

Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications on the National Landcare Program

A New Approach

Investment in natural resource management by successive Commonwealth governments through landcare and similar programs has generated many benefits, but has been characterised by:

- high transaction costs
- cumbersome processes
- too many defined projects and top down priorities
- increasing disconnect between 'high policy' and investment decision making and on ground activity and landholders
- lack of community confidence in planning and resource management decision making in respect of their short and long-term effects for ecological integrity and the security of our natural resource base
- lack of continuity of action
- poor reporting and monitoring
- increasing disillusionment and withdrawal by landholders and landcare groups
- failure to build new models for action and processes
- failure to increase active participation in landcare and similar activities, and
- inadequate investment in research and innovation (putting ideas into practice).

Research has shown that genuine change requires that:

- those involved accept the need
- those who want it are willing to invest in it, and
- those involved obtain continuing benefits.

These tests are being met only spasmodically and erratically, if at all.

Programs are neither effective nor efficient. The old model has reached a dead end. It will not deliver the '**simple, local and long term**' outcomes and greater community engagement sought by the Government.

Tinkering at the edges will not fix this. New arrangements that transcend the past are essential if we want progress.

This submission argues that Commonwealth investment in natural resource management needs to:

- influence what people do, rather than try to 'manage the environment'
- align incentives, recognition and rewards for individuals and groups with their usual financial and personal aspirations
- accommodate continuing global changes and economic developments, rather than assume static situations
- use the concept of ecological integrity as the foundation for action
- radically simplify the administration of programs, including by more direct funding of the credible programs of successful community groups
- require the use of continuing improvement systems as a condition of its investment.
- invest in research and pathways for innovation (putting ideas into practice)
- get its own house in order, for example, in management of its own extensive landholdings, and
- provide strong leadership.

All of this can easily be done entirely consistently with the statement of intent from the COAG meeting of 13 December 2013:

'The Commonwealth respects the States and Territories (the States) are sovereign in their own sphere. They should be able to get on with delivering on their responsibilities, with appropriate accountability and without unnecessary interference from the Commonwealth.'

The Past

There have been many reviews of Commonwealth natural resource management and landcare programs since the 1980s. Constantly the results have been dissatisfaction with the arrangements, leading, however, only to tinkering at the edges and shuffling of the deckchairs at Commonwealth agencies. So we still have a top down system, short termism, extremely high transaction costs, cumbersome administration, and inadequate community engagement.

It has long been recognised that environmental degradation is costly, and that market failures abound. For example, the 2002 Report to the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council concluded that continuing degradation was inevitable with our patterns of production and consumption:

'Degradation of natural systems occurs because our economy makes it cheaper to degrade Australia than to look after it. The market signals are back to front.', even though

' . . .it is cheaper to maintain natural systems than it is to pay the repair bill resulting from inadvertent or careless damage or to suffer the resulting loss of production.'

Helen Alexander in her 1995 report as National Landcare Facilitator pointed out the unsatisfactory state of decision-making affecting the environment:

'The principles and practices for public intervention to manage resource-use conflicts or to provide incentives to accelerate the transition to greater sustainability are poorly developed.'

Most would argue, quite fairly, that this is still the case.

A motion in the House of Commons in 1782 fits the situation all too well: *'that the calamities and expense of the times have proceeded from want of foresight in the ministers'* (and their advisers and fellow members of Parliament).

There will be little to be gained from any further raking over the past, and so the most profitable approach is to establish better arrangements for the future. We can be confident that simply repeating the practices of the past will not lead to better outcomes.

Rationale and Resources for the Commonwealth

This reference is necessarily about what the Commonwealth Government should do against a background of shared responsibilities with the States and Territories, and some measure of private control of most of Australia's land resources and the daily activities that affect them.

The State and Territory Governments have historically been responsible for land and environmental management. The Commonwealth Government becomes involved:

- for management of its own extensive landholdings
- in exercising powers and responsibilities for the external territories
- for maintaining meteorological services
- when entering into and implementing international agreements, whether directly in respect of the environment (for example, biodiversity) or with potentially substantial impacts on the environment (for example, trade)
- when participating in national arrangements affecting the environment (for example, chemicals management, drought relief and biosecurity)
- in exercising quarantine powers
- in administering import systems (most weeds in Australia were imported plants), and
- in administering industry or regional support schemes.

The Commonwealth Government claims that Caring for our Country is a biodiversity initiative.¹ The Commonwealth also claims for the Sustainable Environment stream of Caring for our Country that *'The health and resilience of ecosystem services will also be improved through continued focus on whole-of-ecosystem, integrated approaches, such as those previously adopted in the Great Barrier Reef.'*

Biodiversity is the plurality of all living things and where they live. The Commonwealth Government is responsible for implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity and many other biodiversity related international agreements. It is therefore obliged to be at least interested in all land management and environment issues in Australia.

A new approach to landcare (using the term in its widest sense) by the Commonwealth therefore needs to embrace its direct land management responsibilities, a responsible approach to its international responsibilities, and collaborative arrangements with the States and Territories and others on matters of national concern.

State and regional bodies are required to take national issues into account in establishing landscape management priorities. There has been an attempt to test the effectiveness of action taken to address these priorities by regional bodies, using a standard based on the international environment management standard ISO 14001, in at least one State (New South Wales). So there is no need for the Commonwealth Government to intervene by second-guessing or superseding these regional and State and Territory decisions.

It can, however, improve the overall position by strong leadership on the general issues, and investment in activities that steer all the actors in positive directions and that facilitate long term, continuing improvement action, as well as managing its own responsibilities properly and facilitating effective Commonwealth/State and Territory collaboration.

Many will judge the Commonwealth's credibility on how it manages its own landscape and other environmental responsibilities. The recent audit report *'Managing Compliance with Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 Conditions of Approval'* has confirmed that the Commonwealth is underinvesting in its direct environmental management responsibilities.

The investment by the Commonwealth in all environment related functions does not match the rhetoric in statements about landcare programs, and the current high transaction costs and discontinuities mean that even the limited investment is not cost effective. The 2008 audit report *'Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality'*, concluded that:

'There is little evidence as yet that the programs are adequately achieving the anticipated national outcomes or giving sufficient attention to the "radically altered

¹ <http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/biodiversity>

and degraded Australian landscape" highlighted in the 1996 Australia: State of the Environment Report.'

Key needs are increased Commonwealth investment to carry out its own responsibilities properly and to play its part in dealing with public good issues, and radical changes to the administration of the Commonwealth investments in natural resource management currently dealt with under Caring for our Country and related programs.

Basis for Action

In the past, there have been many different preoccupations and priorities, for example, salinity and drought, with a tendency to lose sight of the simple proposition that everything is connected to everything else. We need a unifying proposition that applies to all landscapes regardless of land use or local priorities. The concept of ecological integrity provides this:

The quality of an ecosystem in which the natural ecological processes sustain the function, composition and structure of the system. An ecosystem is a dynamic system of plants, animals and other organisms, together with the non-living components of the system.

Adopting this concept would help overcome the drift away from the original objectives of the modern landcare movement and other environmental policies as indicated in Prime Minister Hawke's 1989 statement. That statement acknowledged our dependence on the environment. The strategic objective underlying the August 2014 Government *Consultation Paper: Help Shape the National Landcare Programme* is apparently valuing the environment only for its productive capacity for the human population.

A key foundation for action must be the need to accommodate the continuing global changes involving:

- the composition of the atmosphere, affecting climate and weather (global warming)
- land use, land forms and hydrology
- the toxification of the environment (pollution), and
- the number and range of living things, including the disproportionately large increases in human population (biodiversity).

Some of this global change is a result of natural processes, but a substantial proportion is driven by human activities. These continuing changes contribute to landscape dynamics, leading to a succession of differing landscapes over time. This process is continuously occurring, and so any land management approaches will need to be based on succession considerations, rather than on any notions of static landscapes.

The overarching need in all situations is to reduce the impact of human activities to minimise stress on the landscape, and increase its capacity to remain resilient in the face of natural variabilities and global changes. In other words, the need is to influence what people do, not 'manage the environment'.

Elements of a Good Program

As the needed changes will come only from the aggregation of a host of individual actions, an effective approach will need:

- community supported and endorsed programs with primary emphasis on extension and assistance,
- an overall goal of preserving ecological integrity,
- systems and practices based on continuous improvement principles
- **clarity** for all relevant interests **about local issues and priorities**, so that they can align their own and local community needs
- **help for every land manager** to find a solution, including attention to motivation, capacity and incentive issues
- **adequate investment** in public good issues
- **effective partnerships** involving key government agencies from all levels of government, landholder groups, and many others whose actions influence the outcomes
- **continuing public education**
- adequate investment in **research** (overcoming knowledge gaps and developing better technology) and in **innovation** (putting ideas into practice),
- **effective regulatory systems** to be used when landholders (public and private) do not cooperate.

Past practices of investment in short term projects do not meet these needs.

The Commonwealth has cited previous management of the Great Barrier Reef as a useful precedent. That success has been due to continuing public education, continuing research, the securing of the natural resource base before exploitation, and careful management of the considerable exploitation in the Park, with consistency of approach and continuity over decades. Even so, the Reef area remains at risk from outside pressures, including, in the view of many, decisions about mining and shipping.

The Barrier Reef experience continues, however, to provide a model to test programs such as landcare against.

A good program will not artificially divide landscape management into 'Sustainable Agriculture' and 'Sustainable Environment'. Gleeson and I argue in our paper '*Pushing productivity on Australian farmers misunderstands world food supply and demand*'²

'that we need to, and can have, integrating strategies that improve on-farm productivity and farm profitability and enhance the natural and human capital so necessary for the future sustainability of the agricultural sector. Innovation in natural resource policy and practice is a critical element. The desirable direction of that innovation is well articulated by numerous authors.'

This proposition and using ecological integrity as a basis will overcome the need to make illogical and unhelpful distinctions, and instead provide a common basis for all government decision making, program development and administration, whether overtly environmental or not.

Community Engagement

As already indicated, landcare aspirations can only be realised with maximum community engagement, particularly by landholders. Farming is the major land management activity in most of Australia. The situation has not materially changed since Helen Alexander's 1995 report. She pointed out that the farming community has lacked the necessary empowerment (knowledge, money and share in decision making) to undertake this onerous responsibility required for better care of the environment.

After acknowledging the many gains from the development of the community landcare movement, Helen said:

'However, frustration in community landcare is growing. The scale of community participation in landcare is also an indication of the scale of the problems faced. Nationwide, the landcare community reports concerns about too much responsibility and too few resources, too little money for 'works on the ground', too much funding going into government processes not community action, too much paperwork, too little long term funding and too little coordination between government departments.

People are saying that there is little appreciation of the scale of their problems; that there is a lack of support for rural research, technical expertise, rural training and new industry development; that the links between the social, economic and environmental pressures are not being made, when rural community decline is often of more pressing

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<file:///Documents/%20EMS%20&%20ALMS/gleeson%20quinn%20Pushing%20productivity%20on%20Australian%20farmers%20misunderstands%20world%20food%20supply%20and%20demand%20%7C%20Moffitts%20Fa.webarchive>

concern than resource degradation and that the overall policy framework for sustainable natural resources management and regional development is confused.

It is beyond the scope of this report to advise in detail on how the nation might tackle structural adjustment, resource protection and community decline problems on the scale observed during this study, particularly given the lack of reliable data on the extent of the problems or on how to define sustainability. There are also significant constitutional and national investment issues at stake. Investment would have to be an order of magnitude greater to see substantial and rapid improvement in economic and resource condition.

However, there is much that can be done by clarifying and incrementally investing in existing frameworks and by better identifying objectives, analysing barriers and targeting effort. In planning for the 'implementation' phase of landcare, it is important to recognise the links, but also the distinctions between landcare group activities, an integrated regional approach and the total national effort needed to progress ecologically sustainable development.

The primary objective for rural landcare, from both the government and community perspective, is to enable the adoption of agricultural practices that are both profitable and sustainable over the long term. More broadly, the objective is to manage the tensions between public and private responsibilities for sustainable natural resources management and to ensure the social and economic health of rural communities. Most groups are involved in environmental monitoring, catchment management, labour market projects and nature conservation activities which have significant public benefit.'

Many already accept the need for improvement. The Commonwealth Government can contribute by encouraging the raising of awareness and knowledge levels about natural resource management problems and potential remedies. Aligning its own policies and actions with these needs would help. Small amounts of funding could push others in the right direction.

Knowledge about the state of the environment and possible solutions to problems is critical. The requirement is for extension services (broadly defined, and encompassing pathways for innovation), whether privately or publicly delivered. The Commonwealth Government can support this by direct investment in state of the environment activities, and again by small investments or taxation expenditure encouraging the spread and use of knowledge.

The Commonwealth does invest in systems for change, but as suggested in this submission, so far in a way that satisfies just about nobody, and does not have sufficient meaning or impact for those who need to act on the ground. In the past, one of the simplest and most effective ways to overcome this kind of problem was to fund landcare co-ordinators working for landcare and similar groups.

The Commonwealth could immediately win support of land managers and their supporters, for example, landcare groups, catchment groups, farming systems groups and not for profit organisations providing services to them, by providing funding direct to groups to hire co-ordinators (by whatever name they choose). Similarly, the Commonwealth could contribute to funding programs set up by those groups that meet the proposed continuing improvement and ecological integrity tests. These approaches would better align landcare approaches to those increasingly common with biosecurity, which is, after all, only a subset of natural resource management. Some form of competitive grant scheme could continue in a simplified form, to avoid the current wasteful approach to administration of those schemes.

Continuous Improvement

A continuous improvement approach overcomes the limitations of resting on 'best management practices' (BMP). BMP implies finality rather than constantly seeking new and better understanding.³ It is better to be looking for the next practice, particularly where production and marketing are involved.⁴ BMP elements can, of course, be included in continuous improvement systems where those using them have not yet caught up.

A continuous improvement approach:

- accommodates changing circumstances, for example, from global changes, land use changes, regulatory changes, and personal circumstances
- enables those using them to act within their own resources and according to their own interests and personal aspirations
- enables individual action to contribute to meeting national, State, regional and local goals and priorities whenever the action and those goals and priorities overlap
- enables authorities to align their support, whether through extension, financial incentives, or recognition and reward processes, with the normal financial and personal drivers of the individual
- involves very low transaction costs
- provides continuing results so long as the individual persists, without any further intervention by the authority.

What more could the authorities, including the Commonwealth, want?

If the systems used involve compliance with ISO 14001, there are additional potential market benefits, as well as greatly simplified reporting systems and far better monitoring

³ <http://www.soilsforlife.org.au/downloads/11%20Talaheni.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/landline/content/2014/s4064244.htm>

than occurs now. According to the Department of the Environment⁵ *'The current Australian Government policy on the usage of environmental management systems is that government agencies are encouraged to develop and implement an environmental management system for at least one of their sites.'*

As an example, the Department of Defence states⁶:

'Defence implemented the Australian Government's policy direction that all Commonwealth Agencies were to have a corporate EMS, with at least one site certified by December 2003. Defence achieved these requirements through the corporate EMS being assessed as consistent with the international standard ISO 14001: 2004 Environmental Management Systems and Certification of RAAF Base Townsville's EMS and subsequent certification of Puckapunyal Military Area. Defence continues to progressively roll-out its EMS approach through higher risk Groups and Services activities and at its key Defence Regions and Sites, where activities and the stewardship of environmental values need to be managed on the ground.'

The purpose of Defence's EMS is to provide an integrated approach to environmental management as part of everyday business. The Defence EMS aims to provide a robust system that enables Defence to identify and manage potential impacts on the environment that may arise from its activities.'

For elaboration of these systems and their benefits in the Australian context, see the RIRDC Research reports *Environmental Management Systems - Analysing known and likely outcomes of current EMS activities* (Nelson Quinn)⁷ and *Environmental management in Australian Agriculture* (P. Rowland)⁸.

ISO based systems are voluntary, with the individual determining the nature and rate of activities to be undertaken. When driven by landholders they would immediately reduce transaction costs, and take-up of desired activities would not depend on whether landholders liked the look of, or felt comfortable with, projects and processes designed by others, or were in a position to join in a group or collective activities. There would be built-in persistence and consistency indefinitely, compared with the limitations of projects defined by time or scope. Authorities would have an easy way of accumulating data and information. Otherwise we will continue in the current trap of inadequate monitoring and reporting.

One such system is the Certified Land Management System (CLM) developed and managed by a not for profit organisation, the ALM Group.

⁵ <http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/sustainable-communities/government-sustainability/environmental-management>)

⁶ <http://www.defence.gov.au/environment/>

⁷ <https://rirdc.infoservices.com.au/items/08-145>

⁸ <https://rirdc.infoservices.com.au/items/05-157>

'The primary purpose of CLM is to support superior land and animal welfare management in ways that improve farm profitability and enable the achievements of landholders to be recognised and rewarded. These are important outcomes with private and public benefits.

Land managers use the CLM system to develop and implement strategies that integrate their own commercial and other requirements with government policy and regulatory requirements. Hence it enables and motivates them to continuously improve biodiversity and land, water, air, vegetation and animal welfare management.

The CLM farm ecology, planning and certification processes strengthen on-farm operations and enable the more effective and efficient delivery of government support for natural resource management. Additionally, CLM enables the differentiation of food and fibre products on the basis of externally verified superior environmental and animal welfare performance.'

The following is from the final report of a Symposium in Brisbane on 11 June 2014 (Symposium on Natural Resource and Animal Welfare Management – Agricultural Competitiveness) that brought together key policy makers, landholders, representatives of food and fibre supply chains and specialist interest groups to discuss environmental and animal welfare management:

'All that leads to the next step being the need to get industry and government support for the voluntary national adoption of CLM or a similar system. Unless this is forthcoming we will continue to miss opportunities in food and fibre markets. Unless this is forthcoming farmers will have multiple and less suitable verification systems thrust upon them. Unless this is forthcoming farmers will forego an opportunity to control an increasingly important feature of food and fibre supply chains. Unless this is forthcoming we will continue to have less effective forms of government support for improved environmental and animal welfare management. And unless this is forthcoming we will continue to dissipate scarce resources on approaches that do not have the features necessary to enable evolution to a national whole-of-farm internationally recognised system to verify the environmental and animal welfare credentials of innovative and ethical landholders and others in the food and fibre chains.'

See the full report at <http://www.almg.org.au/resources/current-documents>.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The approach over many years to landcare and related programs has led to a dead end. The problems cannot be overcome by marginal changes. New arrangements that transcend the past are needed.

The Government's desire for more community engagement, strengthening landcare networks and its stated approach '*that investment in managing our natural resources be simple, local and long-term*' are good starts.⁹

Without inconsistency with its stated aim of respecting the need for States and Territories to undertake their responsibilities without interference, the Commonwealth can easily justify its investments in natural resource management on:

- its own considerable direct land management responsibilities
- its obligations under several biodiversity and other international agreements affecting the environment
- the public demands for nation wide action on the continuing global changes (climate and weather, land use and landforms, pollution, shifting composition and spread of biodiversity) and for the wise use of natural resources to support agricultural profitability and regional community wellbeing.

Adoption of the concept of ecological integrity as the foundation of Commonwealth policies, programs and investment will at once avoid sterile arguments about 'environment'/'agriculture' differences, encompass the whole landscape and the human actions affecting it, and build in a long-term perspective.

The Commonwealth can make its investments conditional on the use of continuing improvement and related quality control systems. This alone will overcome many of the past problems, such as discontinuity, projects not merging into long term continuing action, poor reporting and monitoring, constant audit and other criticism, failure to give sufficient attention to changing circumstances from changing land uses, global changes, changing trade patterns and available but under-used knowledge and technology.

The Commonwealth activities should include:

- requiring the use of environmental management systems for all its own landscape management activities – Defence has shown the way, and any costs or perceived difficulties can be minimised by using systems such as CLM or any equivalents
- strong leadership, including continuing public education about the need for ecological integrity, respect for international and other legal obligations, and on the dependence of all human activities on our natural resource base
- review of all its policies and programs over time to test their consistency with the concepts of ecological integrity and continuous improvement

⁹ https://environment.au.citizenspace.com/biodiversity-conservation/national-landcare-programme-survey/supporting_documents/National%20Landcare%20Programme%20Consultation%20Paper.pdf

- support for research overcoming knowledge and innovation gaps in respect of issues of nation wide significance, for example, relating to international obligations, cross border issues, international reputation, trade competitiveness.

The simple, local and long-term tests and greater community engagement can be met by the Commonwealth requiring that the regional organisations in the States and Territories invest a substantial proportion of funds from the Commonwealth in:

- **Directly funding land care/catchment etc groups with credible established plans of action.** This approach to funding is a simple way for governments to meet public good obligations and to be seen to be acknowledging successful local efforts and community engagement. Otherwise these organisations will continue to be forced into the endless trouble, waste and cost associated with relying on competitive grants processes. The Ginninderra Catchment Group is a good example. It has a well established plan, long continuity, credibility with researchers and government and a record of constant achievement - see <http://www.ginninderralandcare.org.au>. There would be many other examples around Australia. The Commonwealth's excellent idea of strengthening landcare networks will come to nothing without this kind of continuing support.
- **Funding credible action plans developed by community groups for specific purposes.** An example is the work of the Serrated Tussock Working Party for NSW and the ACT, which despite the narrow sounding name, is concerned with integrating persistent perennial weed issues with broader landscape and production management - see <http://www.serratedtussock.com.au>. Progress to date is set out in the Working Party's 2014 Report Card (see <http://www.serratedtussock.com.au/?i=471&2014-progress-report>). Some funding to accelerate further progress and to help ensure long-term commitment by all concerned is obviously desirable. Again, there are bound to be others like this around Australia.
- **Using voluntary environmental management system arrangements as one of the bases for investment.** Doing this may attract many who now are unwilling to be constrained by priorities and processes dictated by others, or are not in a position to participate in competitive processes or join a group, or join in more collective activities. Long term continuing improvement will be built in. Commercial advantages will accrue over time. Collection of 'State of the Environment' information will be easier. Reward, recognition and incentive arrangements can more easily align with personal aspirations. These systems can include verification processes. The most developed local example is the Certified Land Management system.

The totality of these suggestions can appear daunting. This is no excuse for inaction. A good plan involves:

- doing what can be done now with available resources and knowledge
- identifying the impediments to progress, for example, lack of public support, knowledge and resource gaps, lack of innovation, and
- developing a strategy to overcome them.

Lack of effective action now will encourage future generations to generate their own version of the 1782 resolution about lack of foresight by governments, Parliament and their advisers.

Nelson Quinn

This submission is based on experience with landcare and related operations (eg, Hall Landcare Group, Ginninderra Catchment Group, Murrumbidgee Landcare, Serrated Tussock Working Party for NSW and the ACT, ALM Group), research work (eg, for RIRDC), international activities (eg, OECD, UNEP, development of intergovernmental programs and policies), international global change research activities (eg, the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research), Commonwealth/State environmental policy and program development and administration, farming and farming industry organisations.