

Submission

Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs & Transport Inquiry into Natural Resource Management & Conservation Challenges

Introduction

GA is Australia's largest environmental NGO with offices in all states and territories and many regional offices. We have been in existence for 26 years and have a staff of 350 and a turn over of \$50M/annum.

Since 1990 Greening Australia has delivered a number of major national contracts. The larger of these include:

- *The One Billion Trees Program* - which aimed to enthuse, educate and empower the community to plant one billion trees.
- *Bushcare Support Program* - Greening Australia provides technical advice, education and support to groups receiving Natural Heritage Trust community grants for vegetation protection, enhancement and restoration projects.
- *Bush for Greenhouse* - Greening Australia works with landholders to plant trees to sequester carbon emissions generated by corporations who invest in the program.
- *National Corridors of Green* - Greening Australia was funded to provide grants and technical support to landholders to plant green wildlife corridors connecting to patches of remnant bush.
- *Farm Forestry Support* - Greening Australia works with landholders to develop farm forestry as an industry.
- *Green Corps* - Greening Australia, in partnership with Job Futures, has been contracted by the Commonwealth Government to deliver Green Corps. The program offers young people an opportunity to receive quality training while participating in projects that contribute to significant environmental and cultural heritage initiatives.
- *Florabank I & II* - The national program that builds capacity in the native seed sector and provides guidance and coordination for seed collectors and buyers to ensure a supply of high quality seed will be available for natural resource management, mine rehabilitation and climate change mitigation & adaptation.
- *Exchange* – The national vegetation knowledge service - a demand drive, flexible service that provides valuable support to NRM practitioners, and landholders. Exchange connects science and practice.

On World Environment Day 1998, Greening Australia's work with the community was recognised with admission to the United Nations Environment Program Global 500 Roll of Honour. The award recognises outstanding achievements in protection of the environment.

Since 2000 Greening Australia's strategic direction has been *Transforming our Landscapes*. This is achieved through large scale restoration, re-establishment & expansion of biodiverse native forest. Addressing land degradation at this scale through revegetation not only means the establishment of native forest, but the restoration of habitat, grassland, natural drainage systems, and riparian repair. It is a systems approach to landscape restoration involving protection & enhancement of existing native vegetation, augmented by the large scale restoration that is required.

Greening Australia welcomed the Auditor General's 2008 Report which highlighted the urgent need for large scale restoration of Australia's natural assets to address 'the radically altered and degraded Australian landscape'. The report acknowledged that environmental restoration and conservation works can no longer be piecemeal but must be carried out as part of a comprehensive approach to natural resource management.

The inexorable link between environmental, social and economic well being- the triple bottom line needs to be strongly front-of-mind.

While GA supports the scope of Caring for our Country, we have been dismayed by the transitional funding process to date which has not encouraged a 'big picture' approach to NRM. We anticipate that the Government's Business Plan, to be released later this year will transition NRM work to focus long-term & large scale so that we can seriously address the degradation of Australia's natural assets.

Submission

Our submission addresses the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry:

1. *Lessons learned from the successes and failures of three decades of Commonwealth investment in resource management including Landcare, the National Heritage Trust, The National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality, and other national programs.*

- Earlier programs were output and activity focused, but not linked strategically to outcomes that are science based.
- Projects were proposed and completed in isolation – there was an absence of landscape-scale.
- Short funding periods, and/or policy to not fund the same project twice means that much good work was either degraded before it was resourced again, or forgotten.
- The previous policy of spreading the dollars across a wide geographic area and applicants has often meant that priority areas

have been under serviced and funding capital has been invested in an ad hoc way in landscapes that are not priority.

- The level of funding in the past and now does not meet the scale of the environmental threat. Under NHT1, funding from all sources ranged from less than \$1/ha to \$30/ha in every IBRA Bioregion. This included funding for the large overheads required to deliver funds on-ground (Harvey & Freudenberger 2003). A major NRM outcome cannot be achieved when so little funding is spread so thin. Greening Australia's analysis indicates that \$250M is required to achieve a significant NRM outcome in just 11 focal landscapes (less than 2% of Australia). The Commonwealth's \$2.25 billion investment in Caring for our Country represents .3% of the Commonwealth Government's annual budget.
- Poor availability of baseline datasets and the continuing inability of the States and Commonwealth to provide meaningful national data sets at a scale that relate to most conservation actions, handicaps analysis of what is required and what has been achieved. For example, vegetation mapping is not consistent across states and soil mapping is not available at a scale where it is of any use to landholders or practitioners
- National programs run by Greening Australia such as One Billion Trees, Florabank and Exchange have been highly complementary to on-ground projects, providing the technical and scientific support necessary for successful outcomes. What would make these programs more effective are clear regional priorities for NRM, leading to outcome-oriented, long-term programs which are rewarded for using best-practice techniques and the best science.

2. How we can best build on the knowledge and experience gained from these programs to capitalise on existing networks and projects, and maintain commitment and momentum among land-holders.

- Increase investment in R & D to expand the science, determine priorities and improve environmental assessment and reporting.
- Create obvious links between national and regional conservation targets, and actions that can be taken by landholders and community groups. Many landholders are paralysed by over-planning, or embark on projects of little value because of poor understanding of the links between planning and practice.
- Build and expand networks among practitioners, researchers and policy makers to facilitate the sharing of knowledge. Commit to them long-term (i.e. beyond one political term).
- The Commonwealth must demonstrate that it is *there for the long haul*. Interested parties become dispirited and discouraged when grand plans underpinned by grand funding opportunities appear to be available but do not meet reasonable expectations.
- Evaluate effective programs from different regions throughout Australia and share this knowledge through staff exchange, conferences, on-line forums and program templates. Establish a fund specifically for inter-region and inter-jurisdiction exchange of

skills, such as the *Exchange Incentive Fund* that has been successfully operated by Greening Australia and Land & Water Australia.

- There needs to be capital investment in national program development and management, including monitoring & evaluation. Data collection needs to be consistent and comprehensive to ensure quality data and meaningful reporting;
- Planning for program transition is required to eliminate time wastage, project degradation, and loss of delivery capacity. This is a lesson not-learned! The establishment of long term funding mechanisms from government would be helpful in these circumstances;
- It cannot be expected that NRM practitioner agencies that have been vital to the delivery of government policy objectives in the past can maintain capacity while governments develop new policy objectives and implementation programs. Practitioners in good faith expand their skills and staff base to undertake government work. It is a clumsy system that supports capacity building and then allows it to fall away while new directions are forged which in any event require the same skills set to implement new policy objectives.

3. The overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources.

- Effective regional/landscape focus allows for a strategic assessment of the ecological outcomes that can be achieved with available investment capital. This allows for the construction of the compelling case which will attract the non government funding that can dramatically multiply program effectiveness. It also involves identifying where the best results can be achieved and therefore allows for the rational targeting of investment. *It does mean that some organisations and projects will miss out based on their location or off-target outcomes.*
- The administration of funding needs to ensure the roll out of funds in a timely manner. Under NHT2 some regions did not receive funding for 18 months because of disagreement between state & federal governments. Other regions had excess funds and too little time to spend it. To ensure the best outcome for investment, the Commonwealth must administer projects in a way that allows for project & priority planning.
- There is a view that a number of regional bodies have been opportunistic in their use of NHT2 & NAPSWQ funding using it to establish commercial businesses that duplicate the core business of long-serving & local community NGOs & Landcare Groups. It is considered that blurring the lines between government funded activities and commercial interests also opens the door for bias in the assessment of project proposals and the delivery of government funded projects that are run through regional bodies without proper

commercial tendering procedures. Engagement with NRM bodies should be based on partnership rather than competition.

- The Commonwealth should require and enforce the principles of competitive neutrality when state and local government agencies are bidding against NGOs to provide services funded by Government.
- In a number of states regional boundaries do not make sense on the basis of either science or NRM planning. Boundary setting must be based on environmental & bioregional criteria.
- There is a view that duplication within some regional NRM bodies compromises the availability of resources on the ground.
- Large inspirational programs can and will attract philanthropic dollars, provided they are clearly beneficial to Australia and have clear targets and outcomes and there is a sound estimate of costs;
- Too often regional players do not have access to the expertise and data required for them to be most effective;
- Recognition of the preconditions required for effective regional planning is essential together with action to establish these conditions if they do not currently exist. In many cases this will require significant investment. Where there is a lack of local leadership (a key precondition), Government must be prepared to distribute funds in a differential way to ensure they go where they will have impact rather than where it is politically palatable. In regions with low leadership capacity, time and money would be well spent on developing this. Similarly regions with poor data and technical capacity, need resourcing to bring them up to the mark or need to look to other organisations that can fill the data and technology gap.
- When considering the costs & benefits of a particular approach to NRM it is important to consider the qualitative as well as the quantitative outcomes. It takes time for attitudinal change to deliver quantitative outcomes. Community involvement and behavioral change are vital to enduring environmental conservation and protection, yet they can be overlooked and undervalued if they don't immediately deliver measurable economic outcomes.
- Emphasis on market based instruments (MBIs) to deliver environmental outcomes overlooks the invaluable contribution of volunteers. Many people are motivated by the concept of the public good and it is vital that there is a place for their contribution and acknowledgment of their value although they operate outside the market.
- Greater cooperation across NRM regions, through the use of standard methodologies and systems for monitoring, planning, on ground works and governance /administration. This will save 56 separate organizations from having to develop these instruments independently. It will also be conducive to the aggregation of data.

4. *The need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level.*

- NRM is a multi-decade process as natural systems do not restore in a linear fashion or in a given timeframe. Investment in landscape restoration must take a long term view. As the bulk of investment costs are in the early years of the project, a failure to realize the long-term nature of the work may result in incorrectly deeming a project to be a failed investment when in fact the judgment has been made too early.
- Only under a long term vision can long term cycles such as climate be considered. Salinity, a major land-use issue, has virtually dropped off the NRM agenda because of the drought. As soon as it rains, salinity will re-appear, and we will have to redevelop our capacity to manage it. Building resilience into natural systems in response to climate change is a long term goal that cannot be addressed under the current short term arrangements.
- State boundaries do not respect bio-regions. Landscape restoration traverses state & territory boundaries. Consistency in the approach to natural resource management is required across the country. The aggregation of base & performance data both to assess the effectiveness of actions and to feed into national state of the environment reporting requires a national approach to NRM.
- To maintain the ongoing capacity of national conservation networks to engage land managers, resource users and the wider community to deliver on-the-ground NRM outcomes under the Caring for our Country program requires a long-term strategic approach to NRM.
- Under the interim funding arrangements there is no opportunity for a long-term strategic approach, as the projects on offer are discreet and capable of delivering outcomes on the ground in less than 12 months.
- The interim funding arrangements have caused significant internal turmoil in many delivery organisations (government and non government) with increased staff turnover and a focus on survival rather than vision – this is not conducive to developing a long-term strategic approach to NRM.
- When Governments drive an overarching strategic policy agenda there is always the challenge of reconciling the role of visionary leader with regulator. Relationships of trust between regional bodies, delivery agencies, and landholders are essential to ensuring the strongest levels of participation of land managers and other resource users in the national NRM program. Such relationships come under threat when there is a scarcity of resources.

5. *The extent to which the Caring for our Country program represents a comprehensive approach to meeting Australia's future NRM needs.*

- Putting aside the experience of the transitional funding period, there are elements of the proposed CFOC program that do inspire confidence:

- The device of the Business Plan-a Prospectus or offer document against which proponents can bid for work, could provide a constructive approach to NRM if it encourages large scale restoration work rather than a piecemeal approach.
- The standardisation of monitoring and reporting provides the opportunity to report in a comprehensive way because of the availability of quality data. However proponents must include the cost of thorough M&E in their funding proposals-unlike the past where the lack of resources for this vital aspect of the work resulted in compromised reporting.
- The focus on partnership has potential to bring the right mix of expertise to a project, however it must be recognised that on some occasions this would result in spreading resources too thin on the ground or unnecessarily complex administrative arrangements. The emphasis must be on strategic partnerships that add value rather than partnership per se. The Commonwealth needs to be aware that partnering with conservation groups through NRM bodies is not as cost-effective as engaging directly with conservation groups in service delivery on national policy objectives.
- Where government is one of a number of partners, there needs to be new contractual arrangements that accommodate the flexibility that is required for successful cooperation in rolling out a program. Unduly complex administrative demands can place serious constraints on program delivery.
- An integrated approach to NRM is most welcome. In Greening Australia's case, an integrated approach underpins all of our restoration work-landscape scale restoration through revegetation using biodiverse native forest. Under this approach, in addition to reestablishing original vegetation cover, Greening Australia restores habitat, natural drainage systems, and soil and water quality. The work also achieves carbon emissions mitigation and climate change adaptation. In business terms, there is maximum return for investment.