



Submission Coversheet

Discussion Paper on the review of Caring for our Country - Australia's natural resource management investment initiative

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National Farmers' Federation

Submission to the

**Review of Caring for our Country: Australia's
Natural Resource Management Investment
Initiative**

20 May 2011



National Farmers' FEDERATION

Member Organisations



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1. The National Farmers' Federation

The National Farmers' Federation (the "NFF") is the peak national body representing farmers and, more broadly, agriculture across Australia. It is one of Australia's foremost and respected lobbying and advocacy organisations.

Since its inception in 1979, the NFF has earned a formidable reputation as a leader in the identification, development and achievement of policy outcomes - championing issues affecting farmers and dedicated to the advancement of agriculture.

The NFF is dedicated to proactively generating greater understanding and better-informed awareness of farming's modern role, contribution and value to the entire community.

One of the keys to the NFF's success has been its commitment to presenting innovative and forward-looking solutions to the issues affecting agriculture, striving to meet current and emerging challenges, and advancing Australia's vital agricultural production base.

The NFF's membership comprises of all Australia's major agricultural commodities. Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations collectively form the NFF.

The NFF recently implemented a re-structure of the organisation. Through an associate category this has enabled a broader cross section of the agricultural sector to become members of the NFF, including the breadth and the length of the supply chain.

Each of the state farm organisations and commodity council's deal with state-based 'grass roots' issues or commodity specific issues, respectively, while the NFF represents the agreed imperatives of all at the national and international level.

2. Introduction

The NFF welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Caring for Our Country ("CFOC") review. As NFF understands this "midterm" review would normally be an administrative review but the Government has undertaken to initiate a more comprehensive review. NFF commends this approach and, in particular, how the outcomes might inform the remainder of the current funding phase (July 2008 to June 2013) and any replacement program (e.g. Caring for Our Country #2) from 2013-14.

CFOC has replaced the former NHT program as well as amalgamating a number of other programs, including the highly successful Environmental Stewardship Program, Landcare and Caring for Country. Moreover, the program supports regional delivery through base funding to the regional NRM organisations¹ across Australia.

The "business plan" approach to investment is a supported approach, as is the development of high-level targets focussed on the Commonwealth's responsibilities. However, implementation of the CFOC program has been less than optimal. There is some confusion regarding the roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth, State and NRM organisations. Moreover, there

¹ For example, Catchment Management Authorities

remain concerns about the funding process (e.g. transaction costs and approval times), volunteer burnout, and an emerging theme of data (or lack of data, including an agreed baseline).

The NFF remains highly concerned that governments focus on regulation and acquiring large areas of land for biodiversity and ecological outcomes, and for public land, have not yet managed to secure improved environmental outcomes. In other words, hectares of land in public reserves is being achieved but better environmental outcomes (species regeneration, pests, weeds, disease, and fire management) are not – governments must become more responsible about better management of existing lands to ensure that public money is not being wasted.

The above comments must be also considered in the light of increasing Commonwealth Government responsibility under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 2000* (the “EPBC Act”). This is acknowledgement of the listing of an increasing number of species and ecological communities. Many more are being considered for listing both now and into the future. Listing creates a legal and financial responsibility for protection as well as the costs associated with assessing approvals required for development (whether these are mining, industry, urban or agriculture). Such costs will only increase over time requiring commensurate investment through the Caring for Our Country program (and any replacement program).

When considered in the light of the costs for State regulation and funding programs, the Australian community is investing heavily in NRM.

However, the Australian landscape and communities continue to face challenges. Looking forward there is an opportunity to further develop on Australia’s NRM knowledge, leadership and expertise, build further on Landcare and the regional NRM organisations and Australia’s social capital to achieve sustainable outcomes for our communities, the economy, agriculture and the environment.

While the NFF supports national priorities that reflect the Commonwealth Government’s legal and regulatory obligations (and perhaps community aspirations), there remains a challenge in how to link the national targets to state targets and priorities, then to community and regional aspirations and targets. While in theory this should not be difficult, it has been the nemesis of the CFOC program as there has been a decoupling of Commonwealth priorities to state and local priorities.

NFF participated in the recent ANU forum on regional delivery and some of the outcomes from this forum might be relevant, i.e. clearer definition or perhaps alignment of Commonwealth, State and regional roles and responsibilities. Any NRM program should try to achieve a balance between national outcomes and local priorities – moreover, it is not always easy to pick winners from a central government.

3. Specific Issues

NFF’s members have raised a number of specific issues regarding the CFOC program (not in any order):

- The range of maps (for targeting investment) provided in the last Business Plan were conceptually right but lacking in sufficient detail;
- Variable messages were being received on processes and moreover, applicants understanding of the application forms/process is a continuing issue (e.g. it may take applicants several applications to better understand the requirements, it may be

worthwhile having a state level CFOC and to remove staff from having any votes to maintain impartiality);

- A rigid electronic process might not be suitable for all applicants;
- Weeds need higher recognition under sustainable agriculture, as weeds are generally the community's highest priority issue (e.g. ABS surveys have pests as the first and second priority and is the second biggest threat to biodiversity);
- The monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (the "MERI") framework might not be the answer for NRM as it is difficult to understand, expensive and may not be giving the right information;
- There is a need for one national mapping/data program that could underpin a national evaluation model;
- Sustainable Farm Practices target programs need more focus and resources:
 - Private land covers 61% of the landscape; and
 - With a high proportion of farmers undertaking Landcare now, perhaps there is a need to target the remaining farmers;
- There are some lessons from the Victorian Salinity Plan model in terms of a successful model, i.e. institutionally lean, Government/community and funding approved actions ratified by a community owned plan delivered through one policy approval process;
- While there is a focus on outcomes, programs are still burdened by process;
- The Expression of Interest process should be pursued however, this needs streamlining as it is "verbose";
- Perhaps consider trialing a grant process that is open and available on a continuing process (similar to development grants);
- While overall objectives and placing measurable targets over 20 year program are supported, the difficulty still remains in how to measure these – particularly where there remains measurement and mapping/data constraints;
- The new Landcare Framework should be considered in the review, particularly community capacity;
- Community ownership is integral to delivering sustainable development and protecting natural resources;
- Continue to support base level funding for regional NRM organizations with a focus to achieve on ground outcomes but noting that this is a very long term outcome;
- Perhaps a need for a broader communications strategy that encompasses national, international and regional;
- Generally, there is volunteer burnout;
- Approvals take far too long;
- Reporting and availability of data remain issues;
- It is difficult to measure change if there is no baseline to measure the change against;
- The current model focuses on short time frames which is generally not ideal for environmental/NRM projects; and
- Concern for capacity for state government sorting of the funding system (i.e. Commonwealth funds going to state government core business).

4. The Future

NFF notes that it is easy to "pick" on the CFOC program. However, there is merit in focussing discussion on the CFOC "replacement" program (i.e. from 2013 onwards). A subsequent discussion would also need to include the funding requirements of such a program. NFF views

the next model must be a better marriage between regional, state and Commonwealth priorities and should not be a top down imposed approach. There is merit in considering a more sophisticated decade of Landcare model.

One priority is that a high percentage of Commonwealth money should be spent directly for on ground outcomes – perhaps as high as 90%.

There is some confusion at a regional level – with regional NRM organisations, local government (smaller scale than region) and now Regional Development Australia. There must be clarity around the roles and responsibilities between these organisations and every effort must be made to avoid duplication (even if this is simple infrastructure like buildings in which the organisations operate).

Stronger community ownership will provide empowerment for local communities and regions. Moreover, State roles and responsibilities, resources and assessment must be reviewed along with the Commonwealth's to provide a streamlined approach to NRM across Australia.

A key message is the need around improved mapping and data collection – an essential requirement is a baseline against which to judge improvement for government's investments.

From a process perspective, applications and approvals processes need simplifying and streamlining – the key is to cut red tape.

Perhaps some innovative thought is required to secure alternative funding sources (tourism, regional development etc) which would allow resources to be directed to new and emerging priorities.

A true triple bottom line approach would require a focus on healthy communities – and agriculture would argue food security and population.

5. Conclusion

NFF supports past, current and future Government investment in natural resource management. Moreover, the increasing responsibility for the Commonwealth Government for NRM investment will increase in the future purely as a function of the increased listing of species and ecological communities under the EPBC Act.

It would appear, in hindsight, that the CFOC program picks up on a major failing of the previous NHT programs by having clear national priorities. However, by doing so there is a real disconnect between local implementation and the high-level national targets and priorities.

This more extensive midterm review of the current CFOC program is welcome. NFF encourages the Commonwealth Government to take on board some of the criticisms of the current program to further build a well supported NRM program delivering real environmental outcomes on the ground. To do this requires engagement at local implementation levels.

Moreover, the NFF encourages the Commonwealth Government to commence looking at the replacement program for CFOC in terms of its targets, structure and funding. NFF is advocating that this requires a high level of engagement with stakeholders over the next 1-2 years to ensure that the replacement program learns the lessons of past programs to build a resilient program for future NRM investment.

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