

15th National NRM Chairs Forum | Draft Report

Treetops Room, Melbourne Museum, Carlton Gardens Melbourne - 1 and 2 June 2017

The 15th National NRM Regions Chairs' Forum was held in Melbourne on the 1 and 2 June 2017. The Victorian Chairs hosted the Forum with 46 of Australia's 56 regional NRM organisations represented.

The theme for the Forum was *Innovation in NRM* – particularly in how we demonstrate the importance of partnerships.

The Forum was held at a significant time for regional NRM in Australia with a decision on future Australian Government funding announced in the May 2017 budget. The Forum allowed Chairs to hear directly from senior Australian government officers, key partners, and to discuss the future of NRM in Australia.

Welcome to Country from the Boon Wurrung people

Angus Hume introduced Gheran Steel, CEO of the Boon Wurrung Foundation, who welcomed delegates to the country of the Boon Wurrung people.

Forum Opening

Dr Peter Veenker, as the host Chair, also welcomed delegates. Peter commented on the importance of these national Chairs' Forums and the contribution they make towards sharing information and building a national network of Chairs.

Peter's presentation covered the 20th anniversary of Victoria's CMAs and the Victorian government's recommitment to the regional NRM model with the release of *Our Catchments Our Communities* in 2016. To support the implementation of *Our Catchments Our Communities* the Victorian CMAs have established new state-wide arrangements - Vic Catchments is now the Victorian regional NRM state-wide representative body. Its focus has been to develop both a framework for CMA engagement with the Victorian government (establishing a series of "principle" frameworks) and identifying several Victorian strategic NRM priorities.

Peter extended the apologies of the Hon Lisa Neville, Victoria's Minister for Water, and introduced Adam Hood (Director, Catchments Management with the Victorian Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning) who briefed delegates on the contents of *Our Catchments Our Communities* (OCOC) Strategy. The key points from Adam's presentation were:

- Victorian Governments *Our Catchments Our Communities* Strategy is the overarching document for the 10 CMAs in the State. The government has allocated \$22 million of 4 years to implement the strategy.
- Vic Catchments has now been established as the State body to further collaboration between regional NRM organisations and the Victoria government.
- The OCOC proposes holding annual catchment summits the first of which will take place on 29 June under the theme of *Working Better Together*.

Session 1: Encouraging Innovation

Dr Steve Hatfield-Dodds (CSIRO, Chief Research Leader, Integration Science and Public Policy with the Australian National Outlook program) provided the key note address - *Australian National Outlook and the future of regional NRM*. The presentation was based on integrated modelling that allows for the exploration of possible futures, particularly in material and energy intensive industries. Key drivers for NRM into the future include:

- Global demand for our exports increases, driven by rising incomes, and the re-emergence of Asia resulting is agriculture prices being likely to trend upwards;
- Changes in housing affordability and patterns of energy consumption;
- Climate change and sequestration impacts –if carbon payments reach \$40 to \$60 per tonne carbon farming will become competitive with food production
- Rising demand for water

These drivers are interdependent and integrated responses are required to manage trade-offs. Steve noted that policy choices account for 50% to 90% of the range of projected resource use and environmental outcomes.

The discussion covered assumptions used in the modelling and the challenges arising from extreme political variability across the globe on issues such as climate change. Other points raised by Chairs included: the lessons from this modelling work for indigenous landholders; the extent to which soils are taken into account in the analysis and the important contribution the marine environment makes to food production.

Further information on Steve's work can be found at: www.csiro.au/nationaloutlook

Session 2: Australian Government briefing: the budget, NLP2 and innovation

Kylie Jonnason (First Assistant Secretary Biodiversity Conservation, Department of Environment and Energy) Emma Campbell (Assistant Secretary Landcare and Biodiversity Policy, Department of Environment and Energy), Peter Otterson (Assistant Secretary Sustainable Agriculture, Department of Agriculture and Water) and Sue Middleton (Chair, National Landcare Advisory Committee) provided the National Landcare Programme briefing.

In the May 2017 budget the government allocated \$1 billion over 5 years (from July 2018) plus an additional and the \$100 million over four years (from July 2017) for the National Landcare Programme. Details on the design of the new program are still being developed and will be released in the coming months.

Work on the design has been informed by the review of the current program undertaken over 2016. Efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness of past investments were considered. Practitioners and researchers were consulted as well as land managers. Several expert reports were commissioned. That report will also be released shortly but key messages include:

- Writing the compelling case was challenging to capture the investment outcomes from the last 25 years of investment.
- NRMs need to increase focus on being able to demonstrate outcomes from the next phase of investment.
- Programs achieved significant benefits.
- Better land management practices have been achieved.
- Well-connected local and regional networks.

- 9.5 million hectares managed for improved outcomes.
- Strong support for regional management.
- Regional planning is an effective mechanism.
- Current funding streams are based on past priorities; future investment needs to focus on future priorities.

Officials noted that there was an opportunity for a more detailed briefing at the national CEOs Forum to be held later in June 2017.

Sue Middleton addressed the forum on National Landcare Advisory Committee's role. NLAC was formed after the current program was created and has a skills-based membership. It provides advice to the Ministerial Board. NLAC's term finishes on 12 September 2017 and discussion is currently underway as to whether it should continue and under what terms.

Sue presented the following challenges for NRM regional organisations:

- Framing the program as a 30-year legacy – not just a four-year program;
- Demonstrating lasting and real practice change;
- Explaining how the programme is the foundation upon which Australian producers can market as clean and green into international markets;
- Assisting farmers manage market expectations (clean and green) and climactic conditions;
- Improving relationship with States – creating more value by working with state/territory governments;
- The Performance Framework and key accountability and governance is a good but it should apply to all players;
- MERIT is a good tool but needs to be able to articulate outcomes better, resilience and adaptability concepts need to be integrated with the program along with leverage.

Discussion

Chairs discussed how the proposed procurement process might work and the risks of a competitive process undermining the collaborative/partnership approach of regional NRM organisations. They also considered the implications for the integrated regional program if parts of that program were delivered by alternative contracts and how the regional coordination capacity can be maintained.

Good governance and strong community engagement are also characteristics of the current regional model, how will this be incorporated into a procurement process? Chairs noted that the details of any new process will need to be resolved quickly if it is to be implemented from 1 July 2018 – tender specifications will need to be developed and responses assessed by early 2018.

Angus thanked Kylie Jonnason, Emma Campbell, Peter Otterson and Sue Middleton for sharing their thoughts and time with the forum and on behalf of Chairs thanked them for their major contribution in securing a funding for NLP2.

Session 3: NLP 2 – Response, Input and actions by Regional bodies

Angus Hume introduced the workshop session and sought Chairs feedback on the implications of the morning briefings for natural resource management and how NRM Regions Australia could respond.

Angus noted that he and Kate have undertaken extensive promotion of the NRM Regional Model over the past few months with the tagline of #thousands of local solutions. He also acknowledged the significant contribution from Chairs in briefing their local parliamentarians in the lead-up to the budget decision.

From the earlier discussions, it is apparent that we need to be aware of the challenges and continue to ensure that Regional Delivery is the preferred model for NRM management through continuous improvement which seeks to identify efficiencies and effectiveness in delivery, capturing data so that we can show the outcomes of the investment and not be overly concerned with the suggestion of a new Procurement Process.

Following table-group discussions Chairs completed individual records of their response to the briefings and these were analysed after the Forum. The key messages from those records were:

Session 4: Innovation and partnerships – NRM and environmental organisations

Future challenges for Natural Resource Management in Australia – Paul Sinclair, Campaign Director, Australian Conservation Foundation

Paul's presentation focussed on the challenges faced in promoting the case for Australian Government investment in environmental protection. He noted that steady and incremental changes over the past decade are not keeping pace with the deterioration of our natural resources. Australian Government investment has declined over the past decade.

Paul proposed that a good idea backed by good and passionate people will create change. The challenge for regional NRM organisations is that our story is the 'mainstream' story but we are just not good at telling it.

We need to build a constituency of power – people that will advocate on 'our' behalf (the NDIS campaign is a great example of how people power can be harnessed to fund essential items that are important to the community)

The following points were made during the discussion:

- 'Shortism' is responsible for poor decision making (too short an election cycle that does not allow for consideration of medium to long term issues).
- In order for change to last, both sides (all sides) of politics need to support it. This means we have to connect in a way that speaks to everyone at the personal level.
- The middle ground also needs to be brought on the journey (not just those on the left and the right). Transitions to new ways need to be done justly and equitably.
- NRM organisations, farming groups and NGO conservation groups all play an important role in Australia. We need to be aware of what our roles are.
- We need to be careful that issues are accurately and honestly reported/advocated and that distorted facts are not used as it gets people off side very quickly. People are happy for others to pay (i.e. companies, banks) but ask them to pay personally and they often say no.

National Landcare Network presentation - Terry Hubbard, Chair, National Landcare Network

Terry's presentation covered the role of NLN in providing an opportunity for community volunteers to speak to government with a consistent voice. He advised that a formal merger of the NLN and Landcare Australia is being considered may occur in the next 6 months.

He also shared with Chairs the NLN's views on design parameters for NLP2 and collaboration efforts with NRM Regions Australia:

- The NLN supports effective and efficient NRM delivery – delivered as closely as possible to the community (localism).
- Local Landcare Coordinators have been very successful.
- Around the country Landcare is working with NRMs and State bodies to present a united front and message to government (MOUs and partnerships are emerging across the country), but regional engagement is more successful in some regions than others.

- While there is a desire for greater collaboration between NRMs and Landcare groups, this is not always reflected at the national level. Sadly, the joint approach between NLN and NRMRA to government was abandoned as agreement could not be reached.
- NLN does not consider 'Regional Delivery' and 'Regional Bodies' to be interchangeable terms. Given the ever-decreasing funding, the most appropriate mechanism for delivery must be applied.
- The government 'contract' is with the community and uses a range of bodies to deliver on it.
- Auditing, monitoring and reporting of on-ground change is essential.
- NLN is still keen to partner with NRMs but only if it is a real partnership and not just on a 'as suits' basis.
- The Landcare brand deserves recognition and respect.

Chairs responded to Terry's challenging presentation by noting that Landcare is an important element of delivering regional NRM but practice change across Australia needs to recognise regional differences and the need for different approaches for example:

- The small grants process being proposed by government (part of the \$85m) is unlikely to work in remote areas as there is insufficient community (large area, low population) in many cases to deliver on them. Often the NRMs in these regions have the best chance of success in being able to work with landholders to deliver on-ground changes.
- In addition to Landcare groups, there are a range of industry and conservation groups that also contribute NRM outcomes
- Successful collaborations are often more apparent in well-funded States. The challenge for other less well funded States to form partnerships and have greater collaboration with Landcare without becoming competitive was noted.

Session 6: Progress with NRM Regions Australia Projects

National Environmental Accounts – Max Kitchell, past Chair of NRM Regions Australia

Max briefed Chairs on the background to environmental accounts and the model NRM Regions Australia has developed in partnership with the Wentworth Group.

The approach is based on developing an index (econd) that measures the change in the condition of natural assets. This approach allows for econds to be calculated for a variety of assets and to be aggregated to provide an overall regional score. Ten regional NRM organisations have tested this approach. The trial established that the approach works to produce practical, scientifically rigorous, affordable and useful data.

The anticipated cost of implementing this across Australia is \$15m per year of which \$10m would go to Regional NRM organisations to undertake the measurements. The remaining funds would be allocated to a national data collector (for example the Australian Bureau of Statistics) and to a National Environmental Accounts Taskforce to oversee this process. Max noted that this project is only 3% of the current environment funding.

Max and Peter Cosier have briefed all jurisdictional Environmental Ministers and advisors on the proposal, along with several national interest groups (i.e. NLN, Greening Australia etc.). There is strong support for the concept from national figures influential in public policy (e.g. Ken Henry, Peter Harper, Bruce Thorn, Neil Byron and Mike Grundy) and some have accompanied Max and Peter to various Ministerial meetings to support the proposal.

In November 2016 Max and Peter Cosier presented the approach to the national Environment Ministers Council where the Ministers agreed to work together to develop a common approach to environmental accounts in 2017. A meeting with stakeholders is proposed for August 2017.

Max proposed that Chairs (through NRM Regions Australia and individually) continue to provide support to the proposal by writing to the Prime Minister, noting that the Secretary of his department has been briefed and has expressed support.

Chairs thanked Max and Peter for all their great work to date on this matter.

Opportunities in the Carbon Economy: update and Victorian examples

Kate Brunt, Goulburn Broken CMA, briefed Chairs Victoria's CMA collaboration around climate change. A statewide climate change coordinator position (Kate) has been established; a statewide priorities paper prepared and a web portal set up to allow easy access all CMA climate change plans. CMAs are also exploring innovations such as Blue Carbon (which requires building an Emission Reduction Fund method for marine and freshwater wetlands carbon sequestration) and how CMAs can both become carbon neutral in their operations and assist other Victorian authorities achieve this goal set by the Victorian Government (this project is being supported by funding from our catchments Our Communities).

Discussion

Chairs asked whether there are competitors to CMAs in relation to carbon sequestration. Kate noted this depended on the role CMAs play - an appraisal is currently being undertaken of the different roles CMAs might play for example regions could decide if they wish to be facilitators/enablers or take on commercial opportunities. Kate noted that a collaborative approach will be undertaken in Victoria where the NRM plans will be used to identify appropriate planting opportunities and delivery of those plantings determined on a site by site basis.

Kate Andrews drew attention to the meeting papers and the contribution NRM Regions Australia has made to the national debate about land sector carbon sequestration and abatement opportunities.

Review of the National Water Initiative

Jane Doolan (Commissioner) briefed Chairs on the Australian Productivity Commission's review of the National Water Initiative (NWI) adopted by COAG in 2010. Jane outlined the principles that underpinned the NWI and the Terms of Reference provided by the Treasurer. A consultation paper has been released and responses (including one made by NRM Regions Australia) assessed. The need for NWI to better integrate with NRM has been heard. Other matters raised in responses to the consultation paper included the need to consider Indigenous values in water planning and have appropriate representation of Indigenous people as part of this process. Jane posed the question – is there something being missed by not explicitly linking NRM and the NWI?

Discussion

Chairs provided the following feedback:

- The current NWI does not sufficiently recognise integrated catchment management with its focus just on the river – this can result in a skewed reading of the health of the catchment health
- The work of NRMs is not necessarily recognised (perhaps because it is assumed it will just continue). There is a pragmatic need to acknowledge this work and its value – there are risks to maintaining this continuity.
- In some States, there has been a directive for Regional Bodies to refrain from commenting on water debates/issues, however they are keen to assist and be part of the solution as water is part of their core business.

Keynote Address - Provided by Senator Bridget McKenzie on behalf of The Hon Luke Hartsuyker MP, Assistant Minister to the Deputy Prime Minister

Senator McKenzie extended apologies for The Hon. Luke Hartsuyker, who was unable to attend for family reasons.

She drew attention to the Australian Government's 2017 budget commitment to continue funding for the National Landcare Programme and the recognition this provides for the importance of a healthy environment to support the economic and lifestyles of Australians – both rural and urban. Australia's environment is at the centre of Australia's national identity and economy.

The Senator acknowledged the contributions made by NRM Regional organisations across Australia and the development of national partnerships as illustrated by the formal MOU between NRM Regions Australia and the NFF (to be signed at this meeting).

Her address covered a range of Australian Government initiatives designed to support rural and regional Australia. In addition to \$1.1 billion NLP allocation the Government has announced a decentralisation inquiry and funding for major infrastructure projects (i.e. Inland Rail) that will support development in regional Australia.

Angus Hume thanked the Senator for her support and for attending the forum. He reiterated the need for NRMs to continue to communicate with government and reinforce with politicians the responsibility that NRMs have in regard to regional plans and strategies drawn up by local and regional communities (including Landcare and other stakeholders). NRMs work for and partner with the whole community.

Session 7: Innovation and Partnerships – working with agricultural industries

National Farmers Federation and Industry partnerships – Presentation and signing of the NFF and NRM Regions Australia MOU

Angus Hume welcomed Fiona Simson, President, NFF President. He acknowledged the contribution of Gerry Leach, Jack Knowles, Andrew Drysdale and Kate Andrews for the great work they did leading up to the MOU.

Fiona advised that NFF is looking forward to a great partnership with NRM Regions Australia in pursuing the MOU. She outlined the role of the NFF as a strong voice for Australian farmers. She noted the complexity and strengths of having a diverse membership and the need to support industry claims of clean and green. The need for continual improvement in industry and producer practices, animal welfare and staff conditions is being embraced. Much progress has been made however there is still opportunity to work both internally and with partners to make further gains. The MOU reflects the collaborative and relational approach of the partnership and its purpose is to establish mechanisms for the two organisations to deliver better outcomes for agriculture and natural resource management in Australia.

This session concluded with the formal signing of the MOU.

Industry Sustainability Frameworks

Briefings were received from Jack Knowles, NFF Manager Natural Resource Policy and Cathy Phelps, Dairy Australia

Jack introduced a diagram illustrating the projected relationship between NFF and Regional Bodies under the MOU. Farmers know that they need to deliver more food in the future (both domestically and internationally), however they need to manage the impacts of doing this. This will require

innovation to make the most of the opportunities. Jack noted that many agriculture industries have developed industry frameworks (e.g. Cotton, Dairy, Sugar, and Beef) and many of these have involved input from regional NRM organisations.

Cathy outlined the detail of one of those frameworks – Dairy. The framework was developed in consultation with relevant internal and external organisations and is regarded as a living document able to respond to new information or priorities. The framework is underpinned by a range of tools, BMPs and guidelines and supported by customers (e.g. Unilever), consumers and investors that production is sustainable. Banks are also wanting to reward growers who are managing their capital assets well.

Angus Hume thanked Jack and Cathy for their presentations.

Forum Close

Angus Hume thanked all presenters and Chairs for their contribution to this significant Forum. He advised that he will be stepping down as Chair of West Gippsland CMA in September 2017 and that NRM Regions Australia will initiate the process for appointing a new Chair. In response to questions from Chairs, Angus indicated that he would be willing to remain as Chair for a further six months to oversee discussions with the Australian Government on the design of NLP2.

Angus also reported that NRM Regions Australia will be discussing with State/Territory groups of Chairs arrangements for the 2018 Forum and will advise Chairs over the next few months of the location of that Forum.