

# Progress in restoring our environment

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## Introduction

Sustainable natural resource management (NRM) underpins the future of our country. Sustainable primary production is vital for the continued provision of Australian food and fibre to the burgeoning populations in urban areas and to export earnings. Equally important is the underpinning of rural and regional areas through sustainable natural resource use and provision of ecosystem services to the rest of the country.

Regional natural resource management is a unique programme, developed since 2000 that demonstrates Australia's great capacity for innovation and is of growing interest in other countries.

This report is a summary of the messages about progress in restoring the environment from the fifty-six NRM regions delivered to the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council in April 2006.

## Achievements

Across Australia, the regional natural resource management model is working. Almost all of Australia now has accredited strategic regional NRM plans - an outstanding achievement.

Headline achievements of the Natural Heritage Trust and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality through regional programs from 2001 to 2005 are:

- 1 550 km of riparian zones enhanced and protected by fencing and revegetation
- 60 000 hectares revegetated for groundwater recharge control to reduce the impacts of dryland salinity
- 1.2 million hectares of land revegetated and rehabilitated
- 200 million hectares is covered by active management plans for pest plants and animals

Some of the regional natural resource management regions have struggled to get traction on coastal and marine issues. However, this is slowly improving with these natural resources now taking their place in strategic plans and investment strategies. Further development is needed and support for closer partnerships between regional natural resource management bodies and local government will assist in these endeavours.

The natural resource management regions have started to form some communities of interest to share experiences and information. So far there are active groups talking across Australia on rangelands and large population areas, with coastal and marine due to start collegiate activity during the coming twelve months in 2006-07.

## **The multiplier effect**

One of the keys to the success of the regional model is the way it can focus whole-of-government, community and industry efforts toward resolving natural resource management issues. There are many examples where each dollar invested in regional natural resource management by Australian and State and Territory Governments is leveraging significant returns, conservatively estimated at another \$4 for every \$1 invested.

A great example is in the Goulburn Broken region of Victoria, where grants of up to \$20 000 to help farmers build strategic on-farm, off stream dams to harvest nutrient rich water from dairy farms have yielded a total investment of \$200 000. This program delivers multiple benefits from reduced primary water use, reduced nutrient input to waterways, reduced artificial fertilizer use (and cost) to improved pasture production; a great example of win/win for farmers and the environment.

On a local level, such as in the upper south-east region of South Australia, salinity has been a major issue impacting on the productivity of farmlands. As a result of regional natural resource management investment, farmers are now reporting that the problem is turning around with pasture quality and growth and stocking rates starting to improve.

In the South-West Catchment Council of WA region, the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) investment in the Collie catchment will turn the water in a major river basin from being saline to drinkable-a world-class achievement. The Collie River catchment covers an area of 3 000 hectares and includes Wellington Reservoir which is primarily used for irrigation and has progressively become too salty to use in peak summer months with salinity levels exceeding 1100mg/l. Research has shown that the Collie River East contributes 54 per cent of the salt load into Wellington Dam. \$15 million of Australian Government NAP investment will fund the implementation of a Collie River East diversion scheme that will divert salty flows in peak periods combined with further revegetation, habitat recovery, better farm management systems and changes to land use. A pilot diversion in 2005 has already resulted in the removal of 2 988 tonnes of salt from the system with a reduction in the salinity of Wellington Dam of approximately 35 mg/l. Over the next ten years the full diversion will reduce the salinity in Wellington Dam by 45 percent reducing salinity to 650 mg/l by 2010 and 550 mg/l by 2030.

None of this could be achieved without the work of the regional natural resource management bodies in developing key partnerships. There is still more to do in strengthening partnerships, particularly with local government, Landcare groups, industry and Indigenous communities. As with all relationships, these take time to fully develop and continued support of the regional natural resource management model will assist in this.

## **Future NRM investment**

Based on experience to date, the regional NRM groups consider that the more funding streams that are concentrated through the lens of regional strategic plans, the more effective will be the outcomes.

Continuing to split the investment streams through a multitude of unintegrated programmes weakens the regional natural resource management model and the impact of focussed, prioritised action. A particular strength of the regional model is the focus on problem causes, not just the symptoms.

There could be significant efficiencies gained by rolling the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and the Natural Heritage Trust concepts together in a new regional delivery model.

The benefits of continuing Australia-wide funding programmes such as Envirofund, National Landcare Program and the Community Water Fund, are acknowledged. However, it is important that other government funded natural resource management programmes are more closely aligned with strategic regional plan directions.

It is also clear that climate change and its impact on our natural resources will need to be considered in future funding composition.

## **Transition arrangements to the new model**

It is impossible to over stress the importance of a seamless transition from the current Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality programmes to future arrangements. Experience tells us that interim arrangements generate uncertainty and cause major dislocation. It is the responsibility of Australian and State and Territory Governments to undertake their negotiations on the new shape of natural resource management investment in a timely and collegiate manner.

Natural resource management is all about people and their interaction with the environment. It is this element which is the greatest challenge and therefore requires the greatest attention. Once momentum and confidence in relationships are lost, they are incredibly difficult to regain.

The changes wrought on the natural resources of our fragile country require long term, budget line investment to preserve what is still in good condition, to repair the historical damage and to achieve the adoption of sustainable practices in natural resource use.

## **Monitoring evaluating and reporting**

It is hard to find a destination without a roadmap. Natural resources are much more complex than a road system. Better ways to read the signposts that point to changes in resource condition are needed. Resilience and adaptive management are the keys to managing current and future challenges such as climate change. Strong monitoring and evaluation programs are vital to provide agreed quantitative and qualitative results of the investments in our environmental assets.

It will require government leadership to develop the nationally consistent monitoring, evaluation and reporting system that can deliver site, to farm, to landscape, to region, to state, to national coherence.

## **Improving governance – reducing red tape**

The natural resource management regions are striving towards strong governance, quality assurance in their operations and excellence in project management right across Australia. It is recognised that there is still room for improvement in these areas.

The goal is for governments to provide outcomes-based funding with confidence and, in return, streamlined, meaningful reporting is provided by the natural resource management regions.

## **Ecosystem services**

There is government, industry and community interest in the purchase of ecosystem services from farmers and land managers. Ecosystem services are those environmental services of public benefit such as native flora and fauna, maintenance and regeneration of habitat, clean air, water, healthy soils, healthy rivers and waterways and fulfilment of cultural, spiritual and intellectual needs (VCMC/DSE 2003). 'Payment should be made to farmers and land managers for environmental services (clean water, fresh air, healthy soils). Where farmers are expected to maintain land in a certain way that is above their duty of care, payment should be made to them to provide those services on behalf of the rest of Australia' (Wentworth Group 2002).

Natural resource management regions already have comprehensive administrative processes and networks that would allow this to happen in a targeted and efficient way. Tightly targeted purchase of priority ecosystem services would be an important tool in the suite of incentives and contracts available to regional natural resource management practitioners in assisting landholders in their regions.

## **Promote regional NRM delivery**

The bipartisan nature of regional natural resource management is one of its great strengths. Continued support and influence in promoting the benefits of the regional natural resource management programme throughout the community is extremely valuable.

In particular the more than 75 per cent of our population that live in urban centres need a greater awareness and appreciation of natural resource management as a crucial element in the economic, social and environmental well-being of Australia.

## **References**

VCMC/DSE [Victorian Catchment Management Council/Department of Sustainability and Environment] 2003, *Ecosystem Services through Land Stewardship Practices: Issues and Options*. The State of Victoria, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Melbourne.

Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists 2002, *Blueprint for a Living Continent*, A way forward from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, WWF Australia