly, led to additional benefits in six categories, as follows:

- learning, awareness and practice change;
- social – community health and wellbeing;
- social – political and social capital;
- economic;
- cultural; and
- resilience.⁷⁰

4.58 On community health and wellbeing, the study found that meaningful connections with the environment through participation in community activities led to an increase in social connectedness.⁷¹ On political and social capital, the benefits were equally evident. The report stated:

The dynamic social relationships and cohesion developed through Landcare and NRM can form an intrinsic part of the social fabric, in many cases filling gaps in the community beyond the agricultural and environmental domain. The benefits—particularly for regional and rural communities—include enhanced social capacity and cohesion, stronger local governance, the increased recognition of women in rural communities, and self-empowerment and fulfilment.⁷²

4.59 The study also found that Landcare 'promotes the formation of complex networks' that assist communities to cope in difficult times, such as drought or bushfire, and can promote individual and community resilience.⁷³

4.60 Submissions received by the committee similarly pointed to the benefits of Landcare including promotion of social cohesion, improvement of health and wellbeing, provision of employment opportunities in rural and regional areas and

69 Australian Government, National Landcare Programme, *Outcomes of Community Consultation*, October 2014, p. 4.

70 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. 69.

71 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. i.

72 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. ii.

73 Australian Landcare Council, *Multiple Benefits of Landcare*, July 2013, p. iii.

support for local business.⁷⁴ Dr Peter Ampt argued that the social benefits of Landcare 'cannot be overestimated'.⁷⁵

4.61 With the reduction in funding, there were concerns that these ancillary benefits will be at risk. Submitters commented that Landcare programs contribute greatly to employment and business activity and thus the health of communities. This is particularly important in remote regions, where employment opportunities are scarcer and resource costs are higher.⁷⁶ For example, members of the Rangeland NRM Alliance contribute to the direct employment of 250 people. The Alliance added:

The indirect support of regional employment including Indigenous employment is more difficult to quantify however regions support employment through local contracts, consultancies, community activity and volunteer support and other delivery mechanisms to increase the footprint of Australian Government funds they receive. The impact of this employment is proportionately greater in the much smaller communities of the rangelands regions.⁷⁷

4.62 The wider benefits of Landcare investment were also outlined by Ms Ella Maesepp, Katanning LCDC:

Our Landcare group brings in, on an average year, between half a million dollars and \$1 million worth of grant funding into our community. That money is then circulated around our community through our local nursery, for the purchase of trees; rural supplies for the purchase of fence material; contractors; for the purchase of catering for workshops; venue hire; and for all those things that Landcare does. If we lose the continuity to the point that we lose the capacity of our organisation, we lose the ability to bring that amount of money into our community every year. We have a population of 4,200 people; it is not a big community. That amount of money circulating our community is relevant. For every year that the amount of money we bring in is down—this year is a down year—that is less money going through our community. It does impact and it impacts wider than just the Landcare group because of all that broader thing in our community. Long term, Landcare has been active in Katanning since 1990. Every single one of our farmers—100 per cent—is engaged in Landcare in some way or another. Some engage every single year; some will do the odd bit here and there. It does not matter; they are all involved.⁷⁸

74 Mr Bill Pigott, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 38; Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 42;

75 Dr Peter Ampt, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

76 Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 58.

77 Rangeland NRM, *Submission 4*, p. 2;

78 Ms Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 51.

4.63 The contribution of Landcare to the social fabric and capital of rural communities was highlighted by submitters.⁷⁹ Mr Walker, NLN, provide the following comments:

Another very important product of a healthy and confident Landcare community is social cohesion, social networks and community resilience. Getting farmers off their farms, mixing with their neighbours and thinking about how they can design a positive future has a very positive impact on rural mental health. Community recovery from natural disasters like floods and bushfires has been much quicker and with less evidence of social collapse and personal tragedy where there has been a strong Landcare local network.⁸⁰

4.64 This evidence was echoed by Landcare Tasmania which pointed to important social and community support networks provided by Landcare, particularly during the drought crisis in Queensland and NSW and the bushfire recovery in Victoria and Tasmania.⁸¹ Landcare NSW also noted the contribution that Landcare makes to community wellbeing and resilience:

Working on the land and in nature has been shown to have positive impacts on health and wellbeing, including mental health. Landcare has supported farmers and their families by providing opportunities to socialise through difficult times. Landcare groups have built bridges, bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people together on country with their neighbours to work on projects. In the cities Landcare has provided a meeting place for people from different cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸²

4.65 Submitters considered that the additional contribution of Landcare to communities was not adequately measured or considered. Dr Ampt, for example, commented that:

While Landcare was implemented to build social capital, and evidently achieved this through the extensive Landcare networks that currently exist, being unable to measure the impact per se or prove value for money in the short-term has clouded the perceived relative worth of the NLP.⁸³

4.66 The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association held similar views and commented that this contribution is too important to be ignored:

This story has not only been about productivity but also the preservation and improvement of the natural environment and the engagement of local communities. Such engagement is difficult to measure purely in financial terms but provides a very real point of contact in communities that are too often isolated. It needs to be acknowledged that the current significant

79 Upper Ovens Landcare Group Inc, *Submission 32*, p. 1.

80 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 8.

81 Landcare Tasmania Inc, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

82 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 42.

83 Dr Peter Ampt, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

funding reduction clearly puts at risk the accumulated good work carried out over an extended period, such erosion of an asset should not be tolerated.⁸⁴

4.67 Environs Kimberley further noted that long-term engagement with Indigenous communities was one of the key targets in Caring for our Country and should be maintained. It considered this to be 'very important' because it required NRM groups to engage Indigenous communities and encourage long-term knowledge sharing.⁸⁵ Indigenous engagement in Landcare is discussed further in chapter 7.

Small grants

4.68 A further matter raised by submitters was the reduction in funding directly available to Landcare groups through small grants. It was noted that small grants were an important source of funds for Landcare and provided significant benefits. Ms Johnson, FTLA, noted that small grants had been highly sought after with 25 applications for each application approved.⁸⁶

4.69 Landcare NSW commented that small grants provided through programs such as Envirofund and Community Action Grants had been a 'vital' co-investment for groups to undertake the tasks they had identified as a priority. Landcare NSW stated that small grants were a tool in the suite of NRM arrangements to build capacity in human and social capital that underpins successful community-based NRM.⁸⁷ Mr David Clark, FTLA, added that even \$1,000 or \$2,000 was effective in allow groups to function and keeping capacity in communities.⁸⁸

4.70 Landcare Australia Ltd also expressed disappointment with the lack of access to small grants and noted that reduced funding limits the capacity of groups and decreases the longevity of projects. Small grants over a period of time also allow Landcare groups to stage project activity. Groups are able to commence new works while retaining the capacity to maintain, or protect, areas previously rehabilitated. Landcare Australia Ltd concluded that:

A reduction in available funding is likely to enforce a rescheduling of priorities, preventing new works to be commenced, with some reversal or degradation of rehabilitated/revegetated areas. Some of the gains from previous investment and volunteer time will be lost, which will result in a negative impact on environmental assets, as well as the motivation and participation of groups.⁸⁹

84 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5. See also, Landcare Tasmania Inc, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

85 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 4.

86 Ms Susi Johnson, Farm Tree and Landcare Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 30.

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

88 Mr David Clark, Farm Tree and Landcare Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 30.

89 Landcare Australia Ltd, *Submission 34*, p. 1.

4.71 Organisations noted that small grants had been made available under the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Programme. The Government is providing \$5 million to assist community groups and individuals to undertake projects to conserve and protect their local environment and/or to manage the natural resource base. Also in that category of small grants is round one of the 20 Million Trees.⁹⁰

4.72 While the additional funding was welcomed, it was noted that the 25th Anniversary program was a one-off program and only \$5 million was available.⁹¹ The NLN welcomed the small grants funding allocation for 2014–15 but described it as a 'token' amount that 'cannot replace commitments that should not have been lost in the first place'.⁹² Mr Walker, NLN, noted that the \$5 million funding effectively only provided about four-\$20,000 projects in each of the 56 regions across Australia. As a consequence, 'Landcare is going to struggle to continue to engage and support as well as find the seed funding to resource projects across the Landcare community for the next couple of years'.⁹³

Committee comments

4.73 The committee considers that there is ample evidence that the reduction in funding for Landcare announced in the 2015–15 Budget will have a detrimental impact on natural resource management in Australia. The gains over the last three decades through the concerted efforts of government, NRM bodies, communities and landholders are now under threat.

4.74 While recognising the current budget constraints in the environmental area, the committee supports submitters' view that the Government has failed to understand, and acknowledge, the significant benefits to the environment of funding for natural resource management and the wider benefits for communities through the establishment and engagement Landcare activities. The Government has also reaped significant benefits from its investment with studies indicating many multiples of investment return for every dollar of government investment.

4.75 The committee considers that loss of funding will have wide ranging effects: there will be less on-ground work, fewer resources for capacity building, loss of experienced and dedicated staff in regional bodies and disengagement of volunteers and landholders will continue to grow.

4.76 These outcomes are very significant; the benefits of natural resource management are built on a long-term commitment to improving environmental outcomes. The engagement of volunteers and landholders is vital to success: without their contribution, many areas of Australia would still be showing the effects of uncontrolled weed growth, degradation from feral pests, contamination of creeks from livestock, degraded farmland and treeless landscapes.

90 Mr Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 59.

91 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 13.

92 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, p. 4.

93 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 13.

4.77 The committee considers that the benefits of investment in natural resource management cannot be underestimated.

4.78 The committee also notes that small grants will not be available under the National Landcare Programme. Evidence pointed to the contribution of small grants available under previous programs to the activities of local groups. While the \$5 million allocated by the Government under the 25th Anniversary Land Grants Programme is welcome, it does not address the need of long-term access to small grants.

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.

Chapter 6

Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees

Introduction

6.1 The Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees are complementary to the new National Landcare Programme. Funding of \$535 million for the Green Army Programme and \$50 million for 20 Million Trees will be provided over four years.

6.2 The committee received a range of views relating to both the funding of the programs and environmental outcomes arising from the programs. In particular, there was concern about the shifting of funding from the National Landcare Program to the Green Army and 20 Million Trees. One submitter stated:

The policy rationale espoused for changing the Landcare program is flawed. It uses funds cut from Landcare and other existing environmental programs to disguise the Abbott government's sham statements of commitment to the environment by shuffling the Landcare money to fund politically expedient programs.¹

6.3 There was concern as to whether these programs will deliver long-term benefits to the environment with the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association stating:

The recent shift to program delivery through the Green Army and the 20 million trees program is a concern. We are yet to be convinced of the viability of these programs; and of their capacity to deliver real and tangible outcomes on ground. Unlike previous programs where outcomes have not been adequately measured, there is a very real need to assess the deliverables to ensure that they are meeting community expectations.²

6.4 The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) noted that a large portion of the current National Landcare Programme is focused on the Green Army and 20 Million Trees. The NFF supported the programs but called for a review of the first phase of the programs:

...given that they are a significant shift both in priority and delivery methods from Caring for our Country, we believe an active review of the first phase of these programs is required to ensure that their implementation is meeting the objectives of government and the community. This review should include the level of coordination between the different programs.³

1 Ms Kate Watson, *Submission 69*, p. 3.

2 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 4. See also, National Conservation Society, *Submission 56*, p. 3.

3 Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 16. See also, Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 8.

6.5 Other submitters voiced support for the programs to augment the efforts of community and regional bodies in achieving local and regional outcomes.⁴

6.6 The Department of the Environment (the department) commented on the complementarity of the programs. It stated that, with the increased level of flexibility in the regional funding under the National Landcare Programme, regional bodies will be able to direct some of the regional funding to support, for example, Green Army projects or 20 Million Trees projects. The department stated that it is pursuing this both with the regional groups and with the Landcare community more broadly. The department went on to state:

There is a bit of a journey for the sector to go on—having a look at how it rolls out. We are also working with the National Landcare Networks—and I understand that you have had some of them here to talk to you—around how they can support their Landcare groups to engage in these other programs. It is also an issue that we will be asking the National Landcare Advisory Committee to have a look at and give us some advice on how we can do it better. So, it is something we are very mindful of, but, as you would be aware, in the first year of the program we are just getting the programs up and running and we are working on how we support the sector to engage in all our programs in a complementary way.⁵

Green Army Programme

6.7 The Green Army Programme was a Coalition election commitment and was established through the *Social Security Amendment (Green Army Programme) Act 2014*. The Programme 'will support regional, national and international conservation management objectives through the delivery of local projects'.⁶ The Government is providing funding of \$534.7 million over four years to the department. Other departments, including the Department of Human Services, are also receiving appropriations.⁷

6.8 In his second reading speech on the bill, the Minister for Environment, the Hon Greg Hunt, stated that the Green Army Programme will:

- build to 15,000 participants by 2018;
- be capable of delivering 1,500 on-ground environmental projects;
- be delivered by a national service provider or multiple providers;
- undertake projects assessed on a merit basis against their environmental benefits, contribution to the local community and potential to enhance skills training for participants;

4 See Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

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

6 Australian Government, *Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2013–14*, p. 141.

7 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of the Environment, *Budget Estimates Hansard*, 27 May 2014, p. 124.

-
- establish Green Army teams of up to nine eligible participants and at least one team leader; and
 - eligible participants will receive a Green Army allowance and not also receive a social security benefit or social security pension simultaneously.⁸

6.9 The Minister concluded that:

Ultimately, the Green Army builds on the Howard Government's successful Green Corps program that was established in 1996 to employ young people on environmental projects to preserve and restore our natural and cultural environment. Our Green Army will deliver real and tangible benefits for the environment, it will deliver skills for thousands of young Australians and it will strengthen local community involvement.⁹

6.10 The Green Army Programme is a voluntary initiative for young people aged 17 to 24 years to participate for up to 30 hours per week in a range of environmental programs. The Green Army projects will run for between 20 and 26 weeks. Projects include activities such as restoration and protection of habitat, weed control, and conservation of cultural heritage. Projects may be undertaken in urban, regional and remote areas on public land, Indigenous-held land or private land where there is a clear community and environment and/or heritage benefit.¹⁰

6.11 The Green Army Programme was scheduled to commence on 1 July 2014 with the roll-out of 250 projects of which 150 were announced by the Coalition during the 2013 election. Project proposals may be submitted by individuals and organisations including Landcare groups. The department stated:

There is the potential for NRM bodies and Landcare groups to participate in the Green Army Program by putting forward projects, so essentially being the project sponsors, working with service providers to deliver a range of activities.¹¹

6.12 Programme funding will be provided for transport, basic materials and training for Green Army participants. The approved project sponsors, such as Landcare groups, would be required to cover any other costs. The department stated:

All other costs for the projects are provided by the project sponsor directly rather than through the Green Army Program.¹²

8 The Hon Greg Hunt, Minister for the Environment, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 26 February 2014, pp 869–870.

9 The Hon Greg Hunt, Minister for the Environment, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 26 February 2014, p. 871.

10 Department of the Environment, *Green Army fact sheet*,

11 Ms Peta Lane, Department of the Environment, *Budget Estimates Hansard*, 27 May 2014, p. 96.

12 Ms Peta Lane, Department of the Environment, *Budget Estimates Hansard*, 27 May 2014, p. 97.

6.13 The department added that an average of \$10,000 per project could be made available for 'project-specific materials'.¹³

6.14 At the Supplementary Budget Estimates in October 2014, the department indicated that that \$42,875,000 had been contracted for 196 projects with a total remaining commitment of \$41,359,772. There are 40 projects with \$7.7 million of the committed funds that support threatened species outcomes.¹⁴ The projects included a number of election commitments as well as projects with local councils because local councils have a range of materials and practices at their disposal to support Green Army teams.¹⁵

6.15 Round One Project Guidelines were released in April 2014. At October 2014, 29 projects were underway with nine participants each.¹⁶ Round Two Project Guidelines were released in November 2014 and Round Three Guidelines were released in February 2015.

6.16 Subsequent to Round One, the guidelines were amended to include that projects 'must be directed towards meeting Australia's relevant international obligations or, alternatively, directed towards protecting and conserving matters of national environmental significance'.¹⁷ It was reported that the guidelines were updated based on experience from the first round and to clarify how local Green Army activities can help deliver on Australia's national environmental objectives.¹⁸

6.17 It was also reported that the amendments were made as a result of the High Court's ruling in *Williams v The Commonwealth of Australia & Ors*.¹⁹ The High Court made it clear that the Commonwealth can only provide funding for programs for which it has authority under the constitution. Professor George Williams was quoted as commenting that there is no environmental power under the Constitution and that 'it

13 Ms Peta Lane, Department of the Environment, *Budget Estimates Hansard*, 27 May 2014, p. 97.

14 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 179.

15 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 179.

16 Ms Steph Pidcock, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 181.

17 Department of the Environment, *Green Army Round Two Project Guidelines*, November 2014, p. 8.

18 J Dowling, 'High Court hobbles Green Army for local, community projects', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 November 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/high-court-hobbles-green-army-for-local-community-projects-20141123-11r4di.html> (accessed 11 March 2015).

19 (2012) 248 CLR 156

was possible that the first tranche of Green Army projects was unconstitutional but it would require a challenge to prove'.²⁰

Response to the Green Army Programme

6.18 Some submitters suggested that there was potential for the Green Army to assist, or augment, the delivery of NRM outcomes.²¹ For example, Mr Ian Sauer supported the potential for increased capacity for Landcare projects:

...the Green Army concept is a good one, there will be multiple benefits from the concept. Remedial, environmental, and beautification works will be able to be carried out on a range of public land tenures, many small projects will be able to be undertaken with Local Government, some community groups will be able to leverage help, to get some man power onto projects that is beyond the capacity of the group.²²

6.19 The Rangeland NRM Alliance was cautiously optimistic about the prospect of input from Green Army participants in regional and remote Australia, stating:

The Rangeland Alliance is particularly interested in whether there is flexibility in this program to allow for meaningful application in areas of extensive areas and low population.²³

6.20 However, Mr Keith Hyde, Hovells Creek Landcare Group, commented that in some areas, for example western NSW, tree planting seasons are very short and other activities such as weed control and fencing are also time dependent. As a consequence, it would be very difficult to find suitable projects over the entire year.²⁴

6.21 There was also significant concern about the shift of funds from Landcare to the Green Army and that the program is, in reality, a youth training and employment scheme rather than an environmental program.²⁵ The Alliance reaffirmed that it found the Green Army concept 'sound' but questioned the amount of funding being directed to it:

But our advice to the minister and to the agency is that the Green Army is going to work, at best, across only 20 per cent of the Australian land mass—and yet it is attracting over 50 per cent of what used to be our budget.²⁶

20 J Dowling, 'High Court hobbles Green Army for local, community projects', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 November 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/high-court-hobbles-green-army-for-local-community-projects-20141123-11r4di.html> (accessed 11 March 2015).

21 See NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 7; South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 5; Esperance Regional Forum Inc, *Submission 42*, p. 6; Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p.6.

22 Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 6.

23 Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Submission 4*, p. 7.

24 Mr Bill Pigott, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 39.

25 Upper Ovens Valley Landcare, *Submission 32*, p. 1.

26 Mr Andrew Drysdale, Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August, p. 59.

6.22 Mr Matthew Pitt added that it had been assumed that funding for the Green Army would not affect Landcare funding:

The NLN and many other Landcarers were assured that funding for the Green Army would not be coming out of the Landcare pot, so the proposal was given cautious support as most of us who experienced the Green Corp program did not feel it was a good use of scarce funds...The funding for the Green Army should have come out of the employment and training bucket as [were] we led to believe it would.²⁷

6.23 The Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network commented that the Green Army is 'a very inadequate solution to any reduction in Landcare funding'.²⁸ Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups added that 'it is difficult to see how Green Army could provide a viable alternative to the rich, diverse and sustained program undertaken by Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups over the last 30 years'.²⁹

6.24 Other submitters were more pointed in their comments about the Green Army Programme and its ability to produce long-term environmental benefits with some stating that the Programme was 'ill thought out'. One submitter, for example, stated that it will deliver 'no benefits to the Farmer, environment, landcare or back to the Government. It will be another failed Government program'.³⁰

6.25 The Katanning Land Conservation District Committee (LCDC) also commented that it was 'disheartened' by the Government's approach and disappointed that funds that could have been used to support on-going and active community-based Landcare have been redirected to 'a short-term, unskilled/inexperienced work for the dole program'.³¹ National Landcare Network (NLN) added:

Not only did the National Landcare Programme receive a cut of approximately \$400 million but there was an increase of approximately \$200 million into another Government initiative – The Green Army Programme. This was viewed by many in the Landcare community as a blatant redirection of funds away from Landcare and local communities and into a Youth Employment Training Programme.³²

6.26 It was also noted that the Green Army does not include 'in-kind' contributions by experienced landcarers. As program participants are inexperienced, the Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network argued that the \$300 million Green Army funding will

27 Mr Matthew Pitt, *Submission 23*, p. 1.

28 Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 4.

29 Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups, *Submission 29*, p. 2.

30 Name Withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 3. See also, Mrs Suzanne Metcalf, *Submission 2*, p. 4.

31 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 2. See also, South West Catchments Council, *Submission 11*, p. 6; Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups, *Submission 29*, p. 1.

32 National Landcare Network, *Submission 46*, pp 3–4.

fund the service providers, team leaders, participants, minimal project specific materials and other items such as insurance and training.³³

6.27 Hovells Creek Landcare Group emphasised that Landcare groups currently understand the need to carry out projects in accordance with regional needs because they are part of the local community. It questioned how the Green Army Programme would take into account local concerns. It also questioned the return on Green Army projects:

We cannot see a Green Army program of conscripted 17- to 25-year-olds delivering the same return per dollar invested of federal investment that the existing dedicated army of volunteers is currently delivering, and has delivered, for the nation over the past 25 years.³⁴

6.28 Submitters, while arguing that a successful outcome for the Green Army required the use of local Landcare connections and local participants in projects, pointed to a number of constraints including the costs of running the program, particularly in rural and remote areas, and attracting young people to these areas.³⁵ As an example, the NLN provided the following calculation:

A Green Army project is for 26 weeks and there are 10 people involved. Just say, for argument's sake, they are planting trees. A decent young fellow will plant 100 trees a day. If there are 10 of them, over four days that is 4,000 trees a week and over 26 weeks that is 100,000 trees. To buy the seed stock—the seedlings—is \$200,000. Where are we going to get the money—the \$200,000—to buy the trees that these people are going to be planting for 26 weeks?³⁶

6.29 The Rangeland NRM Alliance suggested tailoring Green Army projects to ensure their success in regional and remote areas and ensuring that participants develop skills, such as remote first aid, 4WD driver training and workplace safety in remote areas, which will provide preparation for work in remote areas in other industries.³⁷ The Alliance also argued that the added cost of carrying out projects in remote areas needed to be factored into funding. It commented that, while it had raised these points with the department and ministerial advisers, it 'did not feel like they were taken on board'.³⁸

33 Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network, *Submission 25*, p. 3.

34 Mr Keith Hyde, Past Chairman, Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August, p. 35. See also, Landcare NSW Inc, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

35 See Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Submission 4*, p. 7; NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 7.

36 Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 14.

37 Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Submission 4*, p. 8.

38 Ms Kate Forrest, Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 57.

Environmental outcomes

6.30 There was concern that the Green Army Programme will not achieve any discernible environmental outcomes. Submitters pointed to the capacity of inexperienced teams to carry out the required work. In addition, it was argued that it appeared that no provision had been made to provide the longer term follow-up required of tree planting, weed management, fencing etc.³⁹

6.31 Hovells Creek Landcare Group, for example, commented that tree planting is the easy, short-term part of the activity. Fencing, site preparation and after care for tree planting can take many months and even years. The Group went on to state that its past experience with similar programs 'is that the "recruits" are rarely committed and diligent about the way they go about their allotted tasks'. In addition, given stringent occupational health and workplace issues, landholders cannot afford the risk of unskilled/insufficiently trained persons either erecting fences, working in erosion gullies, or operating equipment/machinery on their land.⁴⁰

6.32 Submitters also drew parallels to the Green Corp programme, a Howard Government initiative implemented in 1996, which some submitters described as a 'failed' public policy with few environmental successes.⁴¹ Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups stated that similar programs had operated in its area in the past. Results had been mixed, but were mainly poor as a result of lack of motivation of participants, the questionable quality of work and completion of projects which could be put into the 'painting white rocks' category.⁴²

6.33 The department responded to concerns about long-term maintenance of plantings:

...project sponsors for those investments are there to help guide Green Army priorities. But, once a team has delivered the work, whether it be rehabilitation, remediation or weed removal, the presence of a project sponsor for those sites is intended to also then give a sense of stewardship of the investment that has been made through the Green Army team so that those environmental outcomes are more enduring than just a Green Army team doing a particular piece of work and then moving on.⁴³

Impact on established Landcare groups

6.34 A number of Landcare groups voiced concern about the impact of Green Army on the Landcare sector, particularly on access to the program and volunteers.⁴⁴

39 See NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 7;

40 Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Submission 45*, p. 5.

41 See Mrs Suzanne Metcalf, *Submission 2*, p. 4; Big Lap Landcare Inc, *Submission 48*, p. 2;

42 Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups, *Submission 29*, pp 1–2.

43 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 175.

44 Mr Matthew Pitt, *Submission 23*, p. 1; South Coast NRM, *Submission 17*, p. 5; Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 26*, p. 1; Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups, *Submission 29*, p. 2; Esperance Regional Forum Inc, *Submission 42*, p. 7.

The Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) pointed to the level of funding and nature of the projects required under the Green Army Programme. For Landcare groups to become a Project Sponsor, they need to have an existing, already funded, project which would enable participants to undertake 20 weeks training. Such a project would generally be estimated at \$80,000 – \$100,000 in project costs. Without a significant accompanying grant program the Landcare community will not be able to effectively utilise Green Army participants.⁴⁵

6.35 The department observed that there had been some hesitancy from Landcare groups in looking at brokering projects that comprised a number of groups. In response, the department was consulting with NRM organisations and Landcare groups about projects that could be split between groups: three weeks with one Landcare group and four weeks with a Bushcare group.⁴⁶

6.36 The committee also received comments on the impact of the Green Army initiative on the volunteer Landcare force.⁴⁷ It has been noted that volunteers play a vital role in Landcare not only in carrying out projects but also ongoing monitoring and maintenance. Condamine Alliance reported:

Feedback from community groups has been negative about this program—they believe it: disenfranchises local voluntary environmental groups (i.e. Landcare); is unlikely to have any positive environmental impacts; and is not a good use of resources.⁴⁸

6.37 It was also noted that experienced Landcare volunteers will be more effective hour for hour, dollar for dollar, than a trainee, however well-intentioned the trainee. Therefore, the Green Army should be used as adjunct to the volunteer Landcare effort, and should not crowd out funding for existing Landcare efforts.⁴⁹

6.38 Bass Coast Landcare Network commented on the social capital aspects of Landcare:

The grassroots Landcare community's ability and capacity to deliver, build social capital and achieve landscape scale change. The Green Army will move in and deliver activities that would normally be carried out by the Landcare community. How can we ensure that these sites are maintained beyond the life of the Green Army, if there is no capacity to engage local Landcare groups.⁵⁰

45 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 6.

46 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 178.

47 See Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups, *Submission 29*, p. 2.

48 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 11.

49 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 6.

50 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 6.

20 Million Trees

6.39 The 20 Million Trees initiative was announced in the 2014–15 Budget with funding of \$50 million over four years. 20 Million Trees is part of the national stream of the National Landcare Programme and has four strategic objectives:

- 20 million trees – 20 million trees and associated understory planted by 2020;
- environmental conservation – support local environmental outcomes by improving the extent, connectivity and condition of native vegetation that supports native species;
- community engagement – work cooperatively with the community; and
- carbon reduction – contribute to Australia reducing its greenhouse gas emissions.⁵¹

6.40 20 Million Trees will be operated through competitive grants with applications for grant funding between \$20,000 and \$100,000 accepted from eligible groups, individuals and organisations that intend to plant native trees and associated understory in a range of urban, peri-urban and regional environments across Australia. Tree plantings may occur on public or private land.

6.41 At the October 2014 Supplementary Estimates, the department indicated that guidelines and application forms for the small grant component were released in October 2014 for an initial \$3.4 million over three years. The department commented that this 'will be part of a broader notional allocation within the \$50 million that is allocated against 20 Million Trees of around \$8 million that will be in total for small grants over the four-year period'. In relation to large-scale plantings, a request for tender for a national service provider or national service providers was being finalised for release in November 2014 with a first tranche of funding of \$27 million.⁵²

6.42 The department went on to indicate that the allocation in the first year is smaller with the national component building over time to a more significant investment. The department noted that it would not mean that trees would be planted in every region in the first year as it will be based on seasonal planting. It commented:

In Western Australia or other jurisdictions where there is an autumn-planting window for seed collection and seedling stock—which is another limiting factor in getting trees on the ground—we will be working to make sure that we are planting in the best possible places at the right time. It does not mean that every jurisdiction wins a prize in the first element. It will be about planting at the most appropriate time, where there is seed availability.⁵³

51 Department of the Environment, *20 Million Trees*, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/national/20-million-trees> (accessed 16 October 2014).

52 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Estimates Hansard*, 20 October 2014, pp 172, 181.

53 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Estimates Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 172.

6.43 Monitoring and reporting will be through an online tool, MERIT.⁵⁴

Response to 20 Million Trees

6.44 The committee received a range of views concerning 20 Million Trees. For example, Mr Francis Smit, Landcare SJ Inc, commented that it was 'a great project'.⁵⁵ However, it was also noted that it only considers revegetation rather than taking a more holistic approach to natural resource management, that is inclusion of faunal protection, riparian protection, biosecurity, community training etc.⁵⁶

6.45 The Katanning LCDC stated that it had been watching the development of 20 Million Trees 'with interest', and while it hoped that it would be able to engage with the program, it was concerned that its 'simplistic structure may limit the achievement of maximum environmental "bang for buck"'.⁵⁷

6.46 Funding concerns were also raised by another submitter who commented that the \$50 million allocated by the Government would mean just over \$2 per tree. It was noted that trees needed to be purchased or propagated and transported as well as planted, fenced and maintained. In remote areas, transport of workers will also require funding.⁵⁸ In addition, it was argued that 20 million trees will not cover the usual extent of revegetation across Australia for the five-year period.⁵⁹ Mrs Ella Maesepp, Katanning LCDC, stated:

We are concerned that the size of 20 Million Trees is not going to go very far across Australia. Very little of our revegetation can be done without additional fencing, because it is a livestock area and there are sheep everywhere and those sorts of things. We are a little bit concerned about how we can get landscape-scale projects when you have only got one component of the pieces you need to complete a project site under 20 Million Trees.⁶⁰

6.47 In response to the inclusion of costs of fencing, the department stated:

That also does not preclude a consultation process on views coming from stakeholders, both community and practitioners, for the future small-grants round. There was a decision taken that it does not preclude fencing, but fencing could be a co-investment component of the initial small-grants program. We will look at that after we have run the first small-grants

54 Department of the Environment, Budget Estimates 2014–15, *Answer to question on notice No. 8*.

55 Mr Francis Smit, Landcare SJ Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 63.

56 Landcare SJ Inc, *Submission 28*, p. 3. See also, Dr Jill Wilson, Northern Agricultural Catchment Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 41.

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

58 Ms Kate Watson, *Submission 69*, p. 2.

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

60 Ms Ella Maesepp, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 50.

program and then make any necessary adjustments, based on feedback as well as the endeavours around co-investment with respect to issues such as fencing.⁶¹

6.48 The department also added:

Within the 20 Million Trees program itself there is a very strong focus on long-term maintenance of plantings. That is something that is emphasised through the round one program guidelines...and will be considered through the assessment process. We do ask proponents to maintain those plantings in the long term, and it is beholden on the proponents to do that. The long term, in this case, we are considering is around 10 years, but of course the lifespan of many of those plantings will be considerably longer.⁶²

6.49 The possible overemphasis on trees was raised by the Hovells Creek Landcare Group which stated that the focus on tree planting 'as an emblem of environmental revegetation programs to address key environmental issues overlooks the need for shrubs and groundcover species. It is the shrubs and groundcover plants that complete the complex diversities of our ecosystems'. The Group submitted that the need to include threatened and endangered species in revegetation planning is 'absolutely essential and NOT to be overlooked'.⁶³

6.50 The FTLA commented that funding for revegetation work has always been part of Australian Government funding for Landcare. The FTLA welcomed funding for revegetation but stated that 'the rationale of having it as a separate programme is unclear'. As with other submitters, the Association noted that many Landcare groups plant very significant numbers of trees each year as part of normal operations. They were thus well placed, with both resources and expertise, to facilitate delivery. In addition, community-based Landcare groups, which have been established for long periods of time, are more likely to result in ongoing maintenance of plantings than planting undertaken by private contractors.⁶⁴

6.51 The Bass Coast Landcare Network was also of the view that the use of existing networks such as Landcare would be 'vital' for local participation in the program. It added that Landcare already had links to landholders, relationships with shires and other agencies and undertake work with a very similar aim as the program.⁶⁵

61 Mr Sean Sullivan, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Estimates Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 173.

62 Ms Fiona Fraser, Department of the Environment, *Supplementary Budget Estimates Hansard*, 20 October 2014, p. 176.

63 Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Submission 45*, p. 5. See also, Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 2.

64 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 6. See also, Mr Justin Bellanger, South Coast Natural Resource Management, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 35.

65 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 4.

6.52 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW, went further and argued that there was a need to link 20 Million Trees (and the Green Army Programme) to volunteer groups. He commented that:

This infrastructure of coordinated networks will help build an enabled community. The enabled community will be equipped to work in partnership with government to tackle the natural resource management challenges we face now and into the future. In my view, there is a need for review of arrangements.⁶⁶

Committee comment

6.53 The overwhelming view received by the committee was that the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees will have limited environmental impact.

6.54 The Green Army Programme was seen by many submitters as more of an employment program than one directed at achieving positive environmental outcomes. It was thus argued that it could hardly be called a natural resource management program and there was considerable criticism that funding was taken out of NRM to support the Green Army Programme.

6.55 The committee also received much evidence suggesting that there will be very limited contribution to environmental outcomes from the Green Army Programme. The difficulties of groups to meet the program requirements were noted. The committee acknowledges the work of the Department of the Environment to broker arrangements between groups to enable them to access the Green Army.

6.56 However, the committee remains unconvinced that the investment in the Green Army Programme is a direct substitute for Landcare and therefore cannot support the transfer of Landcare funding to the Green Army Programme.

6.57 In relation to 20 Million Trees, it was noted that tree planting has always been a feature, but not the only feature, of Landcare. The committee notes the concerns expressed about lack of adequate funding to support planting activities: fencing, propagation, transport and monitoring.

6.58 The committee considers that, while a worthwhile addition to the suite of NRM activities, the Government would have received a greater return on its investment if the 20 Million Trees funding had been rolled into Landcare funding.

66 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW Inc, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 43.

Chapter 7

Other matters considered

Introduction

7.1 This chapter examines the following:

- how the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture work, and have worked, together to deliver a seamless Landcare program;
- comparison of national, state and regional arrangements for Landcare programs;
- Indigenous engagement in Landcare; and
- research and development.

Delivery of Landcare programs by the Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture

7.2 The National Landcare Programme will be primarily administered by the Department of the Environment. Under the memorandum of understanding between the two departments, the Department of the Environment will administer the Landcare funding for the regional stream, but a joint executive group will meet fortnightly and both departments will be involved in assessing funding applications and briefing the ministers.¹

7.3 Representatives confirmed that the Department of the Environment will administer seven of the eight priority Landcare initiatives under the national stream, as follows:

- 20 Million Trees;
- Coastal River Recovery Initiatives;
- Dandenong Ranges Wildlife Recovery, Weed Management and Fuel Reduction Programme;
- Greater Western Sydney—Cumberland Conservation Corridor;
- Keep Australia Beautiful and Clean Up Australia;
- Kimberley Cane Toad Clean Up; and
- Whale and Dolphin Protection Plan.²

7.4 The Department of Agriculture will administer the remaining 30 per cent of the Landcare budget. This includes:

1 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 64.

2 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 64.

- funding to state governments to control new pest or weed incursions;
- contracts for the annual Landcare conference and Landcare awards; and
- 'a range of individual contracts with Landcare'.³

7.5 The 25th anniversary grants program is being administered by the Department of the Environment, in consultation with the Department of Agriculture. The Reef Trust will be administered jointly by both departments.

7.6 Notwithstanding the division of funding and administrative duties between the departments, departmental representatives reiterated that there is a single application process, through the NRM website, which 'stakeholders have been using now for almost 15 years, so they are well used to that portal'.⁴

7.7 In evidence to the committee, Professor Allan Dale expressed the opinion that, historically, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Environment have worked well together to administer the Landcare program.⁵ The Esperance Regional Forum stated that it had an excellent relationship with, and 'receives positive support' from, both departments.⁶ GeoCatch reported that it had dealt satisfactorily with federal departments for 15 years.⁷

7.8 NRM WA supported the pre-2012 arrangement between the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture, explaining that it had involved a joint team across the two departments, co-location of officers and a shared funding and reporting process. NRM WA expressed concern on behalf of regional bodies that the 'consistency and ongoing communication' that characterised their relationship with the departments could diminish.⁸

7.9 The continuation of the joint team was also supported by Katanning Land Conservation District Committee. It stated that this led to improved communication between the departments and allowed 'a single entry point' for Landcare groups. It stressed the importance of consistency between the departments so that projects can report on both environmental and agricultural outcomes rather than being forced to align with one or the other.⁹

7.10 The South West Catchments Council (SWCC) submitted that the separation of the environmental and sustainable agriculture streams under CfoC also resulted in a departure from integrated property management. It suggested that, should the streams

3 Ms Michelle Lauder, Department of Agriculture, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 64.

4 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 65.

5 Professor Allan Dale, James Cook University, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 51.

6 Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 5.

7 GeoCatch, *Submission 10*, p. 3.

8 NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 4. See also, NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 8.

9 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee, *Submission 6*, p. 4.

remain separate, the reporting and documentation should be consistent between the two streams.¹⁰

7.11 The overlap of projects with agriculture and environmental outcomes was noted by the Esperance Regional Forum.¹¹ The Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA) added that NRM does not readily fit into 'departmental demarcations' and that there should be a whole-of-government approach, rather than environmental and agricultural streams. This is particularly the case, it submitted, when agricultural production is on the increase:

As Australia is continuing to increase its agricultural production so it is increasingly important not to separate the protection of environmental values from agricultural landscapes lest we end up with isolated patches of high environmental value in a sea of degrading agricultural landscapes.¹²

7.12 In order to ensure seamless delivery of the Landcare program, the Condamine Alliance suggested that the departments seek:

- a collaborative approach to caring for the land, through programs that achieve social changes as well as environmental objectives;
- an understanding that people change practices when they see the benefit of doing so; and
- an acknowledgement that well-designed initiatives with appropriate methodologies and realistic aims lead to a legacy worth leaving.¹³

7.13 Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective (QRNRMGC), commented that there needed to be a joint approach: it highlights the importance of the fact that we deal with both productive landscapes and natural environments.¹⁴

7.14 The Department of the Environment stated that it continues to work 'very closely' with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture in 'a collaborative effort'. Both departments, it stated, were involved in developing the National Landcare Programme.¹⁵ In addition, as part of the simplification process, the departments were moving to one funding agreement for regional funding processes. Rather than the

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

11 Esperance Regional Forum, *Submission 42*, p. 5.

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

13 Condamine Alliance, *Submission 3*, p. 12.

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

15 Ms Claire Howlett, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 64.

regions having an environment schedule and an agriculture schedule in their agreements, as is currently the case, a single schedule will cover all funding.¹⁶

Interaction of national, state and regional arrangements

7.15 The National Commission of Audit reported on 'overlap between Commonwealth and state responsibilities and activity' in the Landcare program.¹⁷ Evidence presented to the committee suggests that misalignment between the different levels of priority is a more pressing issue than overlap.

7.16 The QRNRMGC called for an integrated national, state and regional framework articulating national, state and regional levels of plans, priorities and targets. It also called for agreements between the federal, state and local governments and regional NRM bodies. States, it submitted, should be funded to share expertise and data to enable 'full and open participation across federal, state, regional and local levels'.¹⁸

7.17 The Torres Strait Regional Authority submitted that 'there is little coordination in the prioritising of natural resource management issues between the various levels of government'. It called for 'strong national leadership and a legislative approach that is consistent across all Australian states and territories'.¹⁹

7.18 Submitters pointed to the lack of coordination having resulting in unintended consequences. The Australian Coastal Society commented that policy makers should be aware of how national or state level decisions play out at the local level. It stated:

The full ramifications of centralised programs are not always clear when applied to a diverse and spread out feature such as the coastline.²⁰

7.19 Ms Nicole Gammie submitted that benefits achieved by projects in one area of the country can be diminished by outcomes in a different area. She stated:

There are different objectives between the different levels of government within Australia that make policy contradictory...To have long term success, any objectives developed for programs to deliver natural resource outcomes need to be clear and binding for all parties at all levels of government.²¹

State arrangements

7.20 Not all states have their own defined Landcare programs or funding. In those without significant state government support, community and regional groups have a

16 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, pp 66–67.

17 National Commission of Audit, *Towards responsible government: appendix: volume 2*, February 2014, p. 19.

18 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Submission 22*, p. 7.

19 Torres Strait Regional Authority, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

20 Australian Coastal Society, *Submission 8*, p. 3.

21 Ms Nicole Gammie, *Submission 59*, p. 1.

say in the formation of the federally funded NRM body. NRM Regions Australia explained the current arrangements for the 56 NRM bodies across Australia. Each of the 56 is governed by a board, and the appointment of board members varies according to state. For example, in South Australia, New South Wales, the ACT and Victoria, NRM boards are appointed by the state government. In Western Australia, Tasmania, Queensland and the Northern Territory, board members are elected by the community.²²

7.21 Details of arrangements in New South Wales and Victoria, where significant state support exists, and Western Australia and Queensland, where state assistance is much reduced are provided below.

7.22 In New South Wales, the *Local Land Services Act 2013* drew together natural resource management, agricultural advisory services and biosecurity under the umbrella of Local Land Services. New South Wales has 11 Local Land Services regions. This structure was implemented in 2014 to ensure 'state-wide consistency' in quality of service and governance, while also allowing local knowledge to inform regional program delivery.²³ Each of the 11 regions in New South Wales is consulting with government and community to develop a five-year plan. These plans will feed into the state strategic plan, which is currently under development.

7.23 The New South Wales Local Land Services set out in its submission a number of points it maintains are important to ensure the success of a 'local' approach. These include:

- enabling the community through the devolution of decision-making, project planning and implementation, acknowledging that people know their local area best;
- providing support at a regional level to communities, and encouraging peer support and learning;
- ensuring effective governance by establishing clear lines of responsibility and accountability; and
- allowing time to create meaningful partnerships built on trust.²⁴

7.24 The New South Wales model works through state-assisted regional organisations providing support to local group projects and involving those local groups in whole-of-region planning. The New South Wales Local Land Services representative, while acknowledging the reduction in staffing levels due to the decrease in funding, expressed confidence in the ability of the Local Land Services to deliver. Mrs Alexandra Anthony stated:

22 NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 1.

23 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, New South Wales Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 2.

24 New South Wales Local Land Services, *Submission 63*, p. 2.

In the new model we can work out who is best placed to deliver whatever it is that needs to be delivered in the most effective way. So it may not be that regional bodies have all the staff required to deliver a program within a region; it may be that someone else can provide that, and you are building capacity and social capital within the region by finding out who those people are and working with them.²⁵

7.25 Victoria has 10 of the 56 regional NRM organisations, called Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) in that state, which sit under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* (Vic). The board of each CMA is formed by ministerial appointment and state funding is provided from an annual grants program. A state-funded Regional Landcare Coordinator works in each CMA, in addition to the federally funded Regional Landcare Facilitators. The state also provides funding for 68 Local Landcare Facilitators. Landcare groups choose their own local facilitator and bid for funding for that position. In addition, Victoria funds an Indigenous state-wide facilitator. The Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries stated:

The strength of these relationships is critical to unlocking the leverage opportunities between Commonwealth and state governments and local communities.²⁶

7.26 The Department acknowledged that the Commonwealth needs to set national priorities but noted that this can lead to challenges for groups trying to access funding for local priorities. It stated:

The role of target areas is important, because you need to focus...but, equally, you need to balance that against potentially excluding access to funding by some groups.²⁷

7.27 The Department also commented that, while it cannot make up the shortfall caused by cuts to the Landcare budget at the federal level, it will maintain the current level of state funding to 'continue to support the membership base in Victoria'.²⁸

7.28 The Victorian Landcare Council gave an example of national, state and regional collaboration. It reported on a project by the Upper Kiewa Landcare Group that received a small amount of federal support which then led to greater investment by state and regional agencies, a corporation and a local council. It stated:

It is estimated that a Landcare grant of just over \$3000 has seen over \$80,000 of value-adding works from project partners.²⁹

25 Mrs Alexandra Anthony, New South Wales Local Land Services, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 3.

26 Mr Peter Betson, Department of Environment and Primary Industries Victoria, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 1.

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

28 Mr Peter Betson, Department of Environment and Primary Industries Victoria, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 7.

29 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

7.29 In its submission, Connecting Country provided examples of large projects in Victoria which were carried out through networks, operating across Landcare groups, to achieve results at a district or landscape level. These projects were also realised with the support of both state and federal funding.³⁰ Connecting Country reported that the constant nature of the state-based grants allows groups to know how much funding is available and when to apply for it. State-based grants, it informed the committee, are also able to be used for capacity building, to raise community awareness of Landcare.³¹

7.30 Connecting Country hosts a Local Landcare Facilitator funded by the state government. It submitted that the 'Victorian Government's Local Landcare Facilitator initiative is a good model for professional Landcare support at a local level'.³²

7.31 NRM WA submitted that 'an almost complete absence' of state government funding in Western Australia in 2014–15 would make WA regions 'particularly vulnerable' to any interruption of Australian Government funds and would threaten continuity of delivery'. It encouraged the Australian Government to engage with the states to also invest through regional NRM bodies.³³

7.32 Dr Kathleen Broderick of NRM WA drew to the committee's attention the reduction in state funding for NRM in Western Australia when the federal-state bilateral agreements ceased at the start of Caring for our Country. In the absence of widespread state support, Dr Broderick explained, NRM activities in WA are overseen by non-statutory, community-based organisations that have built the necessary infrastructure of networks, integrated plans and knowledge sharing mechanisms.³⁴

7.33 NRM WA also gave evidence that the state's focus has shifted to agricultural development rather than natural resource management and that the role of providing advice on sustainable agricultural practices had been taken up by regional bodies.³⁵

7.34 The changes in Western Australia were also noted by the SWCC which reported that state funding in Western Australia is no longer coordinated with federal funding and that this is a challenge. The funding processes are different, requiring Landcare groups to invest time in duplicating applications, which means that 'money gets taken out of existing programs to go into writing applications for new programs'.³⁶

30 Connecting Country, *Submission 7*, p. 4.

31 Mr Max Schlachter, Connecting Country, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 14.

32 Connecting Country, *Submission 7*, p. 2.

33 Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*, p. 3.

34 Dr Kathleen Broderick, Natural Resource Management WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 18.

35 Dr Kathleen Broderick, Natural Resource Management WA, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 24.

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

7.35 The SWCC commented that, in Western Australia, the lack of coordination between the federal and state programs, coupled with a reduction in funding at both levels, means that paid regional Landcare coordinators 'are literally surviving year to year if they are lucky'.³⁷ This, in turn, affects the programs on the ground. It stated:

A lot less of the work focuses on the strategic work they could be doing and more on organisational survival or surviving in that role. So the lack of strategy focuses more on securing the role rather than the outcomes.³⁸

7.36 The SWCC asserted that much clearer information about state and federal responsibilities needs to be provided. It cited as an example recent Australian Government references to biosecurity in National Landcare Programme documents had caused interest at a local level. The SWCC was obliged to explain to its community groups that federal biosecurity funding was, in fact, not available for ongoing projects dealing with existing pests or weeds and that such projects could only be funded through state money. It commented that, to avoid such confusion in the future, state and federal funding could be provided through a combined mechanism.³⁹

7.37 Queensland, similarly, does not have statutory NRM bodies. The QRNRMGC reported that the loss of Commonwealth-state Landcare funding agreements has caused fragmentation and that it is 'not clear where regions, community groups and industry fit in'.⁴⁰ The Collective now relies on Australian Government programs for 70 per cent of its funding. It stated:

The recently announced 20% cut to the NLP program, which devolves directly to Regional NRM Groups, will reduce Queensland bodies capacity to deliver the NRM outcomes desired by their regional communities as well as national priorities.⁴¹

7.38 The Condamine Alliance stated in evidence that there are always 'strong positives and strong negatives about each of the different programs' and that 'we are really starting to have a decent balance between national, state, regional and local programs'.⁴²

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

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

39 Mr Damien Postma, South West Catchments Council, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 17.

40 Mr Mike Berwick, Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 31.

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

42 Mr Phil McCullough, Condamine Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, pp 27–28.

Public/private benefits

7.39 The Commission of Audit stated that Landcare funding supports 'activities that deliver substantial private benefits and that landholders would have an incentive to undertake without public funding'. It recommended:

Funding should be reduced and redirected to the activities with the greatest environmental externalities that do not provide sufficient private benefits for landholders to fund themselves.⁴³

7.40 Submitters disagreed with the Commission's assessment.⁴⁴ While improved land management practices can lead to increased production and financial gain for farmers, a number of submitters and witnesses commented on the significant public benefits, both environmental and social, that also flow from improved practices on private land. For example, the FTLA commented that environmental issues 'are rarely limited by land tenure boundaries'. It stated:

...much of Australia's natural heritage is located on private land and it is reasonable for the Australian community to assist the private landholders to conserve and protect that natural heritage for the benefit of the broader Australian community.⁴⁵

7.41 This point was addressed by the National Farmers' Federation which submitted that farmers manage 61 per cent of Australia's land mass and that 94 per cent of farmers are 'actively undertaking natural resource management'. Given this, it recommended that 'NRM investment programs are designed and focused in a way that supports farmers to achieve the NRM aspirations of the broader community'.⁴⁶ The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association also emphasised that Landcare activities not only increased productivity but also provided a public benefit:

This story has not only been about productivity but also the preservation and improvement of the natural environment and the engagement of local communities. Such engagement is difficult to measure purely in financial terms but provides a very real point of contact in communities that are too often isolated.⁴⁷

7.42 The Bass Coast Landcare Network noted that Landcare has focused on improving cleared private land because it has been 'the source of most land degradation' and that addressing such degradation also addresses the broader impact on environments away from the source, 'such as wetlands, estuaries and marine

43 National Commission of Audit, *Towards responsible government: appendix: volume 2*, February 2014, p. 19.

44 See, for example, NRM Regions Australia, *Submission 18* and *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2015, p. 55; Natural Resource Management WA, *Submission 14*; Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*; and National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 55.

45 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

46 National Farmers' Federation, *Submission 31*, p. 1.

47 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*, p. 5.

ecosystems', as well as the protection of biodiversity and threatened species.⁴⁸ It further noted the contribution made by Landcare activities on private land to ensuring productivity and food security.⁴⁹

7.43 The Hovells Creek Landcare Group echoed this point. It noted the community benefits flowing from the work done by private landholders:

...there are also community benefits associated with private landholders managing stream banks (which are public lands) in controlling soil erosion which contributes to salt and silt loads in river systems; in controlling weeds which do not respect property or local government boundaries, in providing habitat for wildlife and in tree planting which facilitates carbon sequestration.⁵⁰

7.44 The National Rangeland NRM Alliance stressed that improved management of natural resources and improved productivity are inseparable and that this leads not only to 'improved financial returns for land managers' but also 'social outcomes for residents and communities within the rangelands'.⁵¹ It noted:

Rangelands cover some 81% of Australia – more than 6 million km² – and improving the land management of the degraded areas of this region supports the productivity outcomes for the broader pastoral industry, Indigenous Australians and multiple outcomes across the national landscape.⁵²

7.45 The idea that 'activity to improve landscapes outside of targeted landscapes is not worth public investment' was also challenged by the Victorian Landcare Council. It argued that an accounting system to better demonstrate the achievements of Landcare projects would also demonstrate 'the impact of private landholder investment in the environment'.⁵³

7.46 Several submitters pointed to the significant contribution, both financial and in kind, that private landholders make to sustainable agriculture and environmental management.⁵⁴ The Hovells Creek Landcare Group submitted that, in addition to Government funded Landcare activities, landholders pay for fence construction, site preparation, tree planting and weed control, which can involve a commitment over several years.⁵⁵ Landcare Tasmania submitted that every dollar invested in Landcare

48 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 1.

49 Bass Coast Landcare Network, *Submission 20*, p. 2.

50 Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Submission 45*, p. 4.

51 Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Submission 4*, p. 3.

52 Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Submission 4*, p. 2.

53 Victorian Landcare Council, *Submission 16*, p. 9.

54 See, for example, Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, *Submission 64*; Mr David Walker, National Landcare Network, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 8; and NRM WA, *Submission 14*, p. 8.

55 Hovells Creek Landcare Group, *Submission 45*, p. 4.

'generates a co-investment by farmers and Landcare groups of \$4 to \$5 through contributions towards labour, equipment, volunteer time and expertise' as well as additional financial contributions from landholders.⁵⁶

7.47 Landcare NSW pointed out that implementing natural resource management and sustainable agricultural practices can negatively affect farmers in the short term:

It often requires that they change the very way they farm and the very way they do business. Sometimes that means a short-term loss for their families, and this is for the benefit of the broader community.⁵⁷

Indigenous engagement in Landcare

7.48 In its submission to the inquiry, the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) argued that 'meaningful Indigenous involvement in program conception, development and delivery' is important to support Indigenous engagement in, and ownership of, NRM activities. The TSRA also made the point that programs needed to be better aligned with the social and cultural goals of Indigenous communities and take into account native title, traditional knowledge and employment opportunities.⁵⁸

7.49 The regional NRM body for the Torres Strait region is the Land and Sea Management Unit, established by the TSRA in 2006. It receives funding from both the Australian and Queensland Governments. The TSRA noted that the unit has difficulty attracting and retaining staff when only short-term funding is available. It also expressed the view that a regional approach, with technical support from state agencies, under an overarching national framework, is the model that works best for its region.⁵⁹

7.50 The TSRA observed that the Torres Strait region is 'significantly different' from the other NRM regions, in that it consists of islands, has a predominantly Indigenous population and shares an international border with Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. While the region does not have local Landcare groups, the TSRA submitted, community-based management of environmental resources has been 'highly successful'. It stressed the need for 'sufficient flexibility in program guidelines and investment mechanisms' to ensure the continuation of community-based management. It also recommended that Indigenous representation be included in the ongoing development of the National Landcare Programme to ensure that regional needs and native title interests are given consideration.⁶⁰

7.51 In Western Australia, Environs Kimberley partners with traditional owners and Indigenous rangers on cultural and natural resource management projects. It noted

56 Landcare Tasmania, *Submission 55*, p. 5. See also, Landcare Association of South Australia, *Submission 52*, p. 2; National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 56.

57 Mr Robert Dulhunty, Landcare NSW, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 42.

58 Torres Strait Regional Authority, *Submission 38*, p. 1.

59 Torres Strait Regional Authority, *Submission 38*, pp 4–5.

60 Torres Strait Regional Authority, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

that there is a lack of data at the national level about the ecosystems of the region and the threats to those ecosystems and that the retention of experienced staff with knowledge of the local environment is vital.⁶¹ It stated that, in place of community Landcare groups, Aboriginal rangers are the most 'active natural resource management force' and, further, that 'it cannot be stressed enough how important they are to natural resource management in the Kimberley'.⁶²

7.52 Ranger groups in the Kimberley work with pastoralists and government bodies on a variety of activities. Environs Kimberley reported that they 'are very relied upon'.⁶³ Using local Indigenous rangers to provide data on the environmental health of remote regions also adds to natural resource management knowledge at a national level. Environs Kimberley pointed out that this becomes more important as state governments, museums and universities increasingly find the cost of doing such research in a remote area too prohibitive.⁶⁴

7.53 The broader benefits of Indigenous engagement in natural resource management were also noted by Environs Kimberley:

There are flow on effects from the ranger engagement, such as community pride and self-pride, economic independence, physical and environmental health.⁶⁵

7.54 Environs Kimberley commented that gaining consent from, and partnering with, Indigenous groups on projects in the Kimberley takes time. Working in such a remote region also incurs higher project costs, whether for fuel, administration or monitoring. A lack of computers and intermittent internet access can affect monitoring and reporting. Environs Kimberley recommended that these factors be taken into account in the provision of funding for projects.⁶⁶

7.55 The Kimberley Land Council (KLC) reported 'multiple successes' under phase 1 of the Natural Heritage Trust, 'made possible through the direct partnership between the Australian Government and the KLC'. It noted that under phase 2 of the NHT there was a withdrawal of funding, reduced engagement by Government and 'an underrepresentation of Aboriginal people in NHT2 regional governance models'. It stated:

The experience from the National Heritage Trust 1 and II demonstrates that without dedicated investment and partnerships with organisations that represent Indigenous interests, traditional approaches to multi-stakeholder NRM models fail to engage Indigenous people. Further, the engagement of Indigenous people, as the most significant stakeholders in NRM in the

61 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 1.

62 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 2.

63 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 2.

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

65 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 2.

66 Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Environs Kimberley, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, pp 2 and 5.

North of Australia, is crucial to the success of NRM programs – both within the region and more broadly.⁶⁷

7.56 The KLC stressed that 'a consistent approach to delivery of programs is essential'. It recommended building on the strengths of previous NRM programs, through long-term investment, streamlined contracting and administrative processes, and the inclusion of Indigenous representatives in ongoing consultation with Government.⁶⁸

7.57 The Rangeland NRM Alliance gave the example of an NRM group in South Australia that works mainly with Indigenous landholders. It commented that a reduction in funding for that group could lead to staffing reductions and affect the group's interaction with landholders. It said:

That means that that coordination is lost and you lose the continuity of the program. The impact is difficult to quantify but even just losing the relationships and ability to interact with people will make them difficult to reinstate if funding is ever reinstated.⁶⁹

7.58 Professor Allan Dale observed that, in Far North Queensland, a regional approach to NRM has been successfully implemented by 20 traditional owner groups and has led to a feeling of empowerment for the participants. Professor Dale put forward the view that having a strong framework and good governance enabled a regional organisation to support traditional owners to draw up their regional plan. He noted:

That enabled the traditional owners to negotiate very seriously with the federal government around major regional partnership agreements and other major funding sources to deliver on their land and sea aspirations.⁷⁰

Research and development

7.59 A further matter raised was the need for continuing investment in research and development in NRM. Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, pointed to the importance of on-going research and development:

...you cannot talk about investment in natural resource management without talking about R&D because the two go hand in hand.⁷¹

7.60 Mr Leach gave the example of the uptake of minimum tillage by farmers. However, Mr Leach argued that there was a risk to future development and incorporation of new technologies by farmers. He noted that over the last decade there

67 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 2.

68 Kimberley Land Council, *Submission 13*, p. 4.

69 Ms Kate Forrest, National Rangeland NRM Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 58.

70 Professor Allan Dale, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, pp 52–53.

71 Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 17.

had been a reduction in investment in R & D as farm incomes had fallen due to drought and the matching investment from government had also decreased.⁷²

7.61 Mr Dale Park, WA Farmers, also pointed to the decline in research funding, particularly by government. Mr Park noted that research work into land conservation is almost inherently long-term and quite expensive, and it is very difficult to put a dollar value on the outcomes. He went on to conclude that probably much of the best research work is 'actually happening on farm by farmers. But unfortunately it is one of the first things that drops off the to-do list when things get tough'.⁷³

7.62 The long-term impact of under-funding of research was noted by Dr Peter Ampt who stated that:

I do not think I could overstate how demoralising it is for people on the ground, for people involved in educating our future agriculturalists, as I am, and for people involved in research. The diminution of the funds available for a whole range of projects from which we can generate really good research outcomes and really good evidence, through which we can train future agriculturalists, cannot be understated.⁷⁴

7.63 The Condamine Alliance Group also pointed to the lack of capacity of farmers to take up new practices arising from research and commented:

...sometimes they produce the best science in the world but when it gets out to a practical stage out to the farmers, sometimes they do not have the capacity to take that up. That means that a lot of the research we do may well end up sitting on the shelves, as it has done for countless years before us. I think the legacy of a lot of those things is some of the challenges we need to think about, particularly when we make new policy decisions about where we start spending money.⁷⁵

7.64 A further area where research is lacking is the impact of climate change on NRM. The SWCC commented that research is urgently required to inform future management of priority assets and areas in Australia under climate change scenarios and assessment of the magnitude of ecological impact that climate change could have on biodiversity. However, the council argued that the lack of Australian Government R&D funding, especially in the context of climate change, is not allowing NRM to strategically tackle and deal with biodiversity conservation under a changing climate. It concluded that research and strategic funding is critical.⁷⁶

72 Mr Gerald Leach, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 17.

73 Mr Dale Park, WA Farmers, *Committee Hansard*, 7 October 2014, p. 66.

74 Dr Peter Ampt, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 22.

75 Mr Phillip McCullough, Condamine Alliance Group, *Committee Hansard*, 29 August 2014, p. 31.

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

Chapter 8

Conclusions and recommendations

8.1 Over the 25 years that the Australian Government has supported Landcare, there have been several program iterations, refinements and reviews. While community involvement in Landcare has grown markedly since the movement's inception in the 1980s, each change to the formal program structure and funding arrangements creates uncertainty on the ground. Despite this, community commitment to the Landcare ethos remains:

Landcare is not some tree hugging environmental one day wonder. It is unique and enduring, it is supported by the main custodians of the Australian landscape, the Australian farmers, who are the main environmental stewards, managing, soils, water, endangered and threatened flora and fauna weeds and the list goes on. It is also a partnership between industry, Government and the general community, a unique bi partisan partnership.

Landcare's enduring popularity is due to the embedded philosophy of embracing local issues, empowering communities with education extension and decision support tools that deliver practical solutions.¹

8.2 The committee acknowledges the importance of using local groups and landholders, employing local knowledge and taking local action to achieve results. The committee supports the continued strengthening of networks and involvement of local groups in regional decision making and planning to achieve enduring outcomes on the ground.

8.3 The committee recognises the mutual contribution of sustainable agricultural practices and sustainable natural resource management to the condition of the environment. A point made throughout the inquiry was that problems causing environmental degradation do not recognise boundaries and that improved agricultural practices on private land contribute to the overall health of Australia's landscape.

8.4 The committee recognises the social benefits of Landcare. Not only does Landcare contribute to improved landscapes through sustainable agricultural and environmental practices; its contribution to individual and community wellbeing is immense. As one submission stated:

Landcare is essentially a social mechanism to achieve biophysical outcomes. While its primary focus is on generating outcomes for sustainable landscapes, it is the relationships that Landcare creates through group action, the resultant peer to peer learning, the norms established and the respect Landcare groups develop in local communities that make on-ground action possible.²

1 Mr Ian Sauer, *Submission 61*, p. 3

2 Farm Tree and Landcare Association, *Submission 41*, p. 2.

8.5 In redesigning the Landcare framework once again, it is important that community input continues and that changes are clearly communicated. Former Prime Minister the Hon Bob Hawke AC, speaking at the 2014 Bob Hawke Landcare Award ceremony, noted:

The basic point that I think should underlie all our thinking is that the good people of Australia have demonstrated over 25 years the widespread commitment there is in the community to deal with these fundamental issues of protecting our environment and we mustn't do anything which is going to interfere with that commitment.³

Landcare and the 2014–15 Budget

8.6 The 2014–15 Budget announcement of a reduction in funding of \$471 million over the next four years for Landcare and new funding initiatives including the Green Army and 20 Million Trees were seen by some in the Landcare sector as a broken election commitment.

8.7 It was argued that the reduction in funding shows a failure by the Government to understand, and appreciate, the role that Landcare plays in natural resource management, the strong environmental outcomes from Landcare and the value returned to government and the community of continued investment in Landcare. Many submitters pointed to the significant value derived from government investment with research indicating that for each \$1 invested by government, there was community and landholder investment of up to \$12.

8.8 Submitters from the farming sector also pointed to the increase in agricultural productivity through Landcare activity. The farming sector has been able to identify, implement and manage sustainability and productivity issues through Landcare investment.

8.9 It was argued by many that these gains are now under threat from the reduction in funding. The committee received evidence which pointed to a reduction in projects being undertaken by Landcare organisations. In addition, NRM bodies indicated that there would be a loss of staff. This, it was argued, will diminish the ability of organisations to plan, to assist and support local groups and to engage community and volunteer groups. There will be a loss of skills and corporate and local knowledge.

8.10 The committee also received evidence of the wider benefits of Landcare in rural and regional communities through the provision of employment, building social cohesion and capacity, and health and wellbeing of individuals and the community. It was argued that these benefits are under threat with the reduction in funding.

8.11 The committee acknowledges that investment in NRM has produced wide-ranging and long-term benefit for the environment and for communities. It provides a significant return on investment for the Commonwealth Government and for

3 The Hon Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister, 2014 Bob Hawke Landcare Award, *transcript of interview*, September 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-20/the-2014-bob-hawke-landcare-award/5759828> (accessed 22 September 2014).

Australia. Over the last 25 years, processes and planning for NRM activities have become more efficient and effective, reaping improved returns for the environment, the Government, and the community.

8.12 The committee thus finds it very difficult to support any reduction in funding for NRM programs. While the Government has pointed to its funding commitment over the next four years, this commitment includes programs with a limited relationship to Landcare activities. The committee considers the actions of the Government to be short-sighted. The funding cuts have the potential to undermine the Government's stated aim of placing Landcare back at the centre of land management programs. It has the potential to undermine the gains in environmental improvement over the past 25 years and moves to secure increased agricultural productivity into the future. As well, efforts to reengage communities and volunteers, who are so vital to the long-term health of the Landcare movement, may be hindered.

8.13 While recognising the current budget constraints under which the Government is working, the committee considers that the benefits arising from Landcare are too important to be ignored and thus funding should be reinstated to previous levels.

Recommendation 1

8.14 The committee recommends that the Government provide funding to the National Landcare Programme to the same level as provided under Caring for our Country.

8.15 In addition, the committee notes comments in relation to lack of access to small grants under the National Landcare Programme. Evidence pointed to the effectiveness of small grants for Landcare groups. While the Government has provided small grants through the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Programme, funding is limited to a total of \$5 million for this one-off program.

Recommendation 2

8.16 The committee recommends that the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Programme be maintained as a continuing small grants program over the forward estimates.

The Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees

8.17 The committee notes the comments received in relation to two new programs: the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees. While some submitters commented that the programs would augment Landcare activities, others were of the view that there would be limited positive environmental outcomes from these two programs.

8.18 In relation to the Green Army, there was concern that the funding for this program had been drawn from Landcare. It was argued that this is an employment program rather than a Landcare program and that there were program design features which worked against it being a viable alternative to Landcare. These features include the lack of 'in-kind' contributions from experienced landcarers, minimal funding for project specific materials, lack of knowledge of local conditions by participants, limited return on investment as participants are inexperienced and lack of long-term commitment to projects particularly maintenance and monitoring. In addition, as

project timeframes are for 20 to 26 weeks, it was argued that it would be difficult for Landcare groups to fund and organise projects to meet these requirements.

8.19 The committee welcomes the comments by the Department of the Environment that an average of \$10,000 per project could be made available for 'project-specific materials'. The committee also welcomes the department's moves to broker projects across a number of groups to overcome the problem of the provision of projects up to 26 weeks.

8.20 However, the committee remains unconvinced that the investment in the Green Army Programme can be seen as a direct substitute for Landcare. The committee considers that the Green Army Programme lacks most of the essential features of Landcare that contribute so significantly to environmental improvement. The committee concludes that it is disingenuous of the Government to argue that the more than \$500 million investment in the Green Army will return the same level of environmental benefits, and community and landholder buy-in benefits, that a matching investment in Landcare would have done.

8.21 The committee also notes that while information on projects that have been awarded funding under Rounds One and Two are available on the Department of the Environment's website, little additional information is available on the progress of each project. The committee considers that, given the large investment by the Government, and the lauded environmental and conservation activities of the Green Army, information about environmental outcomes must be publicly available. Such information should include project timeframes, project status, and assessment of the environmental outcomes both immediately following completion of the project and after a suitable monitoring period.

Recommendation 3

8.22 The committee recommends that the further information about Green Army projects be made publicly available. This information should include project timeframes, project status, and an assessment of the environmental outcomes both immediately following completion of the project and after a suitable monitoring period.

8.23 In relation to the 20 Million Trees Programme, the committee notes that Landcare already plants many millions of trees each year. While the addition of funding for further tree planting is welcome, the committee does not consider that it is a good use of scarce Commonwealth resources to establish a new program to do so. The committee considers that it would have been more efficient, and additional administration costs would have been avoided, had the funding for 20 Million Trees been rolled into Landcare funding.

8.24 In addition, the committee considers that a full assessment of both the Green Army Programme and 20 Million Trees should be undertaken after two years of operation to ensure that the goals of the programs are being achieved and the Government is receiving value for money.

Recommendation 4

8.25 The committee recommends that a comprehensive review of the Green Army Programme and the 20 Million Trees Programme be undertaken by June 2016 to ensure that the programs are meeting their stated goals and that the Commonwealth Government is receiving good value for money from its investment.

National Landcare Programme

8.26 The underlying principles of the National Landcare Programme are: local, simple and long-term. The committee considers that enunciation of these principles could provide important reference points to build on Landcare's past successes. However, in the committee's opinion, there other matters which work against sustaining the work of Landcare into the future.

Local

8.27 The local principle was welcomed by submitters as it was seen to bring the program back to its original focus; a focus which appears to have been lost under Caring for our Country. The committee considers that the refocus on 'local' is appropriate to support further development of natural resource management across Australia.

8.28 The committee considers that regional NRM bodies are well placed to advance the local principle: they have expertise; local knowledge; and regional understanding. The active incorporation of local priorities and input by local groups is a positive move to encourage the reengagement of communities, volunteers and landholders in NRM activities.

8.29 However, there are a number of concerns with the new arrangements, particularly the impact of funding levels. The committee recognises that the Government has responded to stakeholder comment and various reviews of Caring for our Country and previous programs. However, the committee is also mindful that one of the factors influencing changes to Landcare programs has been the reduction in funding which the Government has made available.

8.30 In this regard, the committee is concerned that the lack of funding may impact adversely on long-term planning and a systematic approach to NRM which includes both large-scale and smaller projects. The committee received a range of views in relation to the future of large-scale projects with some submitters commenting that these would still be undertaken while others were less certain that funding would enable the continuation of large-scale projects.

8.31 The committee notes that under the national stream it is intended to retain support in important areas such as the management and rehabilitation of coastal rivers, threatened species and ecosystems, the National Reserve System and management of pests. The 20 Million Trees is also included in the national stream.

8.32 While this is welcome, it is unclear how engagement of stakeholders, particularly communities, will work to achieve national priorities. The committee considers that there may be a danger that the arrangements under the new National

Landcare Programme could undermine a comprehensive and coordinated approach to long-term strategic landscape scale planning and action. The committee believes that further consideration should be given to evaluating the impact of the new arrangements on landscape scale projects and consideration be given to improving coordination and planning of large projects.

Recommendation 5

8.33 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government consider avenues to ensure the continuation of landscape scale projects and to foster further collaboration between stakeholders on long-term landscape scale strategic planning and action.

8.34 The committee is also concerned that the new arrangements have the potential to introduce a degree of friction between NRM bodies and community groups and may undermine the aims of the local principle. For example, the requirement for providing a minimum of 20 per cent of regional funding to local groups will be a positive mechanism to support local projects, capacity building and community engagement. However, it comes at a time when NRM funding levels have decreased and access to small grants has been removed. This will mean that significantly less funding will reach groups on the ground.

8.35 The committee has also noted the evidence pointing to the impact on regional NRM staff who provide support and assistance to community groups. Many groups and landholders benefit greatly from the work of facilitators and support officers. The reduction in the number of these positions may impact adversely on the local principle and undermine the strategic objectives of the National Landcare Programme which are based on increasing community and landholder engagement and participation.

8.36 The committee notes the Department of the Environment's comments in relation to the employment of a facilitator by NRM bodies. However, the committee is concerned not only that the facilitator role is maintained, but also that regional NRM bodies retain experienced staff with local knowledge for planning and capacity building activities. At the same time, given the current restriction in funding, the committee considers that all regional NRM bodies must ensure that their administrative arrangements are as efficient and cost effective as possible. In this regard, the committee welcomes the commitment by the Department of the Environment to simplification. The committee considers that this should go some way to reducing administrative costs.

8.37 While acknowledging the reduction in funding received by regional NRM bodies, the committee is concerned that appropriate arrangements are put in place to ensure community engagement and community capacity building. Community participation in NRM is crucial to its success and the committee does not consider that lack of funding should undermine genuine community collaboration and engagement by regional NRM bodies.

Recommendation 6

8.38 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government review the funding model for the National Landcare Programme with a view to reinstating funding for facilitators and community support staff.

8.39 In addition, the committee has noted comments concerning the disengagement of farmers. The committee acknowledges the importance of engaging landholders in NRM planning activities and the benefits that arise from this engagement. The committee considers that further efforts are needed to ensure that effective collaboration with landholders is undertaken. In this regard, the committee notes the comments by the National Farmers' Federation and moves to improve linkages between NRM bodies and industry. The committee considers that this should be further encouraged.

Recommendation 7

8.40 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government conducts a review of factors contributing to disengagement of landholders in NRM activities with a view to addressing those factors and increasing landholder engagement.

Recommendation 8

8.41 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government works to further foster linkages between regional NRM bodies and industry groups.

Simple

8.42 The committee welcomes the Government's commitment to the principle of 'simple' and moves by Department of the Environment to decrease the administrative burden on NRM bodies. In addition, the department has moved to an online monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement tool which is aimed at reducing the reporting burden.

8.43 However, the committee remains concerned about the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation of NRM investments. The committee acknowledges that some reporting is required for financial accountability and governance. However, reporting should be appropriate to the size of the project and investment.

Recommendation 9

8.44 The committee recommends that reporting be proportionate to the size of a project or grant. Notwithstanding that accountability and good governance is expected at all levels, there should be flexibility in reporting so that the requirements for small-scale projects are commensurate with the size of the project.

8.45 The committee also notes the comments by submitters that although there is extensive reporting it does not appear to influence policy debate or policy development. In part, this may be as a result of the focus of reporting on outputs. Reporting on outputs can be time consuming and onerous and does not identify positive changes to landscape and thus whether the investment has been successful. It also does not identify practices which may be applied in other areas. The committee

therefore considers that further effort is required to ensure that there is a move away from reporting on outputs towards effective reporting of outcomes. The committee notes that the Department of the Environment has indicated that the MERIT system will assist in the evaluation of outcomes. However, the committee considers that further work in measuring outcomes of NRM projects is required

Recommendation 10

8.46 The committee recommends that investigation be undertaken to further decrease the focus of reporting on outputs and increase reporting of outcomes.

8.47 Evidence was received about the establishment of a national environmental accounts system. Submitters supported this approach and pointed to the trial of national environmental accounts in ten NRM regions which is being evaluated.

8.48 The committee considers that national environmental accounts are an important initiative as they aim to provide annual reports over various levels on the health and change in condition of environmental assess, underpin long-term planning and improve cost effectiveness of public and private investment in environmental management and repair. The committee urges the Commonwealth to evaluate the trial and to consider the extent to which it could incorporate its approach in the development of a national monitoring and evaluation system.

Recommendation 11

8.49 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government examine the outcomes of the trial of the national environmental accounting system developed by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, with a view to investigating the feasibility of implementing that system, or a similar system, and incorporating it in the MERIT reporting process.

8.50 In addition, the committee has noted the comments on the lack of reporting on social outcomes arising from NRM investment. The committee considers that the Commonwealth Government should investigate ways to incorporate reporting on social outcomes to ensure that the full benefits of its investment are identified.

Recommendation 12

8.51 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government establish a system of reporting the social outcomes of investment in natural resource management so that the full benefits of that investment are identified.

Long-term

8.52 Without a long-term commitment of investment in NRM, there is potential for environmental outcomes to be undermined and for disengagement of communities and landholders. The committee notes that the Government's commitment to long-term funding. This is welcome; however, that commitment is to a much lower funding level.

Delivery of Landcare programs by the Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture

8.53 The committee has considered the evidence in relation to coordination between the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture. The committee notes the departments' arrangements to coordinate the delivery of Landcare programs with the Department of the Environment undertaking the major share of this task.

Interaction of national, state and regional arrangements

8.54 The evidence received by the committee points to concern about misalignment of priorities in national, state and regional arrangements. The committee also notes that there are differing arrangements across jurisdictions. The committee considers that more effective coordination across and within jurisdictions would contribute to a consistent approach to NRM issues.

8.55 One step to improve coordination may be a review of regional NRM bodies with a view to decreasing the number bodies. At the moment there are 56 regional bodies across Australia. The committee considers that there are benefits to be gained through economies of scale, centralisation of resources and improvement in information sharing.

Recommendation 13

8.56 The committee recommends that a review be undertaken to investigate any potential efficiencies of NRM bodies. The investigation may consider adopting a shared services model using existing resources and ways for NRM bodies to reflect effective boundaries. This should be undertaken on a state-by-state basis with due consideration of the importance of community engagement.

Indigenous engagement in Landcare

8.57 The committee acknowledges the significant contribution of Indigenous groups, traditional owners and rangers to natural resource management. Indigenous rangers in the Kimberley work with pastoralists and government bodies and in Far North Queensland a regional approach to NRM has been successfully implemented by traditional owner groups.

8.58 The committee considers that the Commonwealth should ensure that the new National Landcare Programme incorporates flexibility and investment mechanisms to maintain Indigenous engagement in NRM. In this regard, the committee points to the need to:

- better align programs to the social and cultural goals of Indigenous communities;
- take into account native title and traditional knowledge; and
- acknowledge barriers to access and additional costs caused by remoteness.

8.59 The committee also considers that there should be greater consultation with Indigenous groups as the National Landcare Programme is rolled out.

Recommendation 14

8.60 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government ensures that the National Landcare Programme incorporate sufficient flexibility and investment mechanisms to maintain Indigenous engagement in natural resource management.

Recommendation 15

8.61 The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment undertake consultation with Indigenous groups active in natural resource management to ensure that Indigenous views are incorporated in any modifications of the National Landcare Programme.

Research and development

8.62 A further matter raised was the need for continuing investment in research and development in natural resource management. The committee notes that funding for research and development has declined over the years. This committee considers that this is short-sighted particularly in light of the need to increase agricultural productivity and the need to ensure that adequate research is undertaken on the impact of climate change to deal with biodiversity conservation and agricultural productivity.

Senator Anne Urquhart
Chair

Government Senators' Additional Comments

1.1 The Coalition members of the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee consider the report fails to acknowledge the efforts of the Government to put Landcare back at the heart of natural resource management.

National Landcare Programme

1.2 The Australian Government is investing more than \$2 billion to manage our natural resources, enabling communities to take practical action to improve the environment. This includes investment in the National Landcare Programme, together with complimentary initiatives such as the Green Army, Working on Country and the Reef Trust.

1.3 The Government's redesign of the National Landcare Programme is focussed on:

- a. returning decision-making back to local communities, rather than a top-down approach from Canberra;
- b. a simpler and more effective reporting and application process; and
- c. a commitment to long-term projects and programme design.

1.4 The report acknowledges the Government's 25th Anniversary of Landcare Grants but does not address the Minister for the Environment and Minister for Agriculture's decision to mandate that Natural Resource Management (NRM) organisations funded under the regional stream of the National Landcare Programme must invest at a minimum 20% of their funding for small on-ground projects delivered by Landcare and other community groups.

1.5 This change to the programme design ensures that Landcare and community groups have access to small project funding through their local regions on an ongoing basis.

Ongoing consultation with Landcare and local communities

1.6 The National Landcare Programme Advisory Committee will play an important role in advising the Government about the implementation of the National Landcare Programme and opportunities for further improvements as the programme rolls-out.¹ The report fails to acknowledge the Government's commitment to consult with the sector through the Advisory Committee to ensure this programme delivers on its principles of simple, local and long-term.

1.7 Engagement with local communities through the regional delivery stream of the Programme will play a critical role in ensuring the Government's investment in natural resource management is targeted at priority local projects that meet local community needs such as funding to Landcare groups.

1 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 59.

1.8 The Government is also supporting with \$1 million in annual funding the important work of the National Landcare Network and state Landcare networks. This funding is focused on supporting the networks' role in building relationships with NRMs, advising Government on the roll-out and design of the Green Army, 20 Million Trees and National Landcare Programmes and continuing to build capacity within the movement.

Green Army Programme

1.9 The Australian Government's Green Army Programme is complimentary to but not replacing Landcare funding.

1.10 The Green Army is primarily an environment programme focused on supporting local communities to take practical action, but it also provides young people with practical skills and training.

1.11 The report does not acknowledge the important role the Green Army can play in supporting, and assisting, the vital work of Australia's volunteer conservation organisations. The Programme does not aim to displace the volunteer movement, but to energise and add much-needed support to the efforts on the ground.²

1.12 Young Australians care deeply about, and are interested in, working in the environment. For many young people, the Green Army could be their first opportunity to work in the environment and undertake paid work experience. This experience in the Green Army could have a profound impact on their lives, their community and the local environment. These young people are the next generation of Landcarers.

1.13 Most significantly, the report fails to acknowledge young people involved in the programme will not only gain valuable skills and training to prepare them for the workforce in this initiative, but the environment will benefit significantly from this initiative.

- a. Projects submitted under the Green Army are in partnership with local communities and must have a conservation outcome.
- b. Projects are tailored to ensure that they meet local species requirements and that approval is provided from the project sponsor on how best to deliver the project at the outset. This ensures that the Green Army is meeting local environmental needs.

1.14 In contrast to previous similar programmes such as the Green Jobs Corps and Green Corps Programmes, the Green Army provides significant flexibility in the programme design to address some of the concerns raised in the report but not explored. The average investment in a Green Army Project is \$192,500 per project; this includes funding for project specific materials above or below the 'on average \$10,000' allocated project specific material amount.³ The Green Army also allows for

2 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 13 October 2014, p. 61.

3 Ms Peta Lane, Department of the Environment, *Budget Estimates Hansard*, 27 May 2014, p. 97.

multiple project applications, multiple Participation in projects and Service Providers are able to work with potential sponsors on their project applications assisting them in how to design a project.

1.15 The Green Army Programme is designed to leverage investment from both the 20 Million Trees and National Landcare Programmes to provide additional support where required for more complex project concepts. Organisations can work in partnership to put together a project proposal utilising the funding in environment programmes.

Senator Anne Ruston
Deputy Chair
Senator for South Australia

Senator James McGrath
Senator for Queensland

Appendix 1

Submissions, tabled documents, additional information and answers to questions taken on notice

Submissions

- 1 Mr Nev Reis
- 2 Name Withheld
- 3 Condamine Alliance Group
- 4 Rangeland NRM Alliance
- 5 WoolProducers Australia
- 6 Katanning Land Conservation District Committee
- 7 Connecting Country
- 8 Australian Coastal Society
- 9 Shire of Capel
- 10 Geographe Catchment Council
- 11 South West Catchments Council
- 12 Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, South
Australia
- 13 Kimberley Land Council
- 14 NRM (Natural Resource Management) WA
- 15 Wildflower Society of Western Australia (Inc.)
- 16 Victorian Landcare Council
- 17 South Coast NRM
- 18 NRM Regions Australia
- 19 Greening Australia
- 20 Bass Coast Landcare Network
- 21 Border Rivers Catchment Management Association
- 22 Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective
- 23 Mr Matthew Pitt
- 24 Dr Peter Ampt
- 25 Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network
- 26 Wild Matters Pty. Ltd.
- 27 Name Withheld
- 28 Landcare SJ Inc
- 29 Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups
- 30 Tasmanian Land Conservancy
- 31 National Farmers' Federation
- 32 Upper Ovens Landcare Group Inc

- 33 Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc
- 34 Landcare Australia Ltd
- 35 Dr Bill Pigott
- 36 Upper Barwon Landcare Network
- 37 Ms Monica Durcan
- 38 Torres Strait Regional Authority
- 39 Trust for Nature
- 40 Chittering Landcare Group
- 41 Farm Tree and Landcare Association
- 42 Esperance Regional Forum Inc
- 43 Australian Land Management (ALM) Group
- 44 Southern ACT Catchment Group
- 45 Hovells Creek Landcare Group
- 46 National Landcare Network
- 47 Landcare NSW Inc
- 48 Big Lap Landcare Inc.
- 49 Mr David Hudson
- 50 Molonglo Catchment Group
- 51 Mr Lynton Bond
- 52 Landcare Association of SA
- 53 Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture
- 54 Australian Landcare International (ALI)
- 55 Landcare Tasmania Inc.
- 56 Nature Conservation Society of SA
- 57 Conservation Council of South Australia
- 58 Name Withheld
- 59 Ms Nicole Gammie
- 60 Mr Douglas Fox
- 61 Mr Ian Sauer
- 62 Mr Noel Klopper
- 63 NSW Local Land Services
- 64 Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association
- 65 Mr Nelson Quinn
- 66 Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
- 67 Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC)
- 68 Leschenault Catchment Council
- 69 Ms Kate Watson
- 70 Confidential
- 71 Dr George Wilson
- 72 Northern Gulf Resource Management Group
- 73 Confidential

Tabled documents

Professor Allan Dale, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University – *Policy briefing*, tabled at public hearing, Canberra, 29 August 2014

Landcare NSW – *A Case Study: Landcare in the North Coast Region*, tabled at public hearing, Canberra, 29 August 2014

Landcare NSW – *The value of Landcare to the Australian community*, tabled at public hearing, Canberra, 29 August 2014

Hovells Creek Landcare Group – Landcare NSW diagram, tabled at public hearing, Canberra, 29 August 2014

Additional information

NSW Local Land Services – Clarification of evidence given at public hearing, Canberra, 29 August 2014

Ms Ella Maesepp – Australian Landcare Council, *Engaging the 20-something year old in Landcare, In the context of Australian Government natural resource management policy and programs: Observations and recommendations by Ella Maesepp*

NRM Regions Australia – Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, *Accounting for Nature – A model for building the National Environmental Accounts of Australia*

Answers to questions taken on notice

Nature Conservation Society of South Australia – Answers to questions taken on notice (public hearing, Canberra, 29 August 2014)

Rangeland NRM Alliance – Answers to questions taken on notice (public hearing, Canberra, 29 August 2014)

Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture – Answers to questions taken on notice (public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2014)

Appendix 2

Public hearings

Friday, 29 August 2014 – Canberra

NSW Local Land Services

Mrs Alexandra Anthony, Member of Board of Chairs

Landcare Australia Limited

Ms Tessa Jakszewicz, Chief Executive Officer

Miss Odessa O'Brien, Corporate Relations Director

National Landcare Network

Mr David Walker, Chair

Ms Glenys Patulny, Deputy Chair

Mrs Amanda Stevenson, Committee Member

Nature Conservation Society of South Australia

Ms Nicole De Preu, Conservation Ecologist

Dr Peter Ampt, Faculty of Agriculture and Environment, University of Sydney

Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective

Mr Mike Berwick, Chair

Condamine Alliance Group

Mr Phillip McCullough, Chief Executive Officer

Hovells Creek Landcare Group

Mr Keith Hyde, Chairman

Mrs Elizabeth Baker, Treasurer

Dr John Baker, Member

Dr Bill Pigott, Private capacity

Landcare NSW Inc

Mr Robert Dulhunty, Chair

Mrs Sonia Williams, General Manager

Professor Allan Dale, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University

National Rangeland NRM Alliance

Mr Andrew Drysdale, Chair

Ms Kate Forrest, Coordinator

Tuesday, 7 October 2014 – Perth**Environs Kimberley**

Dr Malcolm Lindsay, Coordinator, Kimberley Nature Project

South West Catchments Council

Mr Damien Postma, Chief Executive Officer

Ms Christine Kershaw, Director and Board Member

Mr William Bennell, Operations Manager

Natural Resource Management WA

Dr Kathleen Broderick, Executive Manager

South Coast Natural Resource Management

Mr Justin Bellanger, Operations Manager

Northern Agricultural Catchments Council

Dr Jill Wilson, Chair

Katanning Land Conservation District Committee

Mrs Ella Maesepp, Landcare Program Manager

Chittering Landcare Group

Mrs Rosanna Hindmarsh, Treasurer

Landcare SJ Inc

Mr Francis Smit, Executive Officer

WA Farmers

Mr Dale Park, President

Monday, 13 October 2014 – Melbourne**Department of Environment and Primary Industries, Victoria**

Mr Peter Betson, Executive Director, Environment and Landscape Performance

Ms Ingrid Duncan, Director, Catchment and Community Programs

Connecting Country

Mr Brendan Sydes, President

Mr Max Schlachter, Mount Alexander Region Landcare Facilitator

National Farmers' Federation

Mr Gerald Leach, Chair, Natural Resource Management Committee

NRM Regions Australia

Mr Max Kitchell, Chair

Mr Danny O'Neill, Executive Officer

Farm Tree and Landcare Association

Mr David Clark, President

Ms Susi Johnson, Executive Officer

Victorian Landcare Council

Mr Terence Hubbard, President

Dr Ross Colliver, Chair, Policy Subcommittee

Dr Kathryn Rodden, Secretary

Bass Coast Landcare Network

Mr John Cumming, Chair

Mr Nigel Wing, Board Member

Mrs Kellie Nichols, Executive Officer

Australian Coastal Society

Associate Professor Geoffrey Wescott, Vice President

Department of the Environment

Mr Malcolm Thompson, Deputy Secretary

Ms Claire Howlett, Assistant Secretary

Department of Agriculture

Ms Michelle Lauder, Assistant Secretary, Sustainability and Biosecurity Policy
Division

