

# Report from the 10<sup>th</sup> NRM Regional Bodies Chairs' Forum

## 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012 at the Hotel Grand Chancellor, Adelaide

### ***Draft 1: 24 April 2012***

*Planning for New Horizons* was the theme adopted by regional NRM Chairs for their 10<sup>th</sup> Annual NRM Regional Bodies Chairs' Forum held in Adelaide on 19 and 20 of April 2012. Sharon Starick, convenor of the National NRM Regions Working Group and host for the Forum welcomed 53 Chairs of Australia's 56 regional NRM bodies. Also in attendance were the Chairs of South Australia's NRM Council and Victoria's Catchment Management Council and senior officials from the Australian Government and State Governments. David Walker, Chair of the National Landcare Network was the Forum's guest. The Chief Executives/General Managers of the regional bodies participated in part of the Forum to hear briefings from the Australian Government.

The Hon Paul Caica South Australia's Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation attended the Forum dinner to formally welcome Chairs to Adelaide.

### **Drivers of Landscape Change**

The opening sessions of the Forum concentrated on the drivers for landscape change facing Australia. The aim was to present the "big picture" of issues that regional bodies need to consider when developing their regional NRM plans.

**Dr Andrew Ash** (CSIRO) described the Climate Adaptation challenges in a world of contested science and values and a level of scepticism particularly amongst primary producers about whether human activity is causing climate change. Depending on people's beliefs, their response to the messages about climate change range from irritation to confusion and fear. Andrew outlined the science and the potential impacts on all aspects of NRM and presented a framework for assessing climate change vulnerability of different NRM issues. Planning for climate change needs to accommodate a range of factors: making decisions in the face of uncertainty; building adaptive capacity; developing and testing adaptation options; establishing appropriate institutional and policy settings (emphasising the importance of a cooperative model).

**Lucy Lytton** from GeoScience Australia explored the potential growth of the Coal Seam Gas industry and other mining developments, particularly in relation to impact on groundwater resources.

**Peter Hayman** from the South Australia Research and Development Institute briefed Chairs on the agricultural challenges facing in Australia in the context of increasing demand for food (driven by population growth and a growing middle class in the developing countries); biofuels (biofuels consume 30% of U.S. corn production), greenhouse gas mitigation (carbon farming); on-going biodiversity and conservation measures; and the changing climate. Peter

noted that Australia's share of the global agrifood exports was 4% and is expected to be about 3% in 2050. Peter also provided a detailed overview of the potential climate change impact on South Australia's Goyder's Line that estimates the margin of South Australia's grain belt.

Key messages from the Chairs' discussion on these presentations were:

- Chairs acknowledged the importance of preparing for potential future impacts (uncertainty), especially if we are to avoid perverse impacts of our NRM actions;
- But with this comes the need to involve and educate communities, particularly young people;
- The planning challenge is to strike the balance between action and over reaction;
- Chairs noted that the climatic variations across Australia means that the current climate regime for some regions could be the regime faced by other regions in the future and that we have the opportunity to learn how to manage within those different climates;
- In terms of regional NRM body capacity to undertake these new planning tasks Chairs stressed the importance of clarity of the NRM planning role; having adequate information on which to plan; developing adaptive plans that can respond to new information; engaging their communities (including local government) in the plan development and implementation;
- Chairs welcomed the opportunity to take a holistic approach to NRM planning and see the climate change planning as one element of the broader regional NRM plan.

### **Operational Settings**

The afternoon session was designed for Chairs to hear from senior officials about the directions being pursued with national NRM policies and programs. **Ian Thompson** reminded Chairs that while the regional model was valued by governments we cannot be complacent and must continue to articulate its benefits and demonstrate its effectiveness in working with the community in delivering NRM outcomes. This is particularly important if Chairs wanted to push for longer term funding in the future.

Ian responded to questions from Chairs about the competitive element of the *Caring for Our Country* program and the delivery of Community Action Grants, noting that the next stage of the *Caring for our Country* Review will involve detailed conversations with regional bodies and others around these issues.

**Bernadette O’Neill** explained the work of the Office of Water Science and the Independent Expert Scientific Committee in addressing community concerns about potential impacts of Coal Seam gas and large coal mining developments on water resources. Bio-regional assessments will involve NRM regional bodies if there region is underlain by coal seam gas and coal reserves, but the relevant State Governments will need to have established an agreement with the Australian Government (so far Queensland, South Australia and NSW and signed the agreements).

**Jo Mummery** covered NRM Planning for Climate Change and described the framework for delivering climate change information to support regional NRM planning. **Peter Cotsell** outlined the process for developing “climate ready” regional NRM plans to support the carbon farming initiative.

**Bob Debus** (Chair, National Wildlife Corridors Plan Advisory Group and Chair, Land Sector Carbon and Biodiversity Board) concluded the briefing session with an update on progress of the National Wildlife Corridors Plan and the Biodiversity Fund. The Plan recognises that connectivity will aid species in adapting to climate change. To successfully establish and maintain wildlife corridors, firm and ongoing collaboration and cooperation between all parties is required (government, private landholders, regional bodies, indigenous etc) and to facilitate this consideration is being given to a Wildlife Corridors Act.

The Biodiversity Fund (\$946m over the next six years) has completed its first round of project assessments and it is expected that the Minister will announce the outcome over the next few weeks. Multi-year projects are being supported in the first round of funding.

Chairs asked Bob about the relationship between the National Corridors and local and regional corridors and commented on the need to better manage national parks so that corridors do not become a transport corridor for pest animals.

The key points emerging from Chairs discussion on “operational” matters were:

- Chairs welcomed the challenge and the recognition of the contribution regional bodies can make to the future planning for NRM in their regions;
- They recognise that there are a diversity of Australian Government (CfoC, Land Sector Package, Coals Seam Gas, Wildlife Corridors etc.) and State/Territory government programs that have overlapping implications for regional NRM programs and that one strength of the regional model is our ability to align these programs with the aspirations of regional communities. But it is important that policy coordination occurs at the National and State levels to ensure that regional bodies are not getting conflicting messages. Chairs noted the success of the Australian Government Land and Coasts Team in relation to the multi-agency *Caring for our Country* program;

- Chairs also recognised the need to further build the planning capacity within regional bodies and will seek to build relationships with local government, the Planning Institute of Australia and others;
- Although the initial injection of resources is necessary undertake the planning tasks, Chairs expressed the view that NRM planning is an adaptive process and support will be required in the future to keep the plans relevant;
- Chairs noted that keeping the plans relevant to regional communities also requires resources to support their implementation;
- In relation to adapting the plans for climate change Chairs called for the roles of regional bodies and others (for example local government) to be clearly defined and understood and this may require investment in marketing/awareness raising;
- Information to support regional planning needs to be provided on a regional basis and research at a regional level will be required, there may be limited value in refining “national” projections;
- Coordination between the Australian Governments and State/Territory governments’ efforts will also be critical and while regional bodies can assist in this area, agreement between levels of governments on the regional body role will be important.

### **Regional Environmental Accounts Pilot**

**Pam Green**, assisted by Carla Sbrocci and Peter Cosier of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, briefed Chairs on the progress with regional environmental accounts trials. 10 regions are now participating in the trials. Chairs agreed to extend the completion date for Stage 1 of the trials and noted that 5 of the 10 regions will meet this revised deadline.

Chairs agreed to recommit to the Regional Environmental Accounts Working Group. Members to comprise: Pam Green, Convenor (Sothorn Rivers CMA, NSW), Max Kitchell (NRM South, Tasmania), Doug Hall (Perth Region NRM, WA), John Bethel (Northern Gulf Resource Management Group, Queensland), Royce Bishop (Reef Catchments, Queensland).

### **Report from the Carbon Working Group**

Mike Berwick (Terrain, Queensland) reported that the Carbon Working Group has been exploring options for regional bodies’ participation in the carbon market (primarily to support the delivery of NRM outcomes), with approximately 30 regional NRM bodies participating in this work. Work is underway on the type of commercial entity appropriate for regional bodies and a business case for that entity, further details will be available over the next few months.

Chairs thanked Mike for the briefing and agreed that it was necessary for all regional bodies to be kept informed of progress because of the potential implications for all regional bodies.

### **Performance Excellence**

Andrew Drysdale, on behalf of the National CEOs Working Group, briefed Chairs on progress with the regional body performance excellence reviews. Following a presentation on these reviews at the 2011 Forum Chairs adopted a target of 80% (45) of regional NRM bodies having conducted appropriate Performance Excellence Review by July 2013. The Australian Government has agreed to support the review process with a grant of \$180,000 to subsidise the reviews and strengthen regional bodies' capacity to undertake them. 27 regional bodies have completed the Organisational Performance Review (using the framework developed by the Qld and SA NRM bodies). A further 3 have completed a review using another form of the Business Excellence Framework and 8 regional bodies have signed up for a review before July 2013.

### **Knowledge Conference Report**

Andrew Drysdale (Convenor, Knowledge Conference Organising Committee) briefed Chairs on the very successful 4th National NRM Knowledge Conference held in Adelaide prior to the Chairs Forum (16 to 18 April 2012). The conference theme, "*There is a lot happening in our backyard*" was reflected in the wide array of concurrent session papers and in the production of NRM Achievements Report 2012 (comprising one case study from each of Australia's 56 NRM Regions). 340 delegates and 11 Keynote speakers attended the Conference. 33 papers were presented to 11 concurrent sessions and 3 concurrent sessions held with a workshop format. Key messages from the Conference included:

- Social considerations are central to the way we do business – they are important for achieving practice change and we need to better understand and incorporate the social costs and benefits into our decision-making;
- A new narrative is needed to explain the future operating environment and challenges. Stories will be an important part of this narrative and we have much to learn from indigenous communities, both in Australia and overseas on how to tell these stories. The stories are part of the process for passing knowledge between generations;
- Resilience thinking is becoming embedded in the way we plan and monitor our NRM efforts;
- Collaboration and partnerships are essential, no one sector or department or level of government can deal with the NRM challenges facing Australia.
- And we need to create opportunities for innovation.

## Landcare-Regional NRM Bodies Statement of Common Purpose

Sharon Starick formally welcomed David Walker, Chair of the National Landcare Network, to the Forum and briefed Chairs on the agreement at the 2011 Forum to develop a national Statement of Common Purpose between the National NRM Regions Working Group and the National Landcare Network. Sharon invited Sarah Ryan, who led the development of the agreement on behalf of the National NRM Regions' Working Group, and David Walker to sign the Statement.

Following the formal signing of the Statement Chair's identified the following issues that could be progressed by the National Working Group and the National Landcare Network (NLN):

- The need for the Statement to foster the development of State/regional interactions between regional bodies and Landcare – many issues are local in nature and need to be resolved at the regional level;
- It is important that the Statement be promoted widely amongst regional NRM bodies and Landcare organisations;
- Sharing information between the National Working Group and NLN on policy and program developments;
- The National NRM Regions Working Group reporting back to the 2013 Forum on progress.

## 2012 Forum Report to Ministers

Chairs were asked to identify any other emerging issues that could be incorporated into the report to Ministers. The following points were noted:

- *Caring for our Country* and the need to maintain continuity of capacity to deliver and the need to lower transaction costs;
- Chairs need to recognise Minister's concern about *Caring for our Country* recognition and his interest in the bio-banking concept;
- Chairs are interested in how they might have input to "national" R&D investments (noting the recent Productivity Commission Report on "The Most Efficient / Effective Way to Resource R&D Investment");
- While the new NRM initiatives are welcome we must not forget the on-going initiatives of previous years, e.g. dryland salinity are still being delivered;
- Concern about potential impact from the mining boom on land and marine (due to increased shipping) natural assets;
- Chairs recognise the major reform initiative being developed by the Murray Darling Plan.

## **National NRM Regions' Working Group Work Program**

Chairs considered a request from the National NRM Region's Working Group for increased regional subscriptions to support the efforts of the Working Group. There was in-principle support for the request with Chairs stressing the following points:

- The focus for the National NRM Regions' Working Group needs to be policy implementation and program development;
- The Chairs stressed that the intention is not lobbying governments and that "relationship building" should not be a primary purpose of the National Working Group;
- They recognised that aim of the proposal was to ensure adequate support for the range of activities initiated by the National Working Group.

Chairs recognised the range of issues coming from the 2012 Forum that the National Working Group will need to address and also asked the Group to explore:

- The potential for aggregating Regional Plans to develop a National Strategy (overview);
- Consider developing an NRM regional bodies research paper to identify information required to address the future big issues / drivers for NRM?

The Forum expressed a note of caution for the National Working Group asking it prioritise its effort and to concentrate on the top 3-4 issues.

## **2013 National NRM Regions Chairs Forum**

The Forum concluded with Sharon Starick recommending that the 2013 Forum be hosted by West Australia. Chairs endorsed the recommendation.