



AUSTRALIAN LANDCARE COUNCIL

Caring for our Country Review

29 April 2011

The Australian Landcare Council appreciates the opportunity to input into the Review of Caring for our Country and commends the Australian Government on the range of mechanisms, including formal written submissions and internet blogs, it has made available to allow stakeholders to provide feedback.

The council wishes to acknowledge the intention of Caring for our Country, particularly its targeted investment approach towards national priorities and the expected outcomes to be achieved by this investment.

At the outset, the council notes that the delivery model for Caring for our Country and its use of partnerships with governments, regional and local communities, industry and land managers reflects the complexity of the issues being addressed, the range of stakeholders involved and the need for a variety of delivery approaches targeted to different needs.

The council also wishes to acknowledge the achievements made by Caring for our Country and its investment of more than \$1.7 billion to date to achieve outcomes against the six national priorities of National Reserve System, Biodiversity and Natural Icons, Coastal Environments and Critical Aquatic Habitats, Sustainable Practices, Community Skills Knowledge and Engagement, Northern and Remote Australia and the involvement of farmers, Indigenous rangers, regional natural resource management organisations, Landcare and other voluntary protection groups across Australia in achieving these outcomes.

The council has carefully considered its submission to the Review and has provided overarching strategic comments across the initiative as a whole, as well as specific advice on issues under the prompts provided in the national discussion paper.

Strategic Comments

The Landcare approach is based on the philosophy that people from all communities and cultures can, and ultimately must, take responsibility for the health of Australia's environmental assets. Critical to this is recognising the value of investment in building and maintaining the nation's social natural resource management capital and capacity, both professional and volunteer. The council believes there is a role for independent and targeted investment in social capital through Caring for our Country and suggests that regional bodies, peak Landcare, industry and non-government bodies are best placed to facilitate this in the first instance.

The form of the defined targets is important. Such is the diversity of environments within the Australian continent that there is a risk that too narrowly defined bio-physical targets can impose severe and unintended restrictions on the ability of Landcarers to apply their skills within their local environment in a manner that meets any of the defined targets. While supporting the establishment of more broadly stated national targets it will be important in future iterations of the program to do so in a manner that recognises the breadth of ecological diversity across Australia's land and marine environments, and which enables and encourages those who work and invest in Landcare to apply the aims of the targets to their relevant scale.

The council believes regional funding should follow a subsidiary approach and be devolved to the lowest level of competency with the capacity to undertake the work.



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The council also believes ongoing funding to Landcare and national community grants will be critical to maintain the momentum and buy-in of those communities not able to contribute directly to specific Caring for our Country targets.

The council recognises that the interests and responsibilities of Indigenous Australians are not confined by tenure. It will be important to support the capability of Indigenous communities and stakeholders to be actively involved in all stages of natural resource management planning and implementation. Specifically the council cautions against confining the recognition and involvement of Indigenous stakeholders to only those who hold legal tenure to land such as by a Traditional Owner's right.

Australia's natural environment and productive landscapes are central to our national identity, economy and lifestyle. The outcomes and networks formed through a successful Landcare movement underpin many of our national economic, social and environmental aspirations. Caring for our Country provides a clear and established mechanism for 'whole of government' support and investment in the multiple achievements of Landcare, particularly for regional Australia. This is just as relevant for periods of natural disasters as Landcare is one of the nation's great solutions to resilience and recovery through its contribution to natural infrastructure, environmental and social preparedness and recovery. The council believes the review of the Caring for our Country program provides an opportunity to facilitate support and investment from Australian Government agencies outside of the traditional Landcare portfolio for greater and more integrated outcomes.

While recognising the importance of defining clear roles between the Australian and state and territory governments the council believes that the move away from the 'Joint Team' approach (i.e. Joint Steering Committees working with state and territory governments) and required matching funding via bilateral agreements has contributed to state and territory governments reducing their direct contributions to the Caring for our Country targets and investment. The council acknowledges that contributions to and expenditure from each jurisdiction is a matter for that jurisdiction. However, the process of contributing must be fair and transparent. Mechanisms to more closely collaborate with states and territories in the development of national priorities and to reintroduce staged matching funding requirements are worthwhile to explore. To ensure that this process works effectively there has to be clear and transparent rules about what can be counted as a contribution. The Australian Government should consider adopting a fair and stringent process that would provide incentives to raise extra investment from state and territory governments as well as triggers to lose some funding if they do not make a reasonable contribution.

The council supports in principle the development of a national 'Vision for Natural Resource Management' that would have bipartisan and state and territory government support. Such a document would be based on a common vision for our environmental and social capital, principles and agreed indicators which would provide strong leverage for greater levels and certainty of funding by all parties. It would also give clarity to roles and lead to greater alignment of national, state and territory and regional plans and reporting. The council supports a commitment to develop such a Vision document before the commencement of the next iteration of Caring for our Country to drive collaboration and investment. Tying indicators where possible to national account indicators including emerging environmental accounts will significantly strengthen its value.

Meeting the three pillars of activity (food security, responding to climate change and maintaining a commitment to the environment) will be a considerable challenge for the nation



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and core ongoing funding with bipartisan and cross jurisdictional support is required. In addition, there is a need to diversify funding streams. This presents another argument for:

1. re-engaging with state and territory governments and making a staged return to matched funding;
2. supporting mechanisms, such as Landcare Australia Limited to enhance the flow of private and industry funds; and,
3. maximising outcomes for the Landcare sector from the Australian Strategy for Philanthropy in development under the not-for-profit sector reform agenda.

The council provides the following specific comments relating to a targeted approach, partnerships, community engagement, business processes and policy directions.

1. Targeted Approach

The council acknowledges the value of the current Caring for our Country national priorities and notes that the Australian Framework for Landcare recognises four critical pillars of activity going forward; responding to climate change, food security, environmental protection and nurturing volunteerism. While there is some overlap, there is merit in exploring opportunities to create even stronger alignment between the existing national Caring for our Country targets and the four pillars.

A more targeted approach could be adopted by:

- Exploring opportunities to create stronger alignment between the national Caring for our Country targets and the management of carbon.
- Fostering greater cross regional collaboration through funding streams particularly regional allocations.
- Fostering projects that achieve multiple outcomes by using Caring for our Country targets, assessment metrics and funding streams.
- Utilising consultative and transparent target setting involving the states and territories as well as key experts and stakeholders to improve understanding, adoption and promotion of alignment to better reflect community driven targets.
- Adopting a merit based assessment where some national targets are weighted but not exclusionary. National targets are supported in-principle but there must be in-built flexibility to fund the community's capacity to work on relevant and appropriate projects at a local or regional scale.
- Ensuring national priorities focus on matters best addressed at a national scale such as matters of national environmental significance and are underpinned by strong leadership and collaboration.
- Fostering activity in priority landscapes where early intervention is necessary as well as those already in significant decline.
- Ensuring the work of the National Wildlife Corridors Advisory Group guides future iterations of the Caring for our Country program.



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- Creating stronger alignment between Caring for our Country Business Plans and best practice climate change resilience approaches, for instance, by adopting a landscape function approach and maximising community capacity.

2. Partnerships

The council notes that partnerships across planning scales, jurisdictions and sectors are vital to the delivery of a successful Caring for our Country program. To this end, consideration should be given to:

- Encouraging applicants to include a statement of support from community partners. Proposals relating to project funding and natural resource management planning need to clearly demonstrate how regional and local communities have been, or will be, involved in decision making and implementation.
- Fostering better partnerships by ensuring facilitators and the assessment metric support the development of alliances, particularly where partnerships are new and innovative, and maintaining existing strong partnerships.
- Exploring and promoting successful partnership models.
- Ensuring that if Caring for our Country remains on a cycle of annual review that the annual Business Plans are released with sufficient lead time to allow stakeholders to catalyse targeted projects and alliances.

3. Community engagement including Indigenous

Community engagement and participation is essential to natural resource management. The Landcare approach is based on the philosophy that people from all communities and cultures can and ultimately must take responsibility for the health of Australia's environmental assets. The council suggests that community engagement, including Indigenous engagement, could be enhanced by:

- Recognising that Landcare values investment in building and maintaining the nation's social natural resource management capital and capacity, both professional and volunteer.
- Recognising that there is a role for independent and targeted investment in social capital through Caring for our Country and that regional bodies, peak Landcare, industry and that non- government bodies are well placed to facilitate this.
- Ensuring applications include a statement of support from community partners. Proposals relating to project funding and natural resource management planning need to clearly demonstrate how regional and local communities have been, or will be involved in decision making and implementation.
- Developing better working relationships between national, regional and community Landcare groups. The council supports the development of a shared agreement about working together. The document should be publicly released and stress the complementary nature of regional natural resource management and Landcare. The initial agreement between the National Natural Resource Management Regions Working Group and other National Natural Resource Management groups, like the



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National Landcare Network should commit to the inclusion of a mediation clause. Ideally the shared agreement would contain a clause that encourages the negotiation of a similar agreement between the regional groups individually with local groups in their region.

- Enhancing the scope for local community groups to derive core funding from regional boards through regional allocations and for the open call and community grants to increasingly provide scope for innovation and larger scale community-driven projects.
- Maintaining engagement of communities not able to contribute directly to specific Caring for our Country targets through Landcare and national community grants.
- Encouraging Facilitators, as a valuable investment, at both the regional and district scale, to further create an environment that builds the capability of the community.
- Galvanising partnerships, as Caring for our Country opportunities present, for the national volunteer sector to better support national environmental volunteerism.
- Fostering community and individual action to care for the land as that of an ethos of Landcare. Accordingly, in making sustainable decisions and contributing to local on-ground projects urban Australians are also valuable Landcarers.
- Ensuring Caring for our Country recognises the interests and responsibilities of Indigenous Australians within urban and agricultural landscapes and ‘on country’ not only under their ownership.
- Valuing the local land knowledge of Elders of all cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous and farming mentors.
- Enhancing, in the context of a potential key area of future focus, the capability of Indigenous communities and stakeholders to be actively involved in all stages of natural resource management planning and implementation.
- Noting that previous targets relating to the engagement of Indigenous communities have been so specific that the value of gathering traditional knowledge and providing learning on country opportunities were rarely able to be supported.
- Providing confidence to proponents by giving greater direction to northern and remote Australia national targets.

4. Business processes

Administrative processes are necessary to ensure the responsible delivery of government funding. However, consideration should be given to minimising complexity and duplication wherever possible. To this end the council suggests:

- Ensuring the level of administration expected of proponents is kept simple and to a minimum, and commensurate with the level of funding, the likelihood of funding and the relative level of risk of the application.
- Reviewing the merit of regional plan accreditation by establishing National Regional Planning Standards, mechanisms to better collaborate with states and territories over national priorities and matching funding requirements.



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- Fostering innovation for better outcomes for Caring for our Country targets – through the assessment metric and funding streams.
- Following a subsidiary approach for regional funding devolved to the lowest level of competency with the capacity to undertake the work.
- Developing a simple shared reporting system online that can be quickly and easily accessed by others. Landcare is committed to effective information and knowledge sharing. Caring for our Country provides an excellent opportunity to improve reporting systems.
- Promoting social capital, both professional and volunteer, as a valuable investment.
- Tying reporting where possible to national account indicators including emerging environmental accounts to strengthen their value.
- Providing targeted funding to facilitate consultation on the existing regional plans to serve as a useful mechanism to promote alignment.
- Retaining the flexibility to review the priorities of the Caring for our Country Business Plan annually to allow for changes in knowledge and innovation as we respond to climate change.
- Exploring mechanisms to better engage and support local government. Local government should be considered as a key partner to achieving Caring for our Country outcomes and should be recognised as a valued stakeholder in the development of national priorities.

5. Natural Resource Management Policy Directions

A common vision for “Natural Resource Management” would set the framework for future NRM policy direction. The council recommends:

- Developing a well supported Australian Natural Resource Management Vision to foster a set of common principles, greater planning alignment and provide a basis for coordinating greater standardisation of SMART reporting. A vision would also provide greater levels and certainty of funding and seek to clarify roles.
- Supporting regional planning as a critical and important element to the success of Caring for our Country and feeding these plans up to the national level to inform the targets set through national policy.
- Facilitating support and investment through Caring for our Country from Australian Government agencies outside of the traditional Landcare portfolio for greater and more integrated outcomes.
- Re-engaging the states and territories by diversifying funding streams, seeking “whole of government’ investment and facilitating the flow of private and industry funds.