NRM Regions Australia

Submission to the review of the National Landcare Program

The Australian Government's own definition of natural resource management demonstrates its intrinsic value: "Australia's environment is at the centre of our national identity and our economy. Australia derives a significant proportion of the nation's wealth from its environmental assets, including agriculture, mining and tourism."

Our national integrated NRM and Landcare system has been developing for several decades, even prior to the Decade of Landcare, through River Trusts, the soil conservation service, Potter farms and the like. We have built upon the knowledge and principles established over the decades, learning from experience and research. In the early 2000s regionalisation was extended across the country. The system has grown in sophistication and is now a unique social and organisational infrastructure delivering outcomes for the Australian Government, State and Territory governments, local communities and land managers. It has the potential to do more. We can further help the Australian Government deliver on its legislative requirements while supporting communities across Australia.

Despite a reduction of more than 50% in Australian Government funding in the last iteration the NLP has delivered multiple outcomes for the environment, industry and diverse communities. Details and case studies will be provided in a Value Proposition being developed by NRM Regions Australia, the National Landcare Network and Landcare Australia.

Landcare and regional organisations have fundamentally changed how Australians participate in practical on ground activities to reverse the decline of our natural resources. Farmers, families, and communities from urban and rural Australia deliver activities that are important to them, their communities, their catchments and the nation. It is bottom up while guided by strategic regional plans that integrate national and local priorities. NRM is as diverse as the Australian landscape and the Australians who participate in it, yet is always working to improve our natural resources.

We look forward to working with the government to improve the effectiveness of natural resource management and to find new ways to deliver government priorities and outcomes.

A. Principles

Australia's NRM and Landcare system is based upon a set of principles that underpin our success and remain relevant. We believe that these principles must inform any future program in order to be successful – and to address the very problems this system was developed to manage. There are many versions of these principles documented in regional plans, State policies, academic literature and the Australian Government's own program design.

1. **Builds environmental, economic and social capital** – Just as NRM links productivity and environmental goals it also produces much broader outcomes - multiple benefits - such as community resilience, employment, health and well-being.

2. **Localism** – Community ownership in all aspects of NRM is fundamental to success. It requires participation in governance, planning, decision-making and implementation.

3. **Strategic and integrated regional planning (aligning National, State, Regional and local planning)** – Regional planning has developed over time to improve effectiveness. It integrates across landscapes, stakeholders, and issues; works across scales, paddock to national; and links between national, State/Territory, regional and local needs and goals.

4. **Knowledge-based and innovative** – drawing upon all forms of evidence including science-based, Indigenous and local; encourages innovation and responsiveness.

5. **Sound governance and performance systems** - accountable and transparent systems at all levels with processes for evaluation, oversight and continuous improvement in place.

6. **Diversity of approaches** – understanding that conditions are different across Australia (no one size will ever fit all). Acknowledging that even in one area multiple pathways and delivery mechanisms are necessary to address different issues, stakeholders, land-tenures etc. from volunteerism to market based instruments, small landholder grants to large strategic partnerships.

B. Current and emerging success

The points below highlight areas of success within NLP and the NRM system. Despite a reduction of Australian Government funding in the last iterations the NLP has delivered multiple outcomes for the environment, industry and diverse communities.

1. **Building diverse and appropriate tools.** Australia's NRM issues are diverse and vary across our landscapes and land uses. Whether we are dealing with catchment inputs into the Great Barrier Reef, water quality and environmental flows in the Murray Darling Basin, soil erosion in the Rangelands or the protection of our coastal and marine environments, we need tailored and local solutions to address these issues. These solutions require regional NRM to use a range of approaches: incentives to individual farmers, local planning, support for local volunteer group effort, investment in infrastructure, managing environmental flows, agriculture extension and so on.

   NLP2 could encourage the further sharing of successful tools and encourage innovation in new tools appropriate to changing demographics, technologies and environment.

2. **Scaling up and the landscape scale.** Addressing agriculture and landscape health issues at a multi-regional scale is growing within regional NRM (Reef Catchments, Rangelands Alliance, Tri-State Murray Alliance, NRM Planning for Climate Change clusters). This allows for managing at landscape-scale, managing key large natural assets, and can create efficiencies.

   NLP2 could reinforce this trend by targeting funding to support multi-regional collaboration. This trend allows a greater focus on agriculture and environmental health outcomes across agriculture regions and landscapes.

3. **Resilience and risk management.** The role of Landcare Groups and regional NRM organisations is well recognised. They have become a central component in disaster preparedness, response and recovery. The response to multiple fires in SA, Vic and Tasmania have all involved networks and capacity supported through the Australian Government's investment. More recently, recovery programs for flooding in Tasmania are being delivered through the NRM / Landcare network, and even supporting industry adjustment following reduced fruit intake by SPC Ardmona in Victoria.

4. **Indigenous Land and Sea Management (ILSM)**. NRM organisations have been working with Indigenous organisations, businesses and communities in ILSM, thereby contributing to social, cultural, economic and environmental outcomes.

5. **Leveraging.** NRM and Landcare provide leveraging for the Australian Government's investment of State/Territory dollars, partner contributions and community volunteer time and skills. One dollar from the Australian Government can be leveraged against a range of sources to achieve up to $10 of co-investment. As one investor of many the Australian Government gains infrastructure to achieve national priorities and legislative requirements.

6. **Growing industry partnerships.** Successful NRM is built upon partnerships. The Fert$mart program introduced by Dairy Tas in 2014 to improve soil nutrient management in dairy pastures

involves collaboration between Dairy Tas, the Australian Government, Tasmanian Government, NRM North, Cradle Coast NRM and NRM South. Landholders are responsible for the cost of soil testing and the project partners provide access to agricultural advisers to prepare fertiliser and farm management plans.

NLP2 could be targeted to help encourage the growth of such partnerships. An exciting area may be to further progress industry partnerships for regional development.

7. **Voluntary community action is fundamental to Australia's approach to natural resource management**. Landcare, agriculture and other community volunteer groups deliver local, on-ground, relevant activities to address the diverse natural resource management issues facing their communities.

8. **Regional coordination and NRM plans are a significant asset for ensuring strategic investment.** Coordination of community and State/Territory/Australian government effort is essential, and can provide greater efficiencies. This is provided through Australia's 56 NRM regional organisations. Plans represent a compromise view across sectors and attempt to reconcile local, state and national priorities. NRM plans have been developed across the whole continent and are critical to achieving additional Australian Government priorities or legislative requirements, such as strategic assessments under the EPBC Act and climate adaptation.

9. **Carbon industry** provides opportunities for the land management and agricultural sector that are beginning to be realised, for example savannah burning and successful ERF projects for pastoralists. There is much more potential to be tapped, and for the benefits to be more widely shared. Soil health through carbon sequestration is one such opportunity that provides multiple benefits such as increased farm productivity. Regional planning can assist to minimize perverse outcomes.

10. **Australian Government program management** - There are successful elements of NLP program management introduced by the relevant Australian Government agencies that have not yet been fully recognised and for which the results have not yet been fully realised. This includes the performance framework and performance expectations for regional NRM bodies and the MERIT tool. MERIT will increase accountability and our capacity to report on outputs from Australian Government investment. Further cooperative mechanisms between the two responsible agencies would also assist efficiencies.

C. NLP Innovation and potential

Exciting developments are already occurring in NRM as shown above, and there is great potential for more. These may be improvements or efficiencies across the system and in the Australian Government program, or specific innovative projects funded or seeded through NLP. NRM regions see a crucial role in regional development.

NRM regions would love to contribute more substantially to this discussion in the context of the design of NLP2. The following are proposed as a start.

1. **National Environmental Accounts (NEA)** are universally supported by the regional bodies, the previous Minister for Environment, and many State Governments. With pressure from the Audit Office for regions, community and government to better measure outcomes, establishing and running the proposed NEA is a priority. How they interact with impact reporting (i.e. does the government investment contribute to improved landscape health?) needs to be considered.

2. **A national NRM and Landcare policy.** There is an opportunity for national leadership through developing a national policy, establishing greater coherence and continuity for this vital work.

3. **Transaction costs and outcomes approach.** There is room to improve transaction costs of the system. This is an area that regional bodies are already acting on. Applying an outcomes approach, which the Australian Government has been moving towards, allows for greater efficiencies and effectiveness and reduces transaction costs.

4. **Climate adaptation for communities, industries and environment**. There is further untapped potential to use land sector carbon and NRM plans to help meet Australia's climate obligations. NLP2 design needs to be consistent with the broader Government climate change agenda and recognise the need for a regional approach that balances sequestration objectives with water, environmental and agriculture objectives. It needs to minimize perverse outcomes. The updated regional plans provide a platform for this work.

5. **Driving clean green agriculture in Australia.** Through industry partnerships and delivery of on-farm results NRM organisations can contribute to Australia's clean green brand and build access to international markets. NRM Regions have done some work on the potential of certification and would be keen to explore this further with partners.

6. **Improving soil health and increasing production.** Soil health, including increased soil carbon, can lead to a reduction of inputs and increased productivity, thereby creating better farm gate returns. Cutting edge work has been done in the last ten years and there is real potential to share this success through the NLP program and the NRM system.