

Value Propositions:
Investing in Regional NRM Groups to Deliver
NRM Outcomes

A Discussion Paper

on behalf of

Regional Chairs Coordinating Group WA

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Providing feedback on this discussion paper

Comments and advice are sought about the issues and ideas presented in this discussion paper from those involved in the regional delivery of NRM programs, especially from members of regional NRM groups.

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What is this paper for?

This discussion paper presents a suite of seven value propositions about the benefits of ongoing investment in regional NRM groups to deliver natural resource management (NRM) programs, with particular reference to Western Australia (WA). It explores and builds upon debate in WA and Australia more broadly about whether the regional model is an efficient and effective approach to delivering NRM outcomes, especially with respect to achieving agreed targets with limited direct resources.

The work has been commissioned by the WA Regional Chairs Coordinating Group to inform negotiations on a new 4-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the WA State Government and regional NRM groups in early 2009.

It forms part of a broader review process comprising the following objectives:

- Clarify any unique attributes the regional model may have which contribute to achieving NRM outcomes and how these may add value to existing NRM investment;
- Define the areas where regional NRM groups add real value to NRM program delivery; and
- Define roles and responsibilities for regional NRM groups based on the above to enable the best outcomes for NRM program delivery.

The Paper draws on examples from other jurisdictions to provide alternative perspectives to complement other WA-focused review activities. It is intended to stimulate thinking and debate about the actual and potential value of regional groups in delivering NRM outcomes in WA.

In reviewing the WA experience, attention will be given to both identifying achievements and concerns, as well as exploring any implications for NRM delivery, including possible changes to the regional model.

This study complements a concurrent Ministerial review into the value of the regional approach.

Background

Western Australia has six regional NRM groups. Each is an independent incorporated association registered under the *Associations Incorporation Act 1987* (Robins & Dovers 2007a). They form part of an Australia-wide network of 56 regional NRM bodies (Map 1). The age, form and function of these organisations vary between and often within jurisdictions, and reflect their different histories (Dore & Woodhill 1999; Head 2005; Moore & Rockloff 2006).

Map 1: Australia's designated 56 NRM regions



(Source: Robins & Dovers 2007b)

Robins (2007a) traces the paradigm shifts in Australian NRM policy from one-to-one farmer extension by governments to sponsoring local community groups and networks (the 'Landcare movement') and the progressive formalisation of the regional model. The impetus for governments to invest in regional NRM bodies was borne out in part by the realisation that investment through voluntary local landcare groups alone could not achieve the strategic, landscape level NRM outcomes needed (Woodhill 1996).

Two major national NRM programs have been instrumental in driving the formalisation of NRM regions and their management structures across Australia: the \$1.75B Natural Heritage Trust Extension (NHT2) over 6 years (2002–2003 to 2007–2008) (WalterTurnbull 2005; ITS Global 2006a) and the \$1.4B National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) over 8 years (2000-01 to 2007–08) (Council of Australian Governments 2000; Commonwealth of Australia

2001) in 21 priority regions (comprising about 30 NRM regions).

Key policy directions for NHT2 and NAP were described in Lee and Wood (2004) as:

- Working together more effectively;
- Devolving authority and empowering regions;
- Investing more strategically at the regional level;
- Facilitating fundamental change;
- Building on the Landcare ethic; and
- Capacity building for improved natural resource.

The process of signing bilateral agreements between State/Territory Governments and the Australian Government for these programs was lengthy and contested in some cases (ITS Global 2006a). In the case of WA, agreement exchanges took place in December 2002 (NHT2) and September 2003 (NAP)¹, with regional NRM groups identified in both cases as playing a major role in regional delivery (Bessen Consulting Services 2004). Individual contracts set out the terms of reference and means by which the State and groups work together (Bessen Consulting Services 2004) and placed conditions on the regional management structures (WalterTurnbull 2005).

Bilateral agreements under the NHT2 and NAP required the development and accreditation of regional NRM strategies and associated investment plans; the central feature of which are the identification of assets for protection and the setting and monitoring of targets (50-year aspirational vision and 20-year resource condition targets) (Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council 2002; Council of Australian Governments 2000). These plans were approved by the Australian and State Governments through delegated ministers. This approach marked a significant shift from earlier programs, including NHT1 (\$1.25 B over 5 years from 1997–1998 to

2001–2002) (Commonwealth of Australia 1997), and required substantial investment in institutional structures and systems to support the ‘regional NRM delivery’ model (Hicks 2006).

In WA, NHT2 and NAP delivery has been overseen by the State NRM Office. While located in the Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA), the State NRM Office operates across agencies. It has responsibility for managing all State and Australian Government funds, as well as managing contracts in conjunction with the regional NRM groups. It has supported the development of investment strategies by regional bodies, and managed monitoring and evaluation frameworks (WalterTurnbull 2005).

In many ways, the period of the NHT2 and NAP was turbulent at the regional level. While the start-up phase was marked by significant institutional change, including shifting of operational boundaries, the process was one of evolution and therefore continuous change. Significant energy and investment were dedicated to preparing and improving regional NRM plans and investment strategies, putting in place monitoring and evaluation systems and satisfying reporting and auditing requirements.

Nevertheless development of regional strategies and plans has suffered from the absence of a coordinated overarching State NRM policy and institutional framework (Hicks 2006). This policy gap has constrained opportunities to link the work of regions with each other and externally, including with State agencies (Hicks 2006; URS 2008). This context has been compounded by a lack of clarity and consensus regarding the ‘regional delivery model’ that has resulted in tensions between various parties (URS 2008).

A new phase of change is now in motion. The incoming federal Labor Government (December 2007) announced a new program, Caring for our Country, to replace the NHT2 and NAP from 1 July 2008 (Australian Government, 2008). While regional NRM bodies are guaranteed base funding over a four-year period, a significant proportion of program funds will be allocated through competitive grants. At State level, the incoming Liberal Government (September 2008)

¹ Departments of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (Australian Government Land and Coasts team), Australian Government. Online at <http://www.nrm.gov.au/publications/index.html#agreements> (accessed 6 January 2009).

has yet to outline a clear NRM policy, including funding priorities and arrangements.

While the current regional arrangements are the preferred approach to NRM delivery (Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group 2006; Keogh *et al.* 2006; Sinclair Knight Merz 2006; Read *et al.* 2007), there are detractors (ITS Global 2006b). In navigating through this period of transition and uncertainty, it is important to revisit and have clarity about the specific value that regional NRM groups contribute to program delivery. In doing so, it is also useful to identify any opportunities for improvement through drawing on national and international research, as well as recent evaluations and studies in WA (notably Hicks 2006; Read *et al.* 2007; URS 2008).

The next section looks at a suite of value propositions as the basis for conducting discussions with stakeholder groups and informing workshop deliberations. It is acknowledged that some regions might hold other value propositions that are not included in this Paper; these should be highlighted in consideration of regional roles.

The Value Propositions

This section proposes seven ‘headline’ values that regional NRM groups may contribute to delivering programs. They focus on identifying the most outstanding areas in which regional groups play a unique or additive role in NRM program delivery. That is, where an equivalent level of delivery is unlikely to be achievable through other organisational pathways and structures (eg state agencies, municipalities, landcare groups, non-government organisations, private consultants).

These values have been identified from the published literature, preliminary stakeholder consultations and the collective experience of the consultants. The intention of their presentation here is for the purposes of constructive discussion and debate. In that light, either the value propositions or the associated descriptions should not be interpreted as definitive or exhaustive.

For each of these value propositions, the paper sets out a synopsis of current research and thinking in the NRM arena both across Australia and specifically in WA where available. This is followed by a sub-section examining scope for improvements, in some cases looking to the experiences of other sectors and countries.

1. Regional NRM groups add value by integrating national and state policies and translating them into regional plans

Federal governments have been instrumental in formalising regional institutional arrangements across the country as a mechanism for realising more consistent delivery of national program objectives (Keogh *et al.* 2006). As constitutional power over land and water management primarily rests with Australia’s eight states and territories (Brown 2006), the signing of bilateral agreements (and associated tied grants) has provided a process for negotiating and aligning state policies and investments with federal policy directives. Williams (2002) identified one of the key benefits of the regional model as improving integration and coordination across structures, policies and programs.

Regional NRM groups have played a brokering role in integrating and specifying these policies (for sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, dryland salinity mitigation and the like) at the regional level. This role is by no means simple – the suite of NRM-related policies at federal and state levels are numerous, necessarily general and sometimes conflicting. Regional NRM bodies need to interpret and reconcile these overarching policy documents in the context of their specific setting. As they are answerable to both federal and state governments, as their principal contracting agents, they effectively act as a semi-independent vehicle for policy integration and translation.

There are no alternative existing institutional structures that could effectively fulfil this role at the regional scale. While the state could interpret NRM policies through its agencies, this may be at the expense of national level objectives and the injection of federal resources. In terms of local government, NRM policies need to be reflected in

their planning and activities; however, their broad mandate and large number (609 councils Australia-wide² and 141 councils in WA³) limits scope for detailed NRM policy integration and specification at regional scale. Other non-government organisations generally have a narrower mandate than the current scope of regional NRM bodies and may be directed by or favour special interests.

Improvement opportunities

There are several key areas where improvements could be made to better facilitate the role of regional NRM groups in integrating and specifying federal and state policies in the regional context. The first concerns the process of signing bilateral agreements. Regional NRM groups have typically been absent or played a minimal role in the negotiation process associated with these agreements. Given the principal role and stake of regional NRM bodies in delivering against the stated agreement, it would seem reasonable that they played a more central part in the negotiation process. This could take the form of six trilateral agreements in the case of WA or formal participation in the bilateral agreement process by a delegation of regional NRM group representatives.

The current process of accrediting regional plans and investment strategies by the Australian Government is suggested as impeding effective partnerships (Farrelly & Conacher 2007; Wallington *et al.* 2008). Federal and state governments need to provide clearer direction on the criteria and standards for regional planning. Unnecessary costs are incurred in the process of 56 NRM regions separately developing frameworks for strategic planning, target setting and related monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems. Governments also need to move from cherry-picking specific projects (Lockwood *et al.* 2007) to providing untagged funds for implementation of priority projects.

2. Regional NRM groups add value by providing a community-led and -backed platform for NRM planning

Regional NRM bodies play a critical role in achieving 'buy-in' and commitment of regional stakeholders to the NRM policies of federal and state governments. In developing regional plans that integrate and translate these policies, regional NRM bodies have structures and processes in place that enable input from and participation of a diversity of community members and interests. While NRM plans could be developed without giving effective and coordinated voice to community perspectives, their subsequent translation into enduring action is likely to falter.

At a peak level, all 56 regional NRM bodies are governed by community-based Boards of management; a critical feature of the regional model. To date, Board membership has tended to emphasise representation of the farming community, and appointments have generally been vetted by the responsible Minister. Their functions in many cases are not limited to delivering NHT2 and NAP, reflecting their diverse histories and relationships with, and capacities of, their local communities and respective state governments. Many have constitutions that define their specific roles and responsibilities. While remunerations vary significantly between jurisdictions, Board membership is largely considered a community service and public ambassadorial role.

In the case of WA, these Boards are a mix of community and agency representatives, with consideration given to having stakeholder and sub-regional representation. The Boards have between 12 to 20 members, generally appointed through membership voting, usually with two to three year terms (Robins & Dovers 2007a).

Most regional NRM bodies have sub-committee structures in place for addressing specific issues and enabling broader community input and participation. Some of these committees are permanent, such as strategy implementation committees, while others are formed and convened on an as-needs basis, such as in response to a particular issue arising. The terms of reference for these committees are typically

² Australian Local Government Association. Online at: <http://www.alga.asn.au/about/> (Accessed: 6 January 2009)

³ Western Australian Local Government Association. Online at: <http://www.walga.asn.au/> (Accessed: 6 January 2009)

defined and approved by the Board. A Board member generally chairs or participates in such committees and reports back to the Board on progress and outcomes. In addition, regional NRM bodies convene specific events to enable community engagement in its planning processes.

Improvement opportunities

Much could be done to strengthen the community basis of regional NRM groups, and achieving greater autonomy from governments, notably in the representativeness and appointment of Board members (see Box 1 for an example from Canada). Allan and Lockwood (2000) use the term 'state-sponsored community participation' in reference to Australia's regional model, reflecting the strong role often played by governments in their appointment, mandate- and agenda-setting, and resourcing. The need for more equitable power sharing arrangements is discussed by Whelan and Oliver (2005). WalterTurnbull (2005) note that agencies operating within statutory frameworks tend to exercise greater management control of regional bodies and Boards than in non-legislated jurisdictions, but at the same time tend to provide greater corporate governance support.

Consideration could be given to adapting current Board structures to more effectively focus on higher level strategic issues. WalterTurnbull (2005) reported that the most effective Boards are those spending most of their time on strategic issues. Smaller, executive or company style Boards (say 6-8 members), like those governing NSW Catchment Management Authorities, may therefore provide a more cost-effective and efficient alternative. This could be supported by a system of lower-tier committees with devolved responsibilities. South Coast NRM is moving to this sort of structure (Robins 2009). In doing so, structures need to account for skills issues, for example Indigenous representatives suggest that 'the current skills mix of Boards is unsatisfactory and that more work was needed in defining the right combination of skills, especially with respect to working with Indigenous peoples' (Robins 2009: 53). All six regional NRM bodies could adopt similar structures, including some shared committees. Transition to executive Boards supported by 'working groups' may also

address perceived issues within existing WA structures arising from the creation of regional NRM groups from amalgamating smaller organisations and their capacity to make decisions at whole-of-region level.

Community support for regional NRM bodies has waned during the period of the NHT2, especially local landcare groups (Colliver 2008) who feel alienated by regional processes. Attention to local needs and dialogue have been sacrificed to the imperatives of top-down agendas and accountability requirements (Keogh *et al.* 2006), and dependency on government support. This disconnect is an area for improvement.

Regional NRM bodies have reacted strongly to onerous administrative and reporting demands, particularly from federal government agencies, and progressively recognised the need to reach a better balance between upwards and downwards responsiveness and accountability. Community engagement has also been somewhat hamstrung by the limited availability of discretionary resources to respond to issues arising in the region that were not identified or specifically funded under accredited plans.

Box 1: Watershed Management in Québec

The Government of Québec (Canada) has undertaken to establish a network of 33 not-for-profit, non-government organisations called Watershed Organisations (WO) to 'gradually introduce integrated watershed-based management' (Government of Québec 2002: 8). Its water policy states that three sectors – municipal, economic and community-based (citizens and groups) – will have 20-40% (min-max) representation. WOs must include representatives of the following bodies, who will not have a majority voice: citizens and citizen groups; elected officials designated by the municipalities or regional county municipalities within the watershed; and water-user representatives in the watershed (agricultural, industrial, forestry, hydro-electric, commercial, and institutional sectors). While governments are represented on WOs, they do not have voting rights. WOs are charged with developing and implementing master water plans for their respective watersheds, requiring consultation with the public and local experts. A master water plan comprises an overview and diagnosis of the watershed, issues, directions and goals, together with an implementation action plan.

3. Regional NRM groups add value by integrating scientific and local knowledge to inform NRM planning and implementation

Effective management of natural resources necessitates (nested) planning at a variety of scales that integrates local knowledge with current scientific thinking. Numerous reports emphasise the importance of connecting science and local knowledge, including that of Indigenous peoples, in regional level planning and implementation (Campbell 2006a; Whelan & Oliver 2005; Oliver & Whelan 2006). Campbell (2006a) notes that regional plans require a high level of technical knowledge about the region's natural resource issues, their inter-connectedness, and how to resolve them.

A national survey by Fenton and Rickert (2008) under the National Land & Water Resources Audit reported that most regional NRM bodies perceive themselves as having adequate capacity, including resources, to review and update their plans and investment strategies. Although, the same survey respondents indicated having insufficient staff.

Regional NRM bodies have formal and informal processes in place for accessing local knowledge, including through the Board and working group structures outlined in Value Proposition No. 2. Across Australia, Board membership comprises about 610 individuals collectively representing a diversity of knowledge, interests and affiliations, though not necessarily equally or adequately (eg women, Indigenous peoples, conservationists). Formal mechanisms for accessing local knowledge are supplemented by associations with local and regional member organisations and individuals actively participating in their programs, such as sub-catchment, landcare and grower groups.

A variety of approaches are used for integrating current scientific knowledge into planning and implementation processes. Regional NRM bodies are able to draw upon an array of (paid and unpaid) scientific expertise, including their staff, technical experts within the community, private consultants, researchers and state agencies. Expert panels are used in many cases to address

particular issues, and regional NRM bodies have also increasingly invested in regionally-specific research. Smaller and remoter regional NRM bodies tend to have lower access to technical support.

In Victoria, for example, the lead agency (Department of Sustainability and Environment) provides regional NRM bodies with technical services, including reviewing regional plans, investment strategies, annual corporate plans and annual reports (WalterTurnbull 2005). Some states (eg South Australia's Natural Resources Management Council) have established semi-independent peak bodies for NRM with roles that include supporting regions with their planning responsibilities. Overarching organisations, in place in some jurisdictions (eg Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective), play a role in identifying and communicating research.

Improvement opportunities

While strategic plans and investment strategies prepared by regional NRM bodies have been successful in achieving federal government accreditation under the NHT2 and NAP, the literature indicates some success at garnering local knowledge, but mixed success between and within jurisdictions at utilising the best scientific information available. Improved and clearer accreditation processes are needed, including provision of case study examples of high quality planning processes and outputs.

A report on progress of catchment action plans (CAPs) by the NSW Natural Resources Commission (2006) states 'CMAs have made significant progress in preparing their CAPs, given that they are relatively new organisations and many aspects of the regional model for NRM are still developing' (p. 1). The report points to the Hunter-Central Rivers and Namoi Catchment Management Authorities as particularly good examples of strategic NRM plans.

Several independent reviews have questioned the scientific rigour of regional plans (eg Pannell & Ridley 2008; Australian National Audit Office 2008). Sinclair Knight Merz (2006) found that the science underpinning salinity management responses varied widely between regions, as well as documentation of the use of best practice

models was inadequate. Pannell and Ridley (2008) describe most regional salinity plans under the NAP as 'weak'. Seymour *et al.* (2008) report that regional NRM bodies need 'to become more systematic users of information, with stronger processes to integrate knowledge from a range of disciplines and from regional stakeholders' (p. 211).

Numerous studies have also reported failure on the part of governments to make substantive progress as providers of scientific information to regional NRM bodies (eg Keogh *et al.* 2006; Knowledge for Regional NRM Team 2006; Robins 2006). Regional NRM bodies are reportedly overwhelmed with information of variable relevance and accessibility. There is a critical need for better knowledge management structures (Campbell 2006a; ITS Global 2006a). Campbell (2006b) states that 'it is too hard for people in any part of the system to find out what is happening and what is being learned elsewhere – or has been learned already'.

The NSW NRM Quality Standard (Natural Resources Commission 2005) provides a model for articulating best practice integration of local and scientific knowledge. Any standard should be simple and non-prescriptive, and recognise the limitations of implementation for smaller and less developed regions. It should address all elements of the NRM system and, therefore, extend beyond the regional NRM bodies to incorporate standards for participating government agencies, including research purchasers.

4. Regional NRM groups add value by leveraging investment from diverse sources

A significant number of studies have confirmed substantial cash and in-kind contributions to NRM through, for example the landcare movement (Curtis 2003). Evaluations of NHT1 suggested community contributions more than matched government investment (Hill 2000). In addition to these benefits, the regional model has further leveraged resources from non-government and non-traditional funding source, such as urban constituents, private businesses, local governments and NGOs.

A national survey by Fenton & Rickert (2008: vii) reports, 'Forty-one percent of regional NRM bodies obtained more than 15% of their NRM program funds from outside of NAP/NHT funding sources.' A five-year financial summary for the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority in Victoria (an advanced region) is provided as an example (Table 1). Many regional NRM bodies are actively working to diversify their income streams and position themselves to attract investment through potential carbon and biocarbon markets.

Table 1: Five-year financial summary (Source: Wimmera Catchment Management Authority, 2007: 46)

Revenue (\$,000)	06-07	05-06	04-05	03-04	02-03
Gov't	12,315	10,943	12,736	7,231	7,386
Other	611	746	757	465	287
Total	12,926	11,689	13,493	7,696	7,673

Some regional NRM bodies have the capacity to raise levies. In the case of South Australia, local governments collect levies for all rateable properties on behalf of their respective regional NRM bodies (see Box 2). In Victoria, CMAs lost the capacity to levy landholders following election of the Bracks Government. For example, the West Gippsland CMA collected \$2.87 million in levies in 1998/1999 (Victorian Minister for Environment and Conservation 2001).

Box 2: NRM Levies in South Australia

The following levy rates apply in the case of the Barossa Council⁴:

- 0.0079 cents in the dollar (Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges)
- 0.0088 cents in the dollar (SA Murray-Darling)
- 0.0178 cents in the dollar (Northern and Yorke)

⁴ The Barossa Council, South Australia. Online at: <http://www.barossa.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=405> (Accessed: 7 January 2009)

It may also be argued that regional NRM bodies have drawn significant federal resources that may have otherwise been allocated to other public sectors (eg defence, health, education) competing for scarce resources. The total allocation of resources to NRM programs at national level has increased substantially with formalisation and professionalisation of the regional model. Indeed, dismantling of the regional model in any state runs the risk of reducing the future flow of federal NRM resources relative to other jurisdictions.

Improvement opportunities

Governments are reluctant to invest in overheads and ongoing costs, and accessing long-term, non-project based funds is increasingly difficult (eg Rixon *et al.* 2007). Research by Robins and Dovers (2007b) notes significant funding disparities between and within jurisdictions under the NHT2 and NAP; having implications for regional capacity to effect NRM outcomes, including leveraging resources. The work describes the emergence of 'have' and the 'have not' regions, and a snowballing effect where the 'haves' (characterised, amongst other things, by more staff, experience, skills and information) continue to gain a disproportionate share of the available resources. Purposeful intervention is needed in policy and program formulation and execution to better support less developed regions.

The experience of decentralised NRM organisations in Canada provides lessons for Australia in leveraging resources. Several provinces have levy raising powers, which have proved more effective in raising funds for organisations servicing larger populations. In Ontario, for example, Toronto Conservation Authority (CA) supports around 400 staff compared to the smallest CA in the north at only 4 staff members (Robins 2007b).

Following significant budget cuts to CAs from the Government of Ontario in the 1990s (de Loë and Kreuzwiser 2005), all 36 CAs were forced to seek funds from other sources. As at 2005, CAs collectively administer CA\$250M in programs and services, with audited financial statements showing total revenues from self-generated fees (45 per cent), municipal fees (30 per cent), special

projects (9 per cent), and provincial (14 per cent) and federal (2 per cent) grants or contracts (Conservation Ontario 2007).

About 80% of CAs have formed foundations, with responsibilities for raising funds and community awareness, organising volunteers and administering specific projects, including land acquisitions. The foundations are registered charities and legally independent, and therefore able to accept donations or bequests of money, real or personal property on behalf of the CA. Donors are eligible for tax credits.

5. Regional NRM groups add value by driving more coordinated and accountable provision of NRM-related services

The coordination of and accountability for NRM-related services provided to regional communities (eg access to information, on-ground works, technical advice) has improved with formalisation and professionalisation of the regional model. These advances extend to all actors within the NRM system, including federal and state agencies (including research institutions), and the regional NRM bodies themselves.

NHT and NAP delivery through regional structures has stimulated Australian and state governments to better coordinate (within and between agencies) and account for activities and investments. This phenomenon is described as 'whole-of-government', 'joined up-government' and 'integrated governance' (Morrison & Lane 2005). That is, 'public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues' (Management Advisory Committee 2004). This is reflected in the emergence of joint committees and management teams – for example, the Australian Government's Land and Coasts Team (formerly NRM Team) 'a unique cross-departmental team comprising staff from the Australian Government departments of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Staff from both departments work side by side to jointly manage delivery of Caring for our Country and develop and implement

environment and resource management policies of joint interest.⁵

The increasing prevalence of program reviews, evaluations and audits, including the performance of regional NRM groups, has increased transparency and accountability (eg Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group 2006; Keogh *et al.* 2006; Sinclair Knight Merz 2006; Australian National Audit Office 2008); but often at the expense of significant input from regional actors and associated opportunity costs. Nevertheless, Hatfield-Dodds and Proctor (2008) argue in relation to stewardship payments that, '(d)evolved arrangements and trust funds are likely to perform better in terms of encouraging innovation and streamlining administration than programs managed directly by government, and should play an important part in new stewardship arrangements' (p.3).

Review and evaluation processes have often focused on governance aspects of regional NRM bodies. While the benefits of community-based NRM are well documented, the shifting of responsibilities and accountability from governments to decentralised organisations often fails to provide the requisite power and resources, and support for capacity development (Head & Ryan 2004; Lane *et al.* 2004; Macadam *et al.* 2004; Paton *et al.* 2004; Armitage 2005; Broderick 2005; Marshall 2008). Morrison and Lane (2006: 349) argue, 'we cannot take the capability of new regional governance structures for granted. Their capability needs to be systematically developed.' Marshall (2008) suggests that governments tend to over-estimate how quickly young organisations develop capacities, while Ostrom *et al.*, (1999) notes that governments tends to be under-estimated their capacity for self-(re)organisation.

Most jurisdictions have responded to review and research recommendations advocating the need to strengthen corporate governance arrangements and enhance training and information for regional NRM staff and Board members (Australian National Audit Office 2004; 2008). Most

jurisdictions have developed governance manuals (eg Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation 2006). In the case of NSW, Board members are required to qualify under the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Improvement opportunities

While better coordination has been achieved through the establishment of joint committees and the like, feedback mechanisms from these higher levels structures to regional NRM bodies about critical reporting and decision-making outcomes has not always been adequate (ITS Global 2006a; URS 2008). Improved pathways and systems of communication are needed.

Regional NRM bodies argue that current administrative and reporting requirements are onerous. The procedural demands of accountability, argue Wallington and Lawrence (2008), has sidelined 'a sense of shared responsibility amongst regional actors' (p. 277). The application of universal requirements also places a disproportionate burden on smaller entities. While the NRM Ministerial Council established the Red Tape Reduction Taskforce in April 2004, ITS Global (2006a: 28) reported that it 'did not have the desired impact on streamlining administrative processes for regional bodies'. The streamlining of administration and reporting is therefore a key area for improvement (WalterTurnbull 2005; Keogh *et al.* 2006; ITS Global 2006a; URS 2008), and should focus on lifting the capacity of poorer performing regional NRM bodies.

Cost shifting by state governments, particularly through reducing extension services, is perceived to have undermined delivery of national NRM programs (Paton *et al.* 2004; ITS Global 2006a; Keogh *et al.* 2006). The motivation to reduce expenditure, suggests Eckersley (2003), drives governments to devolve its NRM roles and responsibilities, including to volunteers. Further clarification is needed on roles and responsibilities by the range of actors providing NRM-related services. WalterTurnbull (2005) reported as many as six state agencies having an interest in the regional component of NHT2 and NAP in some jurisdictions. Service level agreements provide a mechanism for specifying

⁵ Australian Government. Online at: <http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/index.html> (Accessed 8 January 2009)

the terms of services supplied by government agencies, and could be used more extensively and effectively than is currently the case.

Lockwood *et al.* (2008) have conducted extensive research on pathways to good practice in regional NRM governance in partnership with nine case study regions in New South Wales, Tasmania and Victoria. Their work produced and tested a prototype governance standard and assessment framework based on the following principles: legitimacy, transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, fairness, integration, capability and adaptability. The outcomes of this research, together with the NSW Standard for Quality NRM (Natural Resources Commission 2005) and Queensland's guide to performance excellence (Vogel & Zammit 2004), present detailed opportunities for performance improvement.

The causal connection between investment and NRM outcomes has potential to be more effectively demonstrated through the use of program logic and stronger monitoring, evaluation and improvement as required in Caring for our Country. If adapted to regional contexts and adequately supported in development and implementation, it offers genuine opportunities to better account for effort to *all* stakeholders and to inform ongoing program improvement.

6. Regional NRM groups add value by tackling cross-boundary issues

The delineation of boundaries for managing natural resources is a perennial issue. While many commentators argue that catchments are the most appropriate unit for land and water management (eg Powell 1993), others note the importance of other demarcations, such as municipal (Wild River 2005), bioregional (Williams 2005), groundwater (Walker *et al.* 2003) and social (Brunkhurst 2000; Reeve & Brunckhorst 2007) boundaries. Some commentators question the cost-effectiveness of addressing problems that operate at larger scales and across NRM boundaries through community-based planning and investment prioritisation processes (eg ITS Global 2006b). Whatever the boundaries of Australia's NRM regions, proactively and effectively working across institutional

boundaries at both larger and smaller scales is an important, necessary and unavoidable function.

There are a number of structures and processes in place for facilitating cross-boundary and jurisdictional decision-making and action. At smaller scales, regional NRM bodies work with municipalities, water authorities, landcare groups, private forest development committees and the like to align their activities and investments with regional priorities. In some cases, formal agreements are articulated in memoranda of understanding or other specific protocols. Members of regional NRM bodies, including staff and directors, often sit on the governing Boards or working groups of other organisations to facilitate such alignment.

At more macro scales, regional NRM groups play a key role in facilitating multi-state planning and implementation processes, such as in the cases of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's Basin Community Committee or the Community Advisory Committee under the Lake Eyre Basin Intergovernmental Agreement. These bodies represent cooperative partnerships between state/territory and federal jurisdictions and key stakeholder groups, such as Aboriginal, farming and mining interests. These structures aim to avoid or reconcile adverse cross-border impacts. Price and Lovett (2008) highlight that the success of the Lake Eyre arrangements stems from a strong culture of openness, trust and respect that has developed between the groups and people involved.

Regional NRM bodies have expressed the desire to share knowledge, but currently have limited opportunities to do so (Morley & Thompson 2006). Formal multi-regional arrangements were formed under the NAP where priority regions bridged two or more NRM regions; however, a review by Sinclair Knight Merz (2006) described these relationships as ranging from *ad hoc* communication to collaborative partnerships. Formal overarching structures like WA's Regional Chairs Coordinating Group or Queensland's Regional NRM Groups Collective support cross-boundary coordination, and extend to the national-level 'Chairs Forums' (attended by all chairpersons and/or CEOs) convened by the Australian Government.

Improvement opportunities

Significant scope exists for improving cross boundary interactions in terms of planning, data sharing, knowledge exchange, program delivery and more. Some of these issues have been discussed under earlier sections.

While municipalities are often represented on NRM Boards and have been shown to positively influence their operating procedures (WalterTurnbull 2005), the influence of regional NRM bodies on the planning and activities of municipalities, especially the alignment of land use plans, is patchy and generally poor. As managers of public land and land use planners, local government is responsible for policy development and implementation of land use planning as well as regulating a wide range of activities that may impact upon natural resource management (Binning *et al.* 1999 as referenced by ALGA 2008). Getting land use planning 'right' will play an increasingly important role if emerging biocarbon markets drive large-scale revegetation across agricultural landscapes. Bilateral agreements, which are 'silent on the role of local government' (ITS Global 2006a p. 23), need to explicitly embrace municipalities as critical actors.

These issues are exacerbated where municipalities straddle NRM regions. The compatibility of local and regional plans is affected by the size of regions (such as the Rangelands in WA) and the mostly low rate bases and limited capacity of councils in such regions to participate in regional processes (Shepherd 2005). There are, however, a growing number of success stories that point to significant opportunities for improvement in this arena, such as those reported through the Australian Government's Mosaic Map project⁶ and in the Performance Story Report of the AG NRM Facilitators Network (*interPART & Associates* 2008).

Most jurisdictions in Australia have peak organisations in place, some of which may be

described as government-established 'independent' advisory bodies (eg New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria⁷) or regionally-initiated coordination and advocacy bodies (eg Queensland). These entities could be further developed and supported to facilitate greater cross-organisational sharing and learning. An examination of their mandates, structures and processes could identify opportunities for better supporting cross-boundary activities, especially in the case of NRM regions with limited capacity.

Advances in cross-boundary planning and implementation could be achieved through more effective use of formalised agreements. These agreements extend to twinning relationships (eg Knowledge for Regional NRM Team 2006), staff sharing and MOUs with universities and Indigenous groups. While a range of protocols are used by regional NRM bodies, lessons could be elicited from drawing together the diversity of experiences from across Australia for mutual benefit. A national survey by Robins (2008a) reports a high level of interest in using protocols as a capacity building mechanism.

7. Regional NRM groups add value by accessing and building regional capacity, networks and partnerships

In working toward integrated NRM, there is a need to acknowledge the highly complex nature of the system, and that ecological, human and political goals sometimes conflict (eg Pahl-Wostl 2007). One of the recognised strengths of the regional approach is the multitude of connections that NRM bodies have to related organisations through their staff, Board members and affiliates (Campbell 2006a; ITS Global 2006a; Sinclair Knight Merz 2006; Whelan & Oliver 2005; Oliver & Whelan 2006). These stable networks provide governments with ready pathways for program delivery across a range of issues and priorities and, importantly, to potentially scale up and sustain the impact of their investments.

Building the capacity of these stakeholders, strengthening networks and expanding

⁶ Australian Government. Online at: <http://www.nrm.gov.au/projects/index.html> (Accessed 14 January 2009)

⁷ Natural Resources Council (NSW), Natural Resources Management Council (SA), Natural Resources Management Council (Tasmania) and Victorian Catchment Management Council

partnerships is a key function in facilitating effective and efficient NRM delivery. Regional NRM bodies are effective at bringing together and forging partnerships with individual stakeholder groups (eg agricultural and fishing industry representatives, commercial companies such as HydroTas) and between multiple organisations (eg to purchase and rehabilitate farming land with Australian Bush Heritage Fund, Trust for Nature, Greening Australia, World Wide Fund for Nature).

In the case of Indigenous stakeholders, several regional NRM groups in Queensland have developed specific Natural Cultural Resource Management Plans with their Indigenous communities (eg Wet Tropics Aboriginal Plan Project Team 2005; South East Queensland Traditional Owners Land and Sea Management Alliance - SEQTOLSMA 2008). In South West Queensland, the Far South West Aboriginal NRM Group guided the development of a cross-sectoral plan that incorporated links with health, education and local government (FSWANRMG 2007).

As the sphere of government closest to the community, local government is responsible for good governance and the care and protection of local communities within a framework of sustainable development (ALGA 2008). The Regional Partnerships program offers funding for environmental projects, and is facilitated through a network of 56 Area Consultative Committees (ACCs). Set up by the Australian Government, these committees operate independently of regional NRM bodies. In a NSW survey, 46 per cent of councils cited the need for a formal relationship between the two models (Shepherd 2005). A Memoranda of Understanding is now under development between councils and regional NRM groups. It aims to set out how local government will be involved in and mutually benefit from regional NRM processes.

Variation in the ability of regions to build capacity and develop partnerships is partly a function of factors outside of their control, such as the size of the region, its population, remoteness, access to information, and proximity to learning and research centres (Robins & Dovers 2007b). These factors influence the flow of government resources, and favour some

regions over others. State support also varies substantially between jurisdictions, with base funding per regional NRM body of around \$1 million p.a. in the case of Victoria, for example, compared to \$250,000 p.a. in Western Australia (WalterTurnbull 2005).

Improvement opportunities

While the value of stakeholder involvement in NRM planning and management is widely acknowledged and advocated, there is growing recognition of the need to adopt participatory and adaptive management approaches that better cope with uncertainties arising from rapid changes, such as in socio-economic conditions, global markets and climate (Tippett *et al.* 2005). Associated with this, is a need for methods that develop participants' critical capacity to enable adaptation to changing circumstances. With their understanding of local contexts and cultures, regional NRM groups are potentially well placed to facilitate these learning and development processes. Box 3 highlights an international example from which lessons for Australia may be drawn.

Box 3: Harmonising Collaborative Planning

Europe's HarmoniCOP project (Harmonising Collaborative Planning) developed a social learning framework within which to address such issues and tested it in ten river basin management case studies. Themes that emerged included exploring different frames, managing boundaries, making innovative use of information and communication tools and promoting two-way integration of planning across different scales. The research confirmed the importance of having sufficient time, involving stakeholders early, and carefully attending to process management, including governance and cultural adaptation (Tippett *et al.* 2005; Pahl-Wostl *et al.* 2008). It also highlighted how well crafted processes can address a myriad of challenges and multiple outcomes. These findings are supported by European Union's Social Learning for Integrated Management of catchments (SLIM) project (Ison *et al.* 2004).

Many regional NRM bodies experience high staff turnover and consequent loss of corporate knowledge and networks (Knowledge for Regional NRM Team 2006). A national survey by Fenton and Rickert (2008) measured staff turnover at 11 per cent across 60 per cent of regional NRM bodies within the last 12 months. Further, Robins (2009) reports that Board members are concerned about the limited pool of potential future appointees from the community and the ramifications for future capacity. A significant body of work has examined 'burn out' in the NRM sector arising from, amongst other things, high demand for input, excessive responsibilities, administrative burdens, continual change and uncertain funding arrangements (eg Curtis 2000; Peters 2006). Robins (2008b) provides a framework to inform more holistic and strategic targeting of effort and investment in capacity building. It describes 29 measures for building capacity across human, social, institutional and economic dimensions.

Differential remunerations for staff and Board members between regional NRM bodies present a potential source of competition and conflict. In 2005, remunerations for the Board Chair in NSW were reportedly \$50,000 p.a. compared to \$16,000 p.a. in the case of Victoria (WalterTurnbull 2005). Bilateral agreements could be used to standardise remunerations or set a band that adequately reflects the requisite roles and responsibilities, and is attractive to prospective staff Board members.

The procedural demands of accountability, argue Wallington and Lawrence (2008), has sidelined 'a sense of shared responsibility amongst regional actors' (p. 277). The recent process of accrediting regional plans and investment strategies by the Australian Government is suggested as impeding effective partnerships (Farrelly & Conacher 2007; Wallington *et al.* 2008). URS (2008) identified that one of the key assets in the investment planning process was the passionate people involved but that lack of recognition of expertise, combined with inadequate time, communication, transparency and coordination was eroding energy, commitment and confidence.

There is scope for regional NRM bodies (and the sector more generally) to extend their activities and relationships beyond traditional target audiences (lead farmers, landcare groups, etc) to other actors (non-adopters, agricultural consultants, etc). Strengthening links between regional NRM groups and ACCs represents one such opportunity, as does developing more direct working relationships with research bodies for knowledge and capacity development. The needs and interests of marginalised peoples is an important consideration (Jackson 2005; Morrison & Lane 2005). Case studies of approaches and experiences from working with non-traditional and marginalised audiences could be more strategically documented and communicated.

In support of an increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment, promoting improved conditions for interdisciplinary, systems-oriented research, with 'real world' processes and outcomes will be well regarded. This could incorporate the use of approaches such as participatory action research (PAR) that have strong track records in situations where management is ongoing in the absence of definitive evidence (eg Kemmis 2005, Wadsworth 1998). It might also consider the role of decision support as a broader initiative than the development of a decision support output - rather one that aims to foster learning and co-learning (Walker 2002) in the true sense of active adaptive management, that addresses the factors that cause decision support based projects to fail and ensures that R&D and evaluation is relevant, transparent, flexible, useable (Bellamy *et al.* 2001; Loevinsohn *et al.* 2002).

In conclusion, this paper presents a suite of propositions where regional groups add unique value to the delivery and achievement of NRM outcomes. It identifies an indicative range of opportunities through which potential can be fostered and improvements made in how regional groups can strengthen ability to achieve NRM targets and outcomes. Enabling these is a shared responsibility between key parties; it is not something that lies solely with regional NRM groups.

While this speaks to the shaping of roles and responsibilities, and to issues of effectiveness and efficiency, inevitably it is the quality of leadership and relationships that make or break the achievement of outcomes.

What happens next?

This discussion paper will inform a workshop to be held in mid-February with the Regional Chairs Coordinating Group. Other participants may be invited to attend the workshop, including state agency personnel and other regional staff and governing Board members. The discussion paper will also be used to inform interviews (face-to-face and by telephone) conducted by the consultants with key individuals prior to and following the workshop. Further, it forms the basis of a survey for distribution to around sixty stakeholders to test the value propositions outlined.

Feedback on this discussion paper together with the outcomes of interviews and workshop deliberations and survey results will inform the preparation of a final project report. The report will address the project objectives stated in the previous section. It will provide case studies that illustrate the value and contribution of regional groups to NRM delivery, and any implications arising from this experience. Recommendations to support future directions and activities will be provided.

The outcomes of this work are intended to support a range of processes, including MOU discussions, partnership development and future investments.

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