

Senate committee inquiry into National Landcare Program

8th August 2014

Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc (MLi) is a not-for-profit, umbrella organisation representing community Landcare in the Murrumbidgee catchment. MLi was formed in 1997 to provide a voice for community Landcare. MLi has survived changes of government; changes of state and federal government departments responsible for agriculture and the environment and has survived the myriad of changes to policy and funding regimes to support Landcare over the past decades. It has survived because the community wants and values Landcare and because it continues to achieve both environmental and social outcomes.

Community Landcare is vital in our rural communities for bringing people together, participating in collective learning, and providing mutual support to take the steps necessary to improve the sustainability of agricultural practices. For community Landcare, sustainable agriculture sits alongside natural resource management as core business for our groups.

The National Landcare Program has provided crucial support for the community movement. Loss of funds to the program is of great concern.

The establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust

NHT provided important funding to allow community groups to employ Landcare coordinators. Whilst it is a community, volunteer movement, it is the case that paid Landcare coordinators are necessary somewhere in the mix to support groups and land holders with developing projects, partnerships and the often bureaucratic process of funding applications, contracts and reporting.

The establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program

CfoC was important because it allowed community Landcare groups to apply for funding in partnerships not dependent on the NRM regional bodies. CfoC was a lifeblood for numerous groups who were not able to get support from their Regional NRM body. It is important to support multiple options for partnerships, on-ground works and community capacity building. CfoC provided options and projects for Landcare to be involved with that were large enough to avoid the "short termism" of just small community grants.

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

Any reduction in funding to community Landcare is of serious concern. Community Landcare is vastly inadequately resourced and there are many missed opportunities to improve and grow community education and involvement, vital for sustainable food and fibre production and NRM.

The 'short-termism' of many grant programs (projects under three years) significantly decreases environmental outcomes and community capacity. Failure to continue to be able to fund staff means the loss of corporate knowledge.

E Block, Wagga Agricultural Institute, Pine Gully Road, Wagga Wagga
P.O.Box 710, Wagga Wagga NSW 2650

Email: office@murrumbidgeelandcare.asn.au Phone. 02 6933 1443

www.murrumbidgeelandcare.asn.au

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

Changes in policy reflect a failure to comprehend the value of the independent community movement and the vast volunteer resource it brings to land stewardship and community education.

The 'bang for your buck' benefits of investing in Landcare are well documented. Estimates, including from ABARE, show that for every \$1 invested by government, the Landcare community and land holders respond with between \$2.80 and up to \$12.00.

Why wouldn't you invest in Landcare?

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

The regional model may be the best option that we have to provide regional level knowledge, engagement and planning. However, there is no one-size-fits-all and the Regional NRM bodies have been limited by being far too bureaucratic and far more concerned about "reporting upwards" than being accountable to the community with whom they are supposed to be working for an with.

Total catchment planning is the preferred process; its realisation is too easily hampered by bureaucratic changes often implemented to administrative, economic and not environmental reasons.

The community Landcare movement has been significantly depleted since the start of regional planning and delivery was introduced. In the Murrumbidgee catchment, 88 Landcare groups have folded since 2004 and the introduction of regional NRM. This is 88 communities where the community and education "glue" that was Landcare has now been lost. In these districts, incentives for NRM have been distributed to individuals only. Incentives delivered in this way are by commercial in confidence legal contracts which limit works to property fence boundaries. Incentives delivered in this matter contribute little, if anything, to community education and do little to provide a supportive environment for producers to consider and experiment with new and changing practices in agriculture and NRM.

The benefits of community Landcare are multiple. The returns from investment in community are impressive.

Why wouldn't you invest in Landcare?

Marion Benjamin
Executive Officer
manager@mli.org.au