Report from the 13th NRM Regional Bodies Chairs' Forum

19th & 20th March 2015 at the Rydges Southbank, Brisbane, Queensland

The 13th annual NRM Chairs' Forum was held in Brisbane, Queensland, on 19 and 20 March 2015. Chairs or deputy Chairs from 44 of Australia's 56 regional NRM bodies attended the Forum along with the Chair of Victoria's Catchment Management Council and the Chair of New South Wale's Local Land Services Board of Chairs. In addition to key note speakers, guests included Terry Hubbard (Chair, National Landcare Network), Jim Adams (Executive Officer, National Landcare Network), James McKee (National Landcare Ministerial Advisory Committee), Sean Sullivan (Department of Environment), and Ian Thompson (Department of Agriculture).

The Forum was hosted by SEQ Catchments (Queensland) on behalf of the Queensland Regional Groups Collective.

Max Kitchell, Chair of NRM Regions Australia convened the Forum, with the official welcome provided by Robert Smith Chair of SEQ Catchments (Queensland) who hosted the Forum on behalf of the Queensland Regional Groups Collective.

Max recorded apologies for Ministers Hunt and Joyce who were unable to attend because the Australian Parliament was sitting and extended a special welcome to five Chairs who were attending the Forum for the first time.

The theme adopted for the 2015 Forum was: *Partnering with community to deliver the national Landcare and sustainable agriculture programmes.*

Session 1: Partnering with the agriculture sector – Session Chair, Sharon Starick (SA)

Charles Burke, CEO, AgForce, Queensland provided the opening address to the Forum. Charles outlined the principle drivers for agriculture business enterprises as productivity, profitability and environmental. Other important drivers include rural lifestyle where values include healthy cattle, pasture and land and successful and happy family. But this sector of agriculture is ageing with the average age of the producer is 60 which means adopting practices with a payback period of greater than 5 years is unlikely to be adopted.

In terms of NRM practices we need to be able to describe the cost of implementation and maintenance; outline the profitability, productivity and environmental benefits and we need to be mindful of how to start implementing.

Charles reinforced the magnitude of the challenge by illustrating the decline in nominal farm profitability since 2003. To secure adoption of best management practices we will also need to access producers "trusted" networks – i.e. how producers get advice.

Charles suggested that we should focus on specific practise that fall below industry standard rather than focussing generic practice such as grazing land management.

Brad Warren (Chair, Oceanwatch) provided a follow-up presentation outlining Oceanwatch's experience with working with the seafood industry. The development of sustainable fisheries management practices was pioneered by the industry and was part of an effort to communicate to the market the sustainability credentials of the industry. In effect their work was supported the concept of a "social licence" where the industry was able to demonstrate the safety and sustainability of its produce. Brad reminded Chairs that

working with industry organisations does not necessarily mean that individual primary producers will follow their industry body – it's a matter of trust and those organisations may not always have the trust of individual fishers. It's important to be aware of, and avoid, industry politics. Brad also drew attention to the need to work with RDCs on extension and adoption efforts – these are not always a priority for research organisations.

Discussion followed the presentations with Chairs drawing attention to the need for greater exposure of regional NRM organisation staff to the realities of agriculture and supporting the concept of a social licence for agriculture.

<u>Workshop Report</u>

Chairs shared information about the management practices promoted by their regional NRM organisations, these covered a wide range of industry sectors (grazing, beef, grapes, grains, sugar, oyster and aquaculture, irrigation etc) and addressed issues such as soil health, nutrient management and water quality, riparian management, pest plants and animals (biosecurity) animal health.   These are addressed through a range of partnerships (Landcare at the local level, industry groups, other farmer groups etc).

The workshop also identified opportunities for regional NRM including:

- Working with peak industry bodies and R&D organisations to develop more effective extension strategies;
- Exploring opportunities to support greater consumer confidence and trust in agriculture produce – restoring the social licence.

Session 2: Implementing the National Landcare Programme – Session Chair: Max Kitchell

One Chair from each jurisdiction, along with **Ian Thompson** (Department of Agriculture), **Sean Sullivan** (Department of Environment) and **James McKee** (National Landcare Ministerial Advisory Committee) formed a panel to discuss progress with implementing the Government's National Landcare Programme. Key points raised by Panel members included:

- Looking for efficiencies in back-office functions to assist with meeting the reduced regional funding;
- Strengthening governance and probity practices;
- The need to avoid micromanagement of regional delivery of NLP by the Australian Government;
- Regional allocations in NSW and the need for these to be revised to take account of the new Local Land Services regional boundaries;
- The 10% upper limit on spending on MERI should be reviewed and regions given greater flexibility to increase this if necessary;
- The relationship with the Australian Government officials has been good – with some regions reporting greater respect for regional decision-making;
- Transitioning to the new MERI framework is requiring more resources than initially thought – having a clearer understanding, at the outset, of what was required could have assisted here;
- The 10% administration cap is causing problems for small regions in having available enough resources to devote to the transition;
- The four year funding agreement was welcomed as was the building on the previous program rather than reinventing the wheel – we should now start thinking about funding after the NLP finishes in 4 years;

- Building the links with the Green Army and the relationship with Landcare was noted as important issues.

The Panel discussion stressed the need for regional NRM organisations to demonstrate performance. We need a good narrative and a strong investment in the MERI framework to convey to our communities and parliamentarians the on-ground outcomes being achieved from Government investment.

Session 3: Building partnerships with the National Landcare Network

Max Kitchell welcomed Terry Hubbard, Chair of the National Landcare Network, to the Forum. Terry outlined the history and drivers for the National Landcare Network and its associated jurisdictional networks. Sharing knowledge, promoting landcare and advocating for funding have been key issues.

Regional NRM bodies are important partners and NLN is keen to work with the State and Territory peak bodies and the NRMs to assist to develop effective partnership models at the Regional level. The NLN welcomes the opportunity to meet with NRM Regions Australia on a regular basis to share experiences of its members in their dealings with NRMs and in particular those models that work well for the effective engagement of the Landcare movement.

Chairs reaffirmed the importance of working closely with landcare and building strong relationships with national landcare organisations.

Session 4: Do we have an effective NRM message? – Session Chair: Mariyon Slany (WA)

Mariyon Slany led this session. She noted that the need to tell our story better was identified by several speakers at this Forum. Mariyon's introduction covered the role of "sales" (i.e. convincing or persuading people to give up something they value for something you have) in our everyday life. She provided examples of the different type of "pitches" that are increasingly used today to entice people to look for more information about products or services. This is particularly important in the current age of the internet and the variety of tools available for getting the message out.

Chairs worked in table groups to identify key messages and reported back to the Forum. One issue that generated discussion was the need to be clear about the purpose of our collective communication effort and to understand the difference between promoting the brand and promoting our services.

Following those reports Chairs collectively discussed the role of NRM Regions Australia in promoting the NRM message. They recognised that NRM Regions Australia does not have the resources to run a major national campaign, but noted the coordinating role (funded by the Australian Government) the national body played in the 2012 campaign delivered by regional NRM organisations. The Chairs agreed to further consider the communications role in the final session when developing the 2015/16 work program for NRM Regions Australia.

Session 5: Future trends in NRM from a Commonwealth agency perspective

Ian Thompson and **Sean Sullivan** shared with Chairs their views on emerging issues for regional NRM.

Ian drew the Forum's attention to several Government initiatives that will influence the way NRM will be delivered in the future, these initiatives included: the White Paper on the Reform of the Federation; the White Paper on Developing Northern Australia; the White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness and the recently released 2015 Intergeneration Report. Australian Government investment in agriculture, fishing

and the environment is a very small part (about 1%) of the overall Australian Government budget and so it is important to continually demonstrate the value of that investment. And we have some good stories to share in relation to adoption of Best Management Practices (as recorded by the ABS in their farm surveys).

Sean's presentation set out the links between delivery, financing, policy and political will and stressed the importance of being able to demonstrate the impact of our actions. We also need to recognise the reality of public finances and strive for on-going innovation and reform.

Both emphasised the need for an improved narrative about the work that we do and Sean drew specific attention to how we can demonstrate our value to the Government by assisting them in the delivery of related programs such as the Green Army and 20 Million Trees.

Session 6: New Directions for Organisational Performance Excellence - Session Chair: Andrew Drysdale, (Qld)

Andrew welcomed **Cynthia Payne**, CEO of SummitCare, and the winner of two gold Australian Business Excellence awards. Cynthia outlined the Australian Business Framework and its relationship to other internationally recognised frameworks. There are strong links to our OPE Framework were we seek similar outcomes – development of a capacity for:

- Strategic understanding of the operating environment
- Strong focus on adaptability
- Understanding current and future needs
- Systems thinking

To achieve this we need leadership, engagement with customers and stakeholders, the development of strategies and plans. These combine with people and business processes to deliver business results. Cynthia illustrated the changes over the last 10 years to SummitCare's key performance indicators. She highlighted the values embedded in the organisations and the balanced scorecard used to drive performance. This balanced scorecard is in turn supported by four focus areas: position focus (aligning position descriptions with the organizations goals); collaborative focus (staff working as a team); Strategic focus (strategic projects are identified and delivered); continuous improvement focus (annual review of key processes). An innovative aspect of Summitcare's business is its Wellbeing Delivery model which also engages all staff in the delivery of quality services.

Norbert Vogel (Australian Knowledge Management Group) followed Cynthia's presentation with a briefing on progress with NRM Regions Australia's Organisational Performance Excellence project. Norbert released the third edition of the Performance Excellence Guide.

Session 7: NRM Regions Australia Project Reports

Max Kitchell drew the Forum's attention to the meeting paper containing progress reports on 2014/15 NRM Regions Australia's projects and encouraged Chairs to review these as preparation for Session 9 of the Forum where feedback will be sought on the 2015/16 work program.

Session 8: The Next Big Step for NRM - identifying the big opportunities for advancing NRM and the role NRM regional organisations have in progressing or capitalising on those opportunities – Session Chair: Max Kitchell

Andrew Johnson (Executive Director Environment, CSIRO) set the scene for this session with a thought provoking presentation on "the Next Big thing for NRM". He outlined challenges facing the world in general and those specific to Australia and considered how the digital revolution would shape our future. In terms of NRM it offered opportunities in measuring and monitoring the environment, evaluating environmental performance and organising and influencing decision-making. These opportunities are driven by miniaturisation and the growing trend for a range of devices being connected to the internet. We are now in an era of "Big Data" where millions of sensors gather and report information. Andrew illustrated the trend by describing the growth of information being stored on the Atlas of Living Australia.

Peter Cosier (Director, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists) reminded the Forum of the importance of on-going investment in science and organisations like CSIRO if we are to capture the benefits of the digital revolution. Peter's presentation covered the background to and the development of the Wentworth Group's *Blueprint for a Healthy Environment and a Productive Economy.* Fundamental to the Blueprint is: the need for the environment to be considered in any long term plan for Australia; the role of regional organisations in delivering NRM programs; and the importance of harnessing consumer power in rewarding farmers for sustainable production practices.

Session 9: Developing the 2015/16 work program

Mick Murphy (Victoria's Catchment Management Council) provided the introduction to this session. He prefaced his short presentation on the history of the Forum by advising members of the death of Malcolm Fraser early that day and his contribution as Prime Minister to Australia's future.

Chairs worked in table groups to identify priorities for NRM Regions Australia. In reporting back Chairs recognised the need to prioritise projects and be prepared to remove projects from the work program. They identified the following priorities:

1. Continuation of existing projects:
- OPE;
- Environmental accounts;
- Relationship building, e.g., NFF, NLN, Ministers, Environmental NGO sector;
- Community Capacity building.
2. New projects:
- Communications with a particular focus on developing narratives that supports continuing government investment in natural resource management and the regional model;
- social licence for sustainable agriculture;
- develop feedback to government on success and challenges of existing NRM roll-out, e.g., Green Army, NLP administrative processes.

Forum Close

Sharon Starick, on behalf of NRM Regions Australia, announced that Max Kitchell has been appointed Chair for the period 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2017. Max thanked the Forum Chairs for the opportunity to continue as Chair and advised the Forum that NSW will be hosting both the 2016 Chairs Forum and Knowledge Conference.