



## **Review of Caring for our Country: Australia's National Resource Management Investment Initiative**

The goal of Caring for our Country is

“to achieve an environment that is healthier, better protected, well managed, resilient, and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate”.

Landcare would suggest that this goal misses the point. Government programs like Caring for our Country underachieve unless they have the support and involvement of land managers and the wider community.

Caring for our Country’s goal should be:

“to foster a community that is aware, engaged and active in caring for their environment, so that it is healthier, better protected, well managed, resilient, and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate”.

### **Discussion Point 1: National priorities in Caring for our Country**

We acknowledge and welcome the fact that the Australian Government has recognised that there is an issue in regard to the "balance of Caring for our Country investments across national, regional and local priorities and the adverse impact this has had on the community's capacity to work on relevant and appropriate projects at a local or regional level". Previous funding programs were directed at local and regional measures to manage natural resources. The introduction of Caring for our Country shifted the focus to a national level at the expense of the other levels. Consequently, those who actually manage the natural resources, ie landholders and local communities, have been disenfranchised

Under NHT II the development of Regional Plans to address Natural Resource Management (NRM) issues were inclusive, providing opportunity for community participation and giving a focus for activities within each region. With the shift in focus of the Caring for our Country program, the community no longer felt connected to the outcomes or activities within their areas. In fact, it made the whole Regional Arrangements process appear redundant as Regional NRM bodies were no longer implementing locally ‘owned’ Regional Plans, but were seen as just another arm of Government.

The Caring for our Country initiative was attempting to address concerns in relation to previous funding programs, but unfortunately a vital component of on-ground NRM change was missing, or at least severely overlooked, from this initiative - the community. An aware, engaged and active community is essential to ensure effective management of natural resources. Unfortunately the setting of National priorities has disengaged much of the Landcare community, as issues relevant to their local and regional priorities do not fall within the Business Plan targets (or the targets are seen as remote and 'top down').

CFOC currently applies a one-size-fits-all outputs approach. Setting of National targets and priorities also has a tendency to inhibit some parts of the Country from applying for funding. Areas in Western Queensland and Eastern Western Australia for example have great difficulty falling within the limits of the funding parameters. Not addressing local and regional natural resource management issues in these regions does have, in the longer term, potential for these issues to escalate and become National priorities. It is best to stop this before it happens.

The effort to ensure 'landscape scale change' in Caring for our Country again presents a challenge. What is the definition of landscape? Is it only the biophysical landscape or does it also take into account the social landscape, such as networks, connections and social cohesion?

Landcare recognises that there will not be permanent change in the management of natural resources unless the 'social norms' of the managers change first. The 'people factor' is central to NRM.

### **How can the Australian government's role in regional NRM planning be improved while retaining measurable strategic outcomes at a national scale?**

1. At the Landcare Forum in Adelaide in 2010 Minister Tony Burke stated that:

"The question has kept changing; the answer of Landcare has remained unchanged. When the question was drought and soil moisture the answer was Landcare. When the question became salinity, once again Landcare was the answer to the question. And when the question is how do we respond to climate change, how do we deal with food production, how do we keep a good environmental story into the future, how do we harness volunteers in the new ways that people interact, I am determined to make sure the answer is Landcare for the next two decades."

In relation to the Carbon Farming Initiative Prime Minister Gillard in her speech, recognised the importance of Landcare and stated that:

"Landcare, the trusted volunteer organisation which has been working with Australian farmers for the past 21 years, will be funded to provide information on how farmers can further benefit under the initiative."

The recognition of the Landcare movement and the volunteer land managers associated with that movement will improve natural resource management and outcomes at all scales - locally,

regionally, and nationally. Landcare is community and regionally driven and at the same time nationally and internationally recognised. It has credibility, trust and a proven success rate. This can only continue to occur if Landcare is adequately resourced (both financially and through adequate staffing). Unfortunately the sentiment of Ministers and the rhetoric of the Australian Government is not matched by the reality of the Caring for our Country program.

2. Recognition of, and consultation with, the all existing Landcare structures at National, State, regional and local levels. The Landcare movement has at the National level the Australian Landcare Council (Ministerially appointed), Landcare Australia Limited (leveraging corporate investment into on-ground works) and the National Landcare Network (an advocacy body); at the State level there are peak bodies in most States, and a growing movement in others to form peak bodies; at the regional level there are Landcare networks, and Landcare Consortium groups; and of course at the local level are individual Landcare groups. There is an amazing amount of potential to influence NRM management and change within this structure, from the policy level to on-ground projects. However, organisations only have the capacity to participate if they are financially secure and enabled. Not all of these organisations are resourced or engaged equally and that is an issue which needs to be rectified.

3. Reintroduce Regional Plans. The regional plans developed previously were a community effort. Indeed many Landcare groups and networks have their own sub-regional plans, still highly relevant to the local community and their environmental issues, that were developed prior to the implementation of the Regional Arrangements. All organisations within a region were consulted and involved in development of resource management priorities. They were committed to assisting address these issues as they had ownership of both the issues and the outcomes. This would also assist with inequity in the current system where a focus on only national priorities means large amounts of the Country have reduced opportunity for funding.

In terms of retaining and improving measurable strategic outcomes at the national scale, the Government will need to resource the local planning process so that local communities are aware of how their local environment impacts more broadly, and how they fit into national targets. Only then will local communities and Government all be heading in the same direction.

Measurement and auditing is also best done locally, so that progress is 'owned', and adaptive management implemented. If land managers and community are given these skills, they will use them.

4. Recognition that Landcare and land management issues are not just biodiversity and agriculture, but include urban and peri urban areas as well. Obviously these come with a different set of issues, but the management of natural resources in large urban centres is also vital.

## **Discussion Point 2: Setting annual priorities and ways of investing**

The setting of annual priorities within a 5 year timeframe allows for variation in priority targets, and attempts to ensure funding is distributed for different issues. The current arrangements of one to five year programs, open call, expression of interests etc is appropriate. The NLN would question that there is currently a dedicated Landcare funding stream, and would suggest that there should be one.

While Landcare funding is often announced, the projects associated with this funding, are often not Landcare projects. One example of this is in Queensland where a substantial amount of Landcare funding was attributed to a private forestry company.

One of the aims of Caring for our Country is stated as being to encourage partnerships to deliver projects. Unfortunately this premise of Caring for our Country is flawed. Co-operation through competition is not a realistic outcome and often promotes short term alignment for securing funding rather than a genuine willingness to work together. In some instances it has created friction within regions, between Regional NRM bodies and Landcare groups/networks.

There is inequity in the application process, as smaller community groups are not able to compete with larger organisations, such as Regional NRM bodies, or State Governments in either preparing submissions or in securing partnerships. We acknowledge the introduction of the small grants program (Community Action Grants) which does assist Landcare and other community groups, and thank the Australian Government for listening to concerns about the loss of the previous small grants programmes. However, Landcare groups and networks are not only capable of undertaking small projects. Many have a proud record of implementing substantial projects efficiently and effectively, and for lasting benefit. They are disadvantaged in the current Caring for our Country open call application process.

The timing of funding for projects can sometimes be an issue which may need to be reconsidered. While funding technically starts at the beginning of the financial year, it is often much later when funds are actually available for projects. This can be an issue depending on the location and type of projects being undertaken. In Northern Australia for example receiving funding in September or October could mean that because of the 'wet' season projects cannot really start until February or March. Similarly with agricultural projects it could depend on the farming cycles, and delays of many months could occur. These issues need to be considered in program design. Caring for our Country needs to be aware of and sympathetic to, seasonal variations that impact on project delivery..

While it is acknowledged that it is difficult to provide funding to manage the environment, it should be obvious by the oversubscription to funding rounds that there is not currently enough funding being allocated to this area. If there is a genuine desire to assist with addressing natural resource issues, then the amount of funding allocated should reflect the need. Environmental funding should be a constant item in the budget. It should not be reviewed yearly, or subjected to changes when there is a change of Government. Similarly, funding for

Landcare should be available outside the competitive process, in the same way as base-level funding for Regional NRM bodies is currently.

Using local community based organisations would assist with the administrative processes, for example working with the State Peak Bodies for Landcare would be an efficient way of delivering funding for local Landcare groups.

### **Discussion Point 3: Community engagement and Landcare support**

The lack of funding under Caring for our Country for community engagement and Landcare support would indicate a lack of importance for this area by the Australian Government.

Landcare and community volunteer groups are extremely capable of managing their local and regional natural resources. Over the years however, their capacity to do this has been degrading - mainly due to lack of funding, but also through the 'sidelining' of local groups through the poor implementation of the Regional Arrangements. The Landcare movement has survived with limited funding for over 20 years now. What they have been able to achieve has however been dependent on funding available for projects. Obviously the more funding the more that can be achieved.

With a lack of focus on local and regional priorities and a lack of support under the Caring for our Country program some Landcare groups have ceased to exist, and others have gone into hiatus. Rebuilding capacity in those regions will become more difficult the longer the situation continues. While there will always be a willingness by community to be involved in managing their natural resources, there will not always be the capacity to undertake the work required. Strong Landcare groups can assist in this process.

Landcare is not currently recognised or valued in the Caring for our Country program. In order to achieve on-ground change and management of natural resource priorities a strong, dedicated community is essential. This is a primary focus of Landcare, and should be recognised.

At least one Regional NRM Body had to resubmit their base level funding program three times because it had too much focus on community engagement. What message does this send both to Regional NRM bodies and to the community? It certainly does not say that community engagement is valued.

### **Discussion Point 4 : Engaging Indigenous Australians**

The Indigenous Ranger program is an excellent program, but it is not in itself enough. Indigenous Rangers are not necessary or required in all regions. The introduction of an environmental work program, as well as the Ranger Program would be beneficial.

The application process under Caring for our Country is challenging for Indigenous groups, and could benefit from having a revised format which is clearer, and contains less Government speak. The monitoring and evaluation process, and the administrative process for small grants is also off-putting and could do with revision.

The Murri Network in Queensland is a wonderful initiative and should be encouraged. Funding for this program was part of NHT II but was withdrawn under Caring for our Country. Reinstating funding for the Murri Network and using this as a model for all States is recommended.

Recognising that Caring for Country in all its formats is natural resource management, and funding for the development and implementation of Caring for Country plans, which are not necessarily linked to national priorities, is recommended.

**Discussion point 5: Working effectively with state and territory governments, engaging with local government.**

The reintroduction, and recognition of Regional NRM Plans, which involves all levels of government and community groups working together is highly recommended.

The aggregation of NRM planning starting with the local level is the basis of a successful program.

Local Government needs to be encouraged to become more engaged in the setting of regional NRM priorities, in partnership with their communities, and to take a more active role in landscape rehabilitation and management, rather than just development planning.

Agreements outlining which organisations are responsible for what could be a way of avoiding duplication.

**Discussion point 6: Regional base-level funding**

The regional natural resource management delivery model is a sound concept. In fact, before Regional NRM bodies there were regional models in existence. In New South Wales and Victoria, Landcare networks were operating and in Queensland Integrated Catchment Management Groups (ICM) existed. In the case of Queensland many of the ICM groups morphed into Regional NRM bodies. However, the model seems to have lost its way.

Many Regional NRM bodies have a large number of staff, ranging from 15 to over 40, and in some instances more. How the overheads and costs of maintaining large staff numbers and multiple office locations is justified is questionable. Many are now seen as another arm of Government.

There is often a conflict between Regional NRM bodies, and community groups who are in active competition with each other. This occurs not only in Caring for our Country funding, but in other funding applications as well. Many Regional NRM bodies have 'commercial arms' that are competing against community groups for limited community funding. This does not foster the concept of working together in partnership, nor does it build trust.

There is inequality in the system as smaller groups cannot compete with Regional NRM bodies that have larger staff numbers and more available resources to put into project applications.

The question needs to be asked - Is there a need for 56 Regional NRM bodies, with their associated salary and administrative costs? Could this money be better spent managing the environmental issues in regions, via existing institutional structures, and increasing funds for on-ground work?

### **Other themes for discussion**

#### **Consistency of funding.**

Traditionally there is a gap between the introduction of new funding programs, and this often results in disruption to existing projects, and groups. During the gap between previous funding programs volunteers were lost, and some never returned. If there is not a smooth transition and consistency of funding, more will go, and we may never get them back again.

As well, the lack of continuity of funding has a devastating effect on local Landcare support. Landcare coordinators are often young, enthusiastic and with tertiary qualifications, adding significantly to the 'social capital' of local communities. When those communities can offer neither job security nor a career progression, those community assets are lost, and are very hard to replace.

#### **Assistance for Landcare at State level.**

While Caring for our Country is an Australian Government initiative and focuses at the national level, it would of benefit the Landcare movement nationally to ensure they are adequately represented. Support for National and State Peak Representative Bodies for Landcare would be greatly appreciated to ensure the voice of Landcare is not lost in the forest of other louder voices.

As an example, the Tasmanian Landcare Association (founded in 1994) is currently facing insolvency by the end of 2011 due to the lack of core funding support available, despite being highly valued as a State Peak Body by community care groups. Without core funding such organisations face a steady decline and the loss for Landcare will be enormous.

#### **Designated Landcare funding**

A designated Landcare funding program would assist with on-ground changes, natural resource management targets, regional priorities, and ensure continuity of Landcare in Australia.

