

Regional Communities Consultative Council



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The Hon. Pam Allan, MP
Chair
Legislative Assembly Standing Committee
Inquiry into Natural Resource Management
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Madam

Regarding: *Comment on Legislative Assembly Standing Community Inquiry into Natural Resource Management.*

The Regional Communities Consultative Council (RCCC) is the peak community advisory body to the Premier, the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Government on rural and regional issues. The Council would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry. The RCCC supports the need to undertake a review of natural resource management in NSW and in general supports the principals of catchment governance and management as recommended by the Wentworth report. We also await the publishing of the current review into natural resource management which is being conducted by Mr Ian Sinclair.

Response to Review issues:

a. Current disincentives for ecologically sustainable land and water use in NSW are;

- Government's **current drought policy** acts as a disincentive to 'leading edge' land managers who balance agricultural productivity with sustainable natural resource management. Current policies do not consider the long term financial, economic or environmental impacts and act to reward negative sustainable management practices e.g. fodder and transport subsidies and drought declarations that provide access to funding to maintain herds on certain areas of drought effected lands.

- Major agricultural advisory industries and organisations **focus strongly on productivity** at individual farm level at the expense of long term sustainability of agricultural industries and the resources on which they depend. Sustainable environmental practices must be able to be quantified into dollars and cents to be included in any business or industries financial viability within a particular area.
- Government support to the establishment of **third party investment** in natural resource management is believed to be low. Landholders do not have a sense that Governments have established a track record in working together with commercial investment in natural resource management, in contrast to other areas such as health, education and housing.
- Historically, an increase in water for the environment has meant a loss of water to industry and so an **adversarial situation** has developed between not only the environment and industry but also industries themselves and between competing communities. There is also an inability of all parties to engage in solutions. This is exacerbated by the rapid pace of change required – there must be recognition of a transition period for the gradual introduction of changes.
- The complexity of natural resource management has lead to **continual reactionary changes in policy and legislation**. This has resulted in a high level of confusion, which translates into frustration, and a lack of trust in Government. The end result is a reluctance within the community to change to more ecologically sustainable systems, for fear of future changes.
- **Low rates of return** from traditional agricultural systems means there are often limited finances available to land-owners to fund any necessary changes.
- **Social impediments** will decrease outcomes where the change required, to achieve ecological sustainability, exceeds the point at which people are prepared to significantly change their activities and lifestyle.
- Current policies effectively encourage the practice of **cultivating native pasture**, in order to avoid the rule that after ten years if over 50% of the pasture is native grasses than a clearing permission has to be sought to cultivate. Local land management practices need to be taken into account especially in areas where cultivating may not be required for best management of the land for up to 15 years. Landholders feel forced to cultivate to maintain their ability to cultivate when it is required.
- Statewide legislation and regulations cannot adequately address **planning at the local level** with the diversity of landscapes and farming practices currently undertaken in NSW. Changes that are needed to the legislation must recognise the different routine agricultural practises within these landscapes. Sustainable management, especially vegetation, requires different strategies and different levels of resourcing to achieve the same outcome across the state. There must be a recognition that local solutions are required for local situations.

- Lack of practical and appropriate **environmental education** for land use managers.

b. *Options for the removal of such disincentives are;*

- **Drought preparedness;** Long term strategies that concentrate on long term economics and natural resource management must also include promotion and education. There should be research and support available to encourage more enterprises to match the resource base and seasonal changes of an area that they are in. Considering the cost of drought, not just the short term social and financial costs but the long term costs to community as a whole should be enough to ensure that the required changes will be undertaken by all levels of Government.
- Reassess the basic charter of **Government advisory bodies** to ensure there is the balance needed between productivity, economic, social and environmental outcomes.
- Giving the community the **financial and physical resources** to implement Catchment Blueprints to deliver a real impact on catchment targets.
- Governments need to **invest for periods longer than 3 years** for ecological sustainable land and water use to be achieved.
- Provision of **property rights and recognition of payment** for the removal of such rights. The consequence – community values will change as these changes will have been at a cost to the whole community.
- **Legislation reform** - streamlining and simplify the Acts, significantly changing the definitions and address the unacceptable and unworkable aspects of the current Act. Confidence needs to be regained by land managers and community to be able to affect any long term changes in NRM. Swift action in making the realistic changes in the legislation that take into consideration the landholder, community and environment will start to renew that confidence. If the legislation is inclusive, workable and user friendly community will start to gain confidence that this will apply to all other structural changes.
- Catchments or regional governance should be able to devise their **own objectives and targets** for the local environment. Again, we would stress the need to develop local solutions for local situations.
- Ensure **accessible, affordable and appropriate environmental education** is available to land use managers.

c. *Approaches to land use management on farms which both reduce salinity and mitigate the effects of drought are;*

- **Strategic grazing management** such as cell grazing, in appropriate areas.
- **Replanting trees and bushes** such as saltbush that can survive in salt areas.

- **Protection** of remnant vegetation.
- Establishment of **perennial pastures** such as Lucerne and phalaris.
- **Erosion protection** measures.
- Recognition that salinity is a function of **landscape management** not individual activities.
- Management of the landscape as a unit (landscape management) and the recognition that **a greater mix of agricultural enterprises** should exist within any one landscape. For example: a predominantly cropping landscape requires a balance of cropping, grazing forestry and protected areas to ensure a healthy functioning system.

d. *Ways of increasing the up take of such land use management practices are;*

- Increased **education and awareness** of better land management practices.
- **Demonstrations** of the profitability of landscape management.
- **Financial assistance** must be given to plant and revegetate; possibility of environment levy or tax incentives.
- **Financial assistance** to better manage remnant vegetation.
- Encourage **planting of perennial pastures** in appropriate areas.
- Encourage **efficient and effective water management** on the property e.g. pivot irrigation system, drip systems and reuse of discharged water.
- Meaningful **incentives** such as tender based, market based, taxation incentives, salinity and carbon credit Environmental Management Systems (EMS).

e. *The effectiveness of management systems for ensuring that sustainability measures for the management of natural resources in NSW are achieved;*

To achieve sustainability the below issues need to be addressed;

- **Current legislation and constraint** does not give an opportunity for innovative thinking.
- **Process time for approval** to change land practice is too long.
- The **budgets and staffing** levels of such Departments as Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources are believed to be insufficient to adequately monitor approvals and compliance as well as assist landholders with on site education and awareness programs.
- Any new **management authority** needs to have community members that are appointed on merit, skill and understanding that they are not delegates only for a particular community or interest group. They need to be able to demonstrate that they can make decisions based on the betterment of the environment, include socio-economic issues and have the links and skill to engage and include community within the change processes.
- At the individual farm level the **practices outlined in d)** above need to be implemented.

- At the regional level the **Catchment Blueprints** are a positive move towards sustainability but need “real” resourcing.
- At the strategic level **changes to legislation and policy** are required.
- Local Government should work **collaboratively with adjoining councils** to ensure a whole of catchment approach is undertaken to address issues such as discharge of grey water into off water treatment sites.

f. The impact of water management arrangements on the management of salinity in NSW;

- Water management arrangements should **align with Landscape management**.
- There are no **formal water management arrangements** to deal with salinity other than use of dilution flows in regulated rivers, which are considered short term and largely undesirable.

Informal water management.

Land based water management arrangements should include:

- Recognition of **water balance in cropping and grazing systems** (no till and low till) and the maintenance of groundcover and active perennial plant growth.
- **Enhanced irrigation management** and recognition of the resource base (soils) in ensuring accessions to the water table are minimised e.g. intensive industries have made changes from spray to drip irrigation and delivery systems have changed in best practice flood irrigation situations.
- **Increasing knowledge and better use of technology** to support better groundwater flow systems and management of vegetation.
- The **Land and Water Management Plans** that are in place address the key issues within these areas. What these plans do not address is the present investment in inappropriate areas i.e. there is a significant capital investment in inappropriate soil types for irrigation. Flood irrigation on red soil can add to salinity problems, whereas flood irrigation on clay soils does not exacerbate salinity issues. The plans should not only address future needs but have in place practical and workable strategies and directions for resolving current practices.


On behalf of the RCCC I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to raise these important issues with you. The RCCC believes that finding effective solutions for rural communities to address the priorities of natural resource management is a high priority. Our views on this subject can be summarised by stating:

- Rural communities are vitally concerned with the management of the natural resources on which our livelihoods are based. However, we see the communities themselves as part of our environment, so that any policy targeted at the bio-physical environment must also consider the socio-economic environment.

- To introduce change successfully, it is vital to consult effectively with all the stakeholders involved in that change. High levels of ownership of outcomes must be established, or change cannot be implemented.
- Lead the way with inclusive, practical, workable and user friendly legislation that signposts the way forward for sustainable NRM. The legislation should also be realistic within the context of the current realities of the environment, resources and capacity to change.
- The recognition of property rights, and associated rights for compensation, must be a fundamental part of successful change management.
- The recognition of a transition period is also an essential requirement for successful change management – agricultural systems and practices cannot be changed in a short time frame.
- A “whole of community” approach must be taken to finding sustainable solutions – the whole community is involved, and not just land managers. All rural communities are involved in the results of agricultural production, whether directly or indirectly, as well as and the wider Australian community.
- While “drought impact mitigating” policies are currently at the forefront, the RCCC would stress the vital importance of effective “recovery strategies”, if rural communities are to be facilitated to establish long term sustainable (economically and ecologically viable) agricultural operations.

We trust these comments will be of value to the Inquiry,

Yours Sincerely



Diana Gibbs
Chair
11 July 2003