



**National
Landcare
Network**

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

15 August 2014

ec.sen@aph.gov.au

**Submission to the Federal Senate Inquiry into the history, effectiveness,
performance and future of the National Landcare Program**

Contact Name: David Walker
Position: Chair

The National Landcare Network (NLN) came into being in 2009 as the national voice for Landcare. It is the federation of community Landcare representative bodies from all states and territories.

NLN's objectives are to:

- Represent the community Landcare movement at the national level in forums with government, industry, philanthropic and other organisations
- Promote and support the development of resilient local community Landcare groups and ensure all these groups across Australia are represented equally within Landcare
- Collaborate with other natural resource management (NRM) bodies to promote Landcare, including promoting sustainable agriculture
- Celebrate Landcare's achievements.

The National Landcare Network thanks the Environment and Communications References Committee for the invitation to provide this written submission to the inquiry into the history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program (NLP) and welcomes the opportunity to do so.

NLN requests the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee at one of the public hearings.

The information upon which this submission is based has been provided by Landcare State and Territory Representative Organisations, Landcare groups and individual Landcarers. In this submission Landcare refers to any community-based group operating in the sphere of sustainable agriculture and nature conservation and includes but is not limited to groups that describe themselves as Landcare, Bushcare, Coastcare, Dunecare, Friends of groups, Producer groups

General Comments

The original National Landcare Program provided government resourcing to support a program based upon locality or topic based participatory involvement in the identification of issues, and the design and delivery of action to address them. This process led to ownership of both the problem and answer, which in turn facilitated high levels of co-investment, embedded changed and more sustainable farming practice, built capacity to adaptively manage and maintain the changes, and strengthened linkages within and across local communities.

Subsequent iterations of Government Natural Resource Management (NRM) Programs (in particular *Natural Heritage Trust* and *Caring for our Country*) have seen the retraction of the local focus which engendered local ownership, towards the setting of targets and priorities by policy makers remote from the landscapes that needed attention and the communities that managed them.

This disempowerment was exacerbated by the practice of purchasing biophysical or land infrastructure outputs rather than changing the social norms and practices of the land managers. The purpose or need for the purchased outputs were often not understood by the land managers, and hence they placed little value upon them.

From 2010 to 2012 the National Landcare Network worked closely with the then Opposition to develop a National Landcare Program (see document *NLN Proposal for a National Landcare Program 2012 .pdf* attached) particularly centred on Shadow Environment Minister Hunt's desire to design a program that was Simple, Local, and Long-Term, and that addressed the many shortcomings of the *Caring for our Country* Program.

To a degree this NLN document, and the discussions with Shadow Minister Hunt, (see also attached *ltr 2010 07 15 NLN DW to Greg Hunt MP.pdf*) formed the basis for the current National Landcare Programme, although the intent behind it, to place Landcare in an equitable and more equivalent position with Regional NRM Organisations, has not been met. The document was also given to the Agriculture and Environment Ministers of the incumbent Government at the time.

Terms of Reference ‘b’

The establishment and performance of the Caring for our Country Program

The National Landcare Network has made previous submissions to reviews of the *Caring for our Country* program (see *NLN Submission - Review of Caring for our Country May 2011.pdf* and *NLN Supplementary Submission - Review of Caring for our Country August 2011.pdf* attached). The significant points from those previous submissions include:

1. The *Caring for our Country* program disenfranchised the Landcare community by focussing on National priorities only. This left large parts of Australia excluded from involvement in the program and unable to apply for funds as their projects did not meet the criteria.
2. The program divided community and Regional NRM Organisations (RNRMOs), by having them compete against each other for funds for similar projects.
3. In the original program design there were no ‘small grants’ funding for Landcare, nor Regional Landcare Facilitators.
4. It is acknowledged that when the National Landcare Network and others advocated on behalf of the Landcare movement in relation to several issues including small grants funding programs and Regional Landcare Facilitators, changes were made to the *Caring for our Country* program to accommodate these needs.
5. *Caring for our Country* was working on a rigid, prescriptive ‘one size fits all’ premise, and this is not the case with Landcare. One of Landcare’s great strengths is that it is flexible and ‘fit for purpose’ for its local community.

Terms of Reference ‘d’

The implications of the 2014-15 budget for Landcare programs, in particular, on contracts, scope, structure, outcomes of programs and long-term impact on natural resource management

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.

In August 2013 there was an election commitment to ‘place Landcare back at the centre of our land management programmes’. This cannot happen when half the funds are removed. 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.

The initial impact of the loss of funds in the budget was the evidence given by the DAFF that the cuts meant that there would be zero funding for 'on ground' projects for Landcare for the 4-year Budget Forward Estimates period. NLN has worked hard to impress upon Ministers that there must be a 'small grants' programme of some description. The availability of a 'one –off' amount of \$5M in the National Stream of the NLP for this year is only a token, and cannot replace commitments that should not have been lost in the first place.

While this recent announcement of \$5M for the small grants round for Landcare is welcomed it cannot hide the fact that if Landcare did not have a voice at the national level these grants would not exist. The National Landcare Network does appreciate the Department of Environment for ensuring the Landcare community has access to small grants funds. It is unfortunate however, that this had to come at a cost to Regional NRM Organisations. This has two implications:

1. Regions lose 20% of their funding which now has to be directed to Landcare on-ground projects, and
2. Other than the 'one-off' provision for this year, Landcare now has no independent funding programs available under the National Landcare Programme that is not administered by Regional NRM Organisations. There is no autonomy for the Landcare movement in relation to funding. They are dependent on the Regional NRM Organisations. So much for the establishment of equity and equivalence between Landcare and RNRMOs that was promised in the development of the NLP.

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.

Landcare is an exceptionally effective e for Government with every \$1 invested into Landcare leveraging co-investment by farmers and community Landcare of at least an extra \$5, yet it is not recognised nor acknowledged from funding programmes. It demonstrates that the Commission of Audit and Treasury know the cost of everything, but the value of nothing.

In submissions from various Landcare State Peak Organisations examples have been provided to demonstrate the impact Landcare has had on land management. Without adequate funding these type of projects cannot continue.

Terms of Reference 'e'

The Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs

While the National Landcare Network cannot comment on the policy rationale behind the Government's changes to the Landcare Program, it was (as previously stated) involved in the development of the original concept for the National Landcare Programme. At the time it was seen as a way of merging Landcare and Caring for Our Country to create one overarching and more effective environmental and sustainable agriculture program.

From the National Landcare Network perspective this was a way of ensuring the survival of the Landcare movement, and giving Landcare equity in relation to funding. This was the intent behind the original document. It has not however, been the outcome.

Terms of Reference 'f'

Analysis of national, state and regional funding priorities for land care programs

It is difficult to analyse the funding priorities at this time as the National Landcare Programme is still in development. It is however, reassuring to see the current consultation process being undertaken for the regional stream of the Programme.

Terms of Reference 'g'

How the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture have, and can, work together to deliver a seamless land care program.

The National Landcare Programme is managed both the Department of Environment and the Department of Agriculture. Previously Landcare was predominantly administered by the Department of Agriculture while the Department of Environment administered RNRMOs.

There are significant challenges in having Landcare under both Departments, as there is not a clear view or direction of how either Department wishes to be engaged with the Landcare community. While the National Landcare Programme is promoted as being a joint initiative with both Departments involved, there is often no overlap of views as to how this might work. Previously there was a joint Landcare team which consulted across both Departments and managed the implementation of on ground projects and administered funding. At the very least similar collaboration will be required to avoid the compartmentalisation of land management into 'biodiversity' and 'production'.

In reality, and certainly in the minds of land managers and the wider community, the two are inextricably linked. We need farming systems that are environmentally sustainable. Indeed, successful agricultural production must be underpinned by a healthy environment and landscape function, and effective nature conservation must include a 'landscape-scale approach that includes the majority of Australia that is privately owned and used for agricultural production.

Terms of Reference ‘h’

The role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes.

The potential for Regional NRM Bodies in working with community, particularly Landcare, in planning, delivery, reporting and achieving outcomes provides a significant opportunity to improve the effectiveness and permanence of government investment in NRM.

Landcare strongly believes that effective relationships between the community and Government organisations and Government generally must be based on ‘trust, respect and connection’. Where relationships have this foundation, then a true partnership can evolve.

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’. One wonders how we could have gone so far off track.

With the recent designation of the industry representative body *Oceanwatch* as a new ‘NRM Region’, there are currently 56 Regional NRM Organisations across Australia. It is unknown at this stage how *Oceanwatch* will fit within the current framework.

On land, meanwhile, there are approximately 6,000 Landcare groups across the country. To achieve effective planning and on-ground landscape change a great deal of collaboration and co-operation will be necessary.

In some states such as New South Wales and Victoria a regional level of Landcare exists in the form of Landcare Networks. This should make it easier for Landcare and Regional NRM Organisations to work collaboratively, although this is not always the case. In the past some NRMOs have seen larger more effective Landcare Networks as a challenge to their authority and prestige.

Other States/Territories have not adopted the model of having Landcare networks, although the idea is being discussed in South Australia and the Northern Territory. Nevertheless, the level of engagement and collaboration is working well in some Regions and not so well in others.

The focus of the NLP on improved engagement between RNRMOs and their communities, particularly Landcare, will be a significant challenge for many of the RNRMOs. In many cases there is a culture of superiority and a ‘top down’ master-servant mentality.

However, according to the NLP Discussion Paper:

“The Australian Government has made clear its intention to place Landcare back at the centre of land management. The knowledge, skills and experience of the

Landcare community will be invaluable in planning and delivering local projects and it will be that programme settings maximise opportunities to utilise this in projects”.

With the regional stream being delivered through the 56 NRM Regional Organisations, and with “these organisations will be tasked with maximising community, including Landcare, participation in setting priorities and delivering projects with environmental and sustainable agriculture outcomes” the onus will be on both NRMOs and the leadership of the Landcare movement to put in place mechanisms to improve engagement, consultation, and partnership.

A Statement of Common Purpose was developed between the National Landcare Network and the National NRM Regions Working Groups (NNRMRWG) as 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. In order to work collaboratively and to ensure effective engagement there needs to be recognition of what each party brings to the relationship. This has been defined in the Statement of Common Purpose by both organisations as:

Landcare

- *Fosters community self-determination;*
- *Stimulates voluntary participation in learning about and taking action to address local environmental and sustainable production issues;*
- *Facilitates the adoption of changed practices;*
- *Builds community capacity and contributes to the social fabric of communities by enhancing resilience and cohesiveness;*
- *Brings local expertise and knowledge to the challenge of sustaining landscapes at broader scales.*

Regional Bodies

- *Develop regional landscape plans and prioritised investment targets that align government (Commonwealth, State and Territory, and Local) directions with regional community visions for the region that are based on sound technical knowledge;*
- *On behalf of larger investors, broker investment in priorities outlined in regional plans, and build regional and community partnerships to implement projects;*
- *Foster the skills and capacities needed by communities to implement plans.*

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.

The leadership of the NRMOs is well aware of past shortcomings, and the need to promote engagement and partnership. The NNRMRWG has developed a 'Localism' policy, which aims at "engaging people, wherever possible, in decisions that affect their life, and devolving power to make those decisions to the lowest possible level". The current draft of this policy is attached (see *NRMRWG Localism Policy draft 51.pdf* attached).

The Landcare community strongly supports the thrust of this policy, and its objective of devolving responsibility and ownership of action to the community, and building the capacity of Landcare and producer groups so that they can implement the change, and become more resilient to future change.

Terms of Reference 'i'

Any other related matters

1. Overall

The National Landcare Programme is an initiative to bring Landcare and Caring for Our Country together to deliver local and regional program priorities. In August 2013, the then Shadow Minister for Environment (now Minister), Greg Hunt announced that this programme would "place Landcare back at the centre of our land management programs", and that it would also "give Landcare a greater say in setting local and regional priorities in recognition of the importance of grassroots work and input". How to do this is the question, and the National Landcare Programme as it currently stands does not outline how this is to be achieved.

The key to successful delivery of a National Landcare Programme (NLP), or any programme for that matter is to ensure it meets the needs of all stakeholders and that the flow of communication, engagement and involvement, between organisations is two-way and continuous. The National Landcare Network (NLN) is very keen to see the development of an engagement process which will be inclusive and which will deliver the desired outcomes for the National Landcare Programme, including autonomy for the Landcare movement, adequate funding to ensure a further 25 years of Landcare, and recognition of Landcare as an equal partner in the Programme.

2. The measurement of NRM outcomes

This issue is raised in the submission of NLN's constituent body, the Victorian Landcare Council. NLN supports the contention of VLC that our NRM system is badly let down by an inadequate system of measurement and reporting of what is actually achieved by investment in community and NRM:

"Since the mid-2000s, NRM budgets have steadily fallen as a percentage of government spending, expenditure on community Landcare has fallen, and community concern for the environment has also fallen. One factor contributing to

all these shifts is a failure to accurately measure and demonstrate change in environmental health and the relationship this has to the social and economic health of the nation.

“Systems for monitoring environmental condition are fragmented across different assets and jurisdictions. The purpose of monitoring systems is split between accountability for public spending, and development of scientific knowledge of ecosystems, with little accountability to resource users.

“Monitoring focuses too much on activities, or on resource condition, and not much on the links between activity and condition.

“However, the NRM system can grow its way into a better system of accounting for environmental condition, by integrating existing monitoring around a clear set of purposes for accounting, negotiated with those who will use the accounts, and by articulating the logic that links activities to intermediate outcomes and resource condition improvement.

“Community Landcare stands to benefit from accounts that demonstrate the impact of private landholder investment in the environment. It will also benefit if indicators of intermediate outcomes on the pathway to resource condition improvement are more visible, for these are often the practices that Landcare facilitates in local communities.

“All NRM contributors stand to benefit from having a way for the sector to speak about environmental condition and evidence from which to argue for investment in programs with a track record of improving condition.”

3. Community Resilience

The contribution that Landcare, and the social opportunities that involvement in Landcare bring, to creating community social capacity and building resilience into rural communities is well understood by those involved, but poorly recognised or valued by Government.

The stresses of natural disasters such as bushfire and flood, seasonal uncertainties of drought and the economic pressures that are usually impacting on farm families, are significantly eased by involvement in community, social and support networks.

There is evidence of lower rates of rural suicide in areas where Landcare networks are strong and able to provide support after disasters, or in times of general hardship.

The study commissioned by the Australian Landcare Council in 2013 *Multiple Benefits of Landcare in Natural Resource Management* provides a thorough overview of the community welfare benefits that can, and should, flow from Government investment in an effective National Landcare Programme. NLN urges the Committee to further investigate this co-benefit, and to include it in their report.