

**COMMUNIQUE
FROM THE NRM COUNCIL**

**FEDERAL MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY
STATE MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE AND FOOD
NRM COUNCIL
21 JANUARY 2008**

The NRM Council met with the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the State Minister for Agriculture and Food on the 21 January 2008. The meeting was attended by the Chair of the NRM Council, the Chairs of the Rangelands Co-ordinating Group, South Coast NRM, South West Catchments Council, Swan Catchment Council, the Deputy Chair of the Avon Catchment Council, the Council's agricultural, conservation and indigenous representatives.

The Ministers and Council had detailed discussion on a range of NRM matters outlined below.

Commonwealth's position on NHT3

The Commonwealth Government is reviewing the current NHT and NAP arrangements. The following areas are being considered:

- A focus on iconic, targeted investment;
- Capacity for some programmatic funding as well as local funding;
- Ability to demonstrate value for money and outcomes achieved for funds invested.

The regional delivery model is not under threat, but the Government is looking at how to improve the programmes and is open to suggestions.

Regional Delivery Model

The Regional Chairs expressed that the greatest asset of the Regional Delivery Model was the partnership forged between all levels of government, the community, industry and non-government organisations. The community and governments, in partnership, develop investment plans which are approved by the State and Federal Ministers for the Agriculture and the Environment. These plans are driven by the community and are backed by science ensuring actions are achievable, deliverable and measurable. Investment is focused and targeted on high priority assets or iconic projects.

The chairs gave examples of the Collie/Wellington, Strategic Tree Farming, Denmark River, South Coast's Perennials Project, Managing Climate Variability Project and the Swan's Light Industry Project.

Oil Mallees

Minister Burke asked how expansive the oil mallee industry was in Western Australia. Minister Chance stated that the industry is expanding however there were some limiting factors. Many farmers were planting mallees for NRM outcomes. The State had made a significant investment of \$20M into the Narrogin Integrated Wood Processing plant, an experimental plant where oil, charcoal, activated carbon and electricity were all produced in a combined process. The agricultural representative on Council stated that mallees were one seen by landholders to be one of the few commercially viable tree farming industries in lower

rainfall areas. A government position on carbon sequestration could provide the way forward for mallees.

Administrative Funding

The Chairs informed Minister Burke that all Regional NRM Groups would start to run out of funds on the 30 June 2008. This was a great threat to maintaining momentum, capacity, community involvement and the ability to delivery projects, including regionally-based professional skills. Regional NRM Groups were unable to provide long term contracts, and therefore a level of job security in a competitive job climate in WA. Minister Chance stated that while the situation was relevant for all Regional NRM Groups, the Swan and Rangelands were particularly affected as under the current funding programme, their regions were limited to NHT funds.

Minister Burke stated that he understood the urgency of the situation. A transition year had been proposed as a solution to providing certainty to groups and employees.

The Chairs acknowledged that while some programmes needed scrutiny and some groups would benefit from assistance, the current model has delivered outcomes that benefit National and State priority natural resource assets.

Integration of Federal Policies with NRM

The Chair of the NRM Council suggested that better integration of Commonwealth Government policies with NRM could be considered as part of the review. Under the existing Commonwealth structure, there are a number of different funds such as Environfunds, NLP, Landcare, and NWI. There could be better integration between programs to achieve improved outcomes.

Regulation Reduction

Minister Burke requested feedback from the Chairs on the amount of regulation and resources invested in administration costs under the programs. Some of these costs were unavoidable to ensure a rigorous, robust system. The Chairs stated:

- They collected more information than required under the current reporting system;
- The current reporting system did not provide meaningful data, such as that required to report to the ERC;
- There was a need to review the system to tailor it to the target audience;
- Around 20 – 30% of administrative resources went into reporting. These funds could be reallocated to activities such as on-ground auditing;
- The Regional Groups would welcome a review into reporting and a move towards a consistent computer system across the six regional groups similar to Queensland's system. This system allows the State and Commonwealth Government's to access and download information. The Queensland project is a State Priority Project.

Exceptional Circumstances (EC)

It was acknowledged that there could be better integration of NRM and EC.

Integration of NRM and Biosecurity

It was acknowledged there was overlap between biosecurity and NRM. The State NRM Council will provide advice to the State Government shortly on possible opportunities for integration to achieve integrated and strategic outcomes.

Biodiversity and NRM

NRM provides an opportunity to protect and manage biodiversity on private land. Managing biodiversity on farmland is considered an integral part of modern sustainable farming practices and can lead to increased productivity. The regional delivery of NRM has led to significant gains in the protection of priority ecosystems through voluntary management agreements – which have complemented conservation area protected under the National Reserve System - especially in under-represented regions such as the Avon Bioregion. For example, WWF (the Worldwide Fund for Nature) has been successfully working with farmers to secure voluntary conservation covenants for areas of high quality bushland in this Bioregion for many years. The current NRM programme has provided additional opportunities for protecting and managing biodiversity.

Indigenous Engagement

Minister Chance introduced Doc Reynolds as the representative on the NRM Council with Indigenous and Aboriginal experience. The complexity of Indigenous engagement was highlighted by the fact that Mr Reynolds was unable to represent all Indigenous issues for all Indigenous people in WA. The NRM Council will provide advice to the State Government on how to better consult with and engage Indigenous people in NRM.

Mr Reynolds expressed the importance of engaging Indigenous people in NRM, especially in relation to issues which often impact on cultural concerns and productivity. There was a need to work together to achieve a better outcome. Currently, Indigenous people felt uninvolved in the decision making process.

Minister Burke had discussed with Minister Macklin the need for better integration between their portfolios. Indigenous engagement in a future programme would be focused on two areas; firstly ensuring land management is properly noted and integrated with local Indigenous communities, and secondly, developing better ways for agriculture to interact and provide opportunities to remote communities, such as the production of horticultural pursuits.

With regard to the first issue, Mr Reynolds explained that there were a number of Indigenous engagement projects occurring in WA such as the South Coast NRM *Restoring Connections* project. Minister Burke requested further information.

Under the second issue, further information will be sent to Minister Burke on the “Community Gardens – Growing People” project, the broader New Opportunities for Tropical and Pastoral Agriculture project and the Indigenous Management Support Schemes.

Mr Reynolds also stated that a review into the approvals process for works on Indigenous land needed to occur.

The meeting concluded with thanks to Minister Burke from both Minister Chance and NRM Council, for providing the opportunity to meet, and with an acknowledgement that the key message was the need for a timely and smooth transition from one programme to the next.