

15 August 2014

Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
References Committee

By email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Inquiry into the National Landcare Program

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. I make this submission in the context of over 25 years involvement in natural resource management, including

- on my own small property outside Queanbeyan;
- assisting organisation of a local Landcare group;
- representing that group on the regional Upper Murrumbidgee Landcare network (eventually chairing that network);
- helping to drive the formation of a cross border ACT-NSW Landcare network, the Molonglo Catchment Group (chairing that group since its formation in 2003);
- representing that group at the territory (ACT Catchment and Landcare Association) and catchment level (Murrumbidgee Landcare Association);
- sitting on grant assessment panels;
- sitting on the Murrumbidgee Landcare Association executive committee, for 6 years; and
- sitting on the Australian Landcare Council, as ACT delegate, from 2005 to 2008

My experience is coloured by my having grown up in a Sydney harbour-side suburb, and having worked, as a geologist, in north Queensland, the west coast of Tasmania and the Pilbara, and having visited for short periods at many other locations across Australia, as well as my experience on the Australian Landcare Council.

Over those 25 years, I have seen the implementation of many environmental support initiatives at all levels of government including, at the Commonwealth level, the Save the Bush, One Billion Trees, Natural Heritage Trust, National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, National Landcare Program and Caring for our Country. My perception of these initiatives is that they largely leverage the volunteer efforts of those in our community who have concerns about what is now termed the sustainability of the environment and the continuing provision of ecosystem services.

Public benefit vs private benefit

My concerns about some of these initiatives is the methods of assessing public benefit as opposed to private benefits. Often the public benefit is long term and not readily cast in dollar terms, whereas private benefit, usually in the form of improved agricultural profitability (leading to longer term sustainability) may be more immediate. In assessing the net present value of public benefit, the notional "discount factor" for future social benefits is difficult to estimate. Because of this it appears

to be frequently mentally set to zero by those overseeing the various program designs and therefore dismissed in initiatives which would otherwise provide a significant degree of private benefit.

Level of support

What concerns me most is that the majority of these initiatives in the context of the environment have a relatively short time frame. I believe unless the support for the health of our environment and its sustainability is at the same level of support as health, defence and education, we will continue to see its slow degradation. I believe that the environment frequently appears to be seen as something that can be deferred for the next year's budget, the next government or the next generation. This may be a reflection of public perception of the need for natural resource management, and it is this perception that might be addressed with future programs – encouraging the public, the taxpayer, to accept and even demand action. This is unlikely to happen when the prevailing view is largely short term. How is it that some local governments and their communities throughout the country are able to implement and retain environmental levies?

Continuity and consistency of support

What disturbs me most is the frequent change in emphasis of the initiatives. Granted it is absolutely necessary for the governments at all levels to demonstrate the effectiveness of expenditure of public funds and therefore ensuring outcomes are well-defined and prioritised, but frequent changes to priority targets, delivery and consequent pauses in the delivery of initiatives increases uncertainty for those engaged in delivering the outcomes so keenly sought, reducing confidence in their ability to make a difference. What is most disappointing is the apparent reduction in the level of support for community capacity building and a greater focus on on-ground outcomes. This may be because it is more difficult to measure if what is being sought is lasting behavioural change and to demonstrate that over time. That should not mean it shouldn't be well supported, as in many instances it may be the best way to leverage private expenditure; Landcare is able to demonstrate a multiplier of 5 or more for government funding. Other disciplines have the capacity to measure behaviour change. It is time that the National Landcare Program implemented a robust methodology to demonstrate how valuable it is in this respect.

I look forward to hearing the outcomes of the Senate Inquiry, and thank you for the opportunity to contribute to it.

Yours sincerely,

Lynton Bond