

Report from the 11th NRM Regional Bodies Chairs' Forum

21st & 22nd March 2013 at the Sebel Hotel Mandurah, Western Australia

The 11th annual NRM Chairs' Forum was held in Mandurah, Western Australia on 21 and 22 March 2013. Chairs or deputy Chairs from 42 of Australia's 54 regional NRM bodies attended the Forum along with 18 guests/speakers. David Gardner, Chair of the South West Catchments Council and Chair of the WA NRM Leaders Group convened the Forum.

The theme adopted for 2013 was *Sustainable Water use in Natural Resource Management*. Mr **Rob Freeman**, Commissioner, National Water Commission briefed delegates on national policy drivers for sustainable water use and NRM. Rob covered the role of the National Water Commission and the National Water Initiative and the outcomes of recent reviews of both. COAG has agreed to extend the term of the Commission and has asked it to maintain its role of assessing progress by jurisdictions in meeting the National Water Initiative objectives as well as taking on responsibility for auditing progress with the Basin Plan. The question of whether the Commission's focus adequately addresses the link between water and NRM was raised during the discussion. **Professor Richard Harper**, Murdoch University, provided a Western Australia perspective on water and land management challenges. He used several local case-studies to demonstrate the importance of an integrated approach to managing land and water resources, particularly in the context of climate change and landscape options for sequestering carbon.

Organisational Performance Excellence

At the 2011 National NRM Chairs' Forum Chairs received a report from Norbert Vogel (Australian Knowledge Management Group) on the outcomes of Organisational Performance Excellence (OPE) reviews of regional NRM bodies undertaken over the previous 5 years. Chairs recognised the value of the reviews and agreed to set a target of 85% of regional NRM bodies having undertaken a review by 2013.

Kathleen Broderick, CEO, NRM South and **Andrew Drysdale**, CEO, Queensland Regional Groups Collective, briefed Chairs on progress with the target noting that it will be met in 2013. 37 regional NRM bodies have undertaken the review (six of these had follow-up reviews resulting in 43 reviews in total) with a further 8 committed to undertaking a review by 30 June – resulting in 83% of regional bodies. Their briefing also included a high level summary of the reviews undertaken since 2011 that provided a snapshot of where the sector was at relative to best practice across a number of business elements. **Damian Postma**, CEO, South West Catchments Council, shared with Chairs his positive experience from a review of his organisation. The presentation concluded with a recommendation that

Chairs commit to continuing the project noting that follow-up reviews provide the most benefit to individual regional bodies.

Outcomes from the Chairs discussion:

- There was strong support for continuing the OPE project with Chairs seeing value in: demonstrating and promoting regional bodies' commitment to performance excellence; providing a continuous improvement pathway for CEOs and Executive Officers with the potential for KPIs to be linked to OPE; and for promoting the work of regional NRM in general and to funders in particular.
- Chairs considered the issue of providing formal recognition of leading practice but noted the primary purpose is to inform individual Boards of their performance. Tools for doing this include sharing of information between regional bodies through workshops, web-based case studies etc.
- The WA waterwise approach may be one way of publically promoting Board commitment to performance excellence.
- Chairs provided support for a future target of 15 reviews per year, but there was some discussion as to the frequency of the follow-up reviews.
- Chairs noted that resources will be required to support the project (an estimate of \$50,000 per year or \$1,000 per region for on-going support of the project was canvassed) and agreed that there are clear benefits in NRM regional bodies being seen to contribute.
- Chairs asked the working group to consider how to avoid doing this work twice. The NSW Natural Resources Commission also audits CMA performance in that state and in some cases regional bodies use other methods to assess Organisational Performance Excellence. The methodology should not be prescriptive. A "hybrid" system that recognises different state and regional approaches might be more appropriate.

Australian Government Report

Sean Sullivan, First Assistant Secretary – Biodiversity Conservation Division, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities and **Michelle Lauder**, Assistant Secretary, Landcare, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry briefed Chairs on progress with phase 2 of *Caring for our Country* call for applications. The details of the Environment Stream are now available and the details of the Sustainable Agriculture Stream will be released over the coming weeks. Discussion with Chairs centred on how regional NRM bodies can demonstrate the contribution they make to economic and social outcomes as well as protecting the natural infrastructure that underpins our resource based industries.

Regional Environmental Accounts

Pam Green, Chair, Southern Rivers CMA, and Chair of the Regional Environmental Accounts Steering Committee outlined the background to the Regional Environmental Accounts project and the previous decisions of the National Chairs' Forum to support the project. She introduced **Peter Cosier** and **Carla Sbrocchi** from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists. Peter outlined the strong international interest in the Australian pilot project and how it could be used to support the implementation of the International System of Environmental Accounts. Carla provided a more detailed briefing on the aims and progress with the regional trials. A report on stage 1 of the trials will be available in mid- 2013. **Annie Lane**, SA Executive Officer, presented a perspective from the Eyre Peninsula region that has been involved in the trial. She noted that REA provides a common language for reporting on condition of natural resources and a means of prioritising investment.

Outcomes from the Chairs discussion:

- Chairs reaffirmed their support for the project and acknowledged the significant contribution of the Wentworth Group. They noted the forthcoming release of the Stage 1 report and provided in-principle support for the project moving to the second stage.
- Chairs recognised the important benefits to both regional bodies and investors in having a robust monitoring system in place that is capable of reporting on changes to the condition of natural resources.
- The Steering Committee was asked to consider the broader engagement of other sectors (for example the mining sector) in the second stage and to build stronger links with relevant national projects. Other matters to be considered by the Steering Committee are: the inclusion of resource managers as “assets”, caution around the accounts becoming “leagues tables” and the need for the accounts to recognise the values that underpin investment decision making.
- Chairs recognised the high level of support provided by the Wentworth Group to date and the need for this level of effort to be available into the future. Securing government investment in the process will require “proof of concept” based on a factual report of progress and a clear indication of how the accounts can transform NRM in the future.
- Chairs endorsed the Steering Committee membership for 2013/14 as:
Max Kitchell, NRM South (convenor)
Royce Bishop, Reef Catchments
John Bethel, Northern Gulfs
Pam Green, Southern Rivers CMA
Heather Baldock, NRM Eyre Peninsula
Chris King, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council

NRM Chairs forward planning

David Gardner introduced the session and briefed members on the changes to the National NRM Regions' Working Group terms of reference. Following the Forum all existing regional NRM body Chairs will receive an invitation to submit an Expression of Interest for a two year appointment to Chair the National NRM Regions' Working Group. The position will be independent, the Chair may continue in that role for the term of appointment even if their role as regional body Chair ceases. There is the opportunity for the Chair's home State/Territory to appoint another Chair (or Board member in the case of the Territories) to bring the State/Territory perspective to the National Working Group. The process will be concluded at the 17 May meeting of the National NRM Regions' Working Group.

To assist with establishing the Forum work program for 2013/14 (to be delivered by the National NRM Region's Working Group) Chairs received progress reports on:

- NRM Planning in Australia – **James McKee**, CEO, NRM North
- The Landcare Statement of Common Purpose - **Sharon Starick**, Chair, SA Murray Darling Basin NRM Board
- Indigenous Land Management - **Kate Andrews**, Chair, NT NRM
- Carbon Working Group - **Mike Berwick**, Chair, Terrain NRM.

Following the presentations Chairs worked in table groups to consider the detail of the projects and provide direction for the National Working Group.

Outcomes from the Chairs discussion:

There was overall support for the existing projects, but Chairs noted the risks of having too many national projects and the need for those projects to have clear terms of reference. In relation to assigning priority to projects, Chairs noted that some projects are on-going and require less attention than others.

- **Organisational Performance Excellence:** There was strong support for continuing this project and for using the information to support the development of a culture of continuous improvement in regional NRM bodies and to promote our efforts to major investors. Chairs suggested that a Business Case be developed outlining the funds required to support the project.
- **Regional Environmental accounts:** Chairs confirmed the priority for this project (see earlier discussion) and reinforced the need for the project to be sustainable in the long term by engaging the Federal government and relevant agencies in order to broaden support for the project at the national level.
- **Regional NRM planning:** Chairs recognised the need to articulate the benefits of regional NRM planning and agreed that the project should continue but Chairs suggested a tighter focus.

- **Indigenous Land Management:** Chairs supported the need for a greater understanding of opportunities to increase engagement of indigenous peoples in NRM and for developing mechanisms for sharing this information.
- **Carbon:** Chairs supported the proposal to reconsider the terms of reference for the Carbon Working Group with a focus on understanding the implications of national policy directions for regional NRM programs.
- **National NRM roundtable:** This was seen as an important on-going initiative that the National Working Group should continue to support. The Roundtable provides an opportunity to share information across a range of organisations and build partnerships at the national level.
- **NRM Knowledge Conference 2014:** Chairs continue to support the biennial NRM Knowledge Conferences and regard this as a valuable opportunity for learning and networking and suggested that one area for the 2014 conference could be sharing information on Indigenous Land Management.
- **National NRM Chairs Forum:** Chairs expressed strong support for the annual Forum of Chairs and regard this as an important part of the National Working Group's work program. Chairs held different views as to whether the Forum should be held annually or biennially and asked the Working Group to examine this issue.
- **Policy and Program Development:** Chairs recognised that monitoring and responding to invitations to contribute to related policy development processes is a major role for the National Working Group. Food Security and capacity building were two areas identified by the Chairs for attention in 2013/14.
- **National NRM awareness:** Promoting understanding of the benefits of regional NRM remains a challenge and on-going effort is required. A common national message promoted locally should underpin the awareness strategy. The project could also consider how to promote the regional NRM message through school curriculum.
- **Landcare Statement of Common Purpose:** Chairs noted the good progress being made with the implementation of the statement and agreed that the National Working Group should continue to support its implementation.
- **National Extension Framework:** Chairs recognised the importance of this initiative and asked to National Working Group to maintain a watching brief.

Forum Close

David Gardner concluded the Forum with a discussion on the location for the 2014 Forum. Chairs noted current rotational policy (NSW in 2014 and then Queensland in 2015) but asked the Working Group to consider Canberra as the location for the next Forum because of the greater potential for access to Ministers.