



CARING
FOR
OUR
COUNTRY

Let's continue the conversation

Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper

Submissions close 5pm, 15 August 2012. Written submission can be up to three pages for each set of key questions (Sections 1.0 & 2.0). The submission will need to be accompanied by a submission coversheet. The submission coversheet is available from the library on the online forum (www.caringforourcountryreview.com.au). Send submission and cover sheet to:

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1.0 Regional Delivery Key Questions

1.1 Governance

The review raised concerns regarding the consistency of governance standards amongst regional NRM organisations. Several regional organisations also requested clearer direction from the Australian Government in terms of expectations of them, particularly in relation to efficiency, performance in community engagement and good governance.

1. What governance standards should be expected of regional NRM organisations?

1. Business/governance standards expected of any business with a turn-over in excess of \$5m.

2. How can we ensure consistency and continual improvement in the performance of regional NRM organisations?

1. By providing realistic funding and setting appropriate priorities that reflect key NRM issues and priorities in the regions.
2. By encouraging normal business practices as they would with any other contracted organisation eg Local Government or a commercial contractor - providing clear and agreed contractual obligations achievable through best practice business standards.

3. How can regional NRM organisations best support their local NRM community?

1. Through a publicly articulated business/service delivery strategy based on a community based natural resource management plan. The role of Government should be to support the implementation, and acceleration of the delivery of this strategy and plan.
2. Through strategic collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders –Landcare, industry, local government, state government, conservation groups etc
3. Through the provision of a range of activities/operations e.g. local on ground works, policy advocacy, membership of key decision making bodies, involvement in regional and statutory planning processes, education from school to community, regional project development, sub-catchment planning, technical expertise etc

1.2 Regional Planning

In the next phase of Caring for our Country regional NRM organisations could have an important role in regional level NRM planning and prioritisation. Many submissions to the Caring for our Country Review discussed the benefits of regional planning – for example, its role in aligning national, state and regional NRM priorities, its ability to engage local communities and its ability to make links between NRM and other regional priorities.

4. How can regional planning best be integrated into Caring for our Country to fully realise these benefits?

1. The current direct support for Regional NRM organisations provides a sound mechanism for the delivery of national objectives based on local and regional priorities ie NRM organisations can translate the national priorities into regionally relevant delivery.
2. However, one of the most frustrating aspects of the competitive call program is the salt and pepper nature of project approvals. The rhetoric of the CfoC program is about strategic investments based on identified NRM priorities, however, the reality of project approvals is a hotch-potch of non-strategic, unrelated and often isolated projects bearing limited relationship to local landscape or regional priorities. The expression of competitive call delivery is not consistent with the strategic basis of the program and undermines integration and alignment of key planning instruments.
3. The application process for open call projects is currently seen as a bit of a lottery and the chances of application success are very low. This is impacting on the participation of NRM organisations in the process and in the quality of applications ie there is not much point in putting time and effort into the application as the chances of being successful don't warrant the effort.
4. A regionally based filter should be passed across all project applications to ensure that they are relevant to not just national priorities but are also consistent with the priorities of regional communities.
5. Additionally, large projects should be addressing NRM issues at a landscape scale and not through individual project sites scattered across the region where the impact is generally minimal.

1.3 Caring for our Country Priorities

Funding for the next phase of Caring for our Country will be directed towards three new strategic objectives in the sustainable environment stream and five in the sustainable agriculture stream.

5. What role can regional NRM organisations play in addressing each of the new Caring for our Country strategic objectives?

1. The program should enter into discussions with each NRM organisation and compare the region's NRM plan priorities with the strategic objectives of the program. The discussions should be able to identify the regional strategic objectives for the program as a basis for investments at both the regional and local level. This would clarify for project applicants where the best return on application effort could be achieved.

6. What role can regional NRM organisations play in ensuring state, regional and local priorities are represented within the framework of our national strategic objectives?

1. Clearly articulating the regional priorities against the CfoC program objectives.
2. In order for the Commonwealth to understand the priorities for NRM organisations requires a serious discussion with State and Regional organisations about the 'real' priorities rather than those articulated by the Commonwealth.
3. Many of the "essential" criteria applied to the assessment process for open call projects, for example, may not be practically achievable in many jurisdictions and this needs to be reflected in trying to achieve the national objectives. Examples include:
 - the lack of State Government or any other technical support in many areas, therefore requiring recognition in the application process that regional NRM organisations may be the main (or only) source of available technical expertise for a project;
 - recognising the challenges NRM organisations have to facilitate non tokenistic Aboriginal participation; and

- the requirement for demonstration of legacy for projects when these options are not available in a region eg covenants on private land, changes in Council by-laws or supporting State government investment are, practically, not possible for many regions.
4. Cross checking of project approvals through the competitive process seems to be lacking at present. A recent example is the funding of a competitive project for an industry organisation which replicated and directly competed with a programme already being delivered through a regional NRM organisation. This duplication of effort has caused frustration and confusion within the community to the extent where involvement of landholders has been difficult to achieve.

1.4 Delivery Mechanisms

Under the first phase of Caring for our Country, regional NRM organisations were able to access pre-determined allocations of regional funding, as well as being eligible for competitive open call rounds.

7. Should regional organisations be eligible for other competitive funding? If so, should there be any restrictions or requirements?

1. Yes, they should and there should no restrictions that are not applied to other applicants. Regional organisations generally have very good relationships with their regional communities and understand the NRM priorities for those communities.
2. We are deeply concerned that this question is even being asked. With private organisations and individuals being eligible (and being funded for often largely private benefit projects), and Commonwealth, State and research organisations, with access to very large budgets, also eligible (and being funded), the contradiction of this query is challenged. Why are regional NRM organisations, in many cases non-statutory bodies, being singled out for this when they:
 - are directly funded to help implement the CfoC program but in some way are being suggested as ineligible to then do the job which they are being directly supported to do
 - have technical and community support for assisting in the implementation of NRM best practices but often limited access to additional resources while faced with massive NRM challenges?
3. If this is a serious question then the whole basis of the funding formula should be reviewed and the strategic basis for investment in NRM by the Commonwealth should be investigated. A suggestion would be that organisations that have a capacity to provide co-investment eg individuals, government, private and statutory organisations etc be required to provide matching cash funding for project applications.

2.0 Protecting and conserving nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity in the next phase of Caring for our Country Key Questions

2.1 Caring for our Country Priorities

Investment in nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity in the first phase of Caring for our Country focused on management and restoration of native habitat and vegetation, management of invasive species and targeted initiatives to support iconic endangered species. Landscape-scale approaches that built landscape resilience and connectivity were prioritised.

Since the first phase of Caring for our Country, the Clean Energy Future Biodiversity Fund has been established. The Biodiversity Fund focuses on supporting landholders to undertake projects that establish, restore, protect or manage biodiverse carbon stores. This includes work to establish new vegetation, maintain or enhance existing native vegetation and manage invasive species to preserve and enhance carbon and biodiversity values. Approaches that enhance corridors and landscape connectivity are prioritised under this program.

In addition, the National Wildlife Corridors Plan, once finalised, will assist in prioritising investment in projects that promote the landscape-scale connectivity and resilience of ecosystems.

For the next phase of Caring for our Country, keeping in mind the complementary role of the Biodiversity Fund:

8. What should activities at local and regional scales focus on to protect and conserve nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity?

1. The assertion that the first phase of CfoC focused on landscape scale approaches is challenged. The rhetoric implied this but the Open Call project assessment process did not support this in reality. A very large number of projects had very limited landscape scale application and were implemented through individual project sites – often devolved grants processes or even through individuals – resulting in small scale, ad hoc and unstrategic delivery with minimal chance of having a landscape impact on NRM ie the landscape scale objectives of the program were not reflected in the project approval process.
2. Funded projects should demonstrate that they are treating the issues at a landscape scale ie across property boundaries and at a scale that can make an ecological or environmental impact. Landscape scale solutions to ecological problems can rarely be achieved at a property level. Landscape scale linkages/continuity should be a guiding principle for supporting biodiversity projects.

9. What is the role of habitat restoration and revegetation in protecting and conserving nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity?

1. Incredibly important and the challenge of changing landholder attitudes to conservation in an increasingly business focussed, socially and financially challenged farming and grazing community should not be underestimated.
2. Many of the programs mentioned above are easy to articulate but not necessarily easy to implement. There needs to be recognition of the ongoing need to engage with communities about the balance between financial viability of their enterprises and the long term stability of the landscape. This is not something that can be done once and we are all happy – owners change, corporatisation of farms is well underway, and younger more economically focussed farmers are taking over the farm. Provision needs to be made for engagement not just implementation.
3. For many regions, revegetation in the way of planting or direct seeding is not technically nor economically feasible/viable and the management of regrowth needs to be more explicit as a management action for habitat restoration.

10. How can Caring for our Country strike the best balance in supporting actions to protect iconic native species and ecosystems, compared with broader actions to enhance the quality, extent and connectivity of biodiverse native habitats and landscapes?

1. The Community Action Grant program is one way of maintaining this balance. It provides the opportunity for local implementation of priority projects.
2. However, a \$20,000 upper limit is inadequate to undertake a serious implementation project, particularly given soaring costs in regional centres, and this should be raised to at least \$30,000 - \$40,000.
3. Support for local, regional and national programs which are planned and have clearly articulated strategies for protection of species and ecosystems should be encouraged. This would mean a change in attitude by the Commonwealth on program such as species recovery plans which currently seem to have limited status and support.

11. How can investment in threatened native species and ecosystems focus more on preventative measures to identify and support vulnerable species before they become nationally endangered and listed?

1. This appears to be more of a political question as the major preventative actions in legislative terms have already been taken – threatened species, land clearing, protected areas etc.
2. The challenge comes from government, industry, urban, utility and infrastructure development pressure to side step and negate preventative/protective legislation.
3. Government resistance to the voracious destruction of threatened habitat and the constant undermining of the legislative protections currently in place is a more cost effective solution than direct investment in preventative measures.

12. Which outcome measures would most effectively track our progress in protecting and conserving nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity?

1. Firstly, there needs to be articulation of the scientific indicators from a national perspective and agreement with each individual State Government based on each States policies and programs. The Commonwealth will be wasting money, time and resources on tracking progress if there is no consensus on this, as the States may actually be working against any Commonwealth approaches eg through mining, fisheries, agricultural and infrastructure development policies.
2. The Commonwealth should then develop a program logic and a MERI plan so that the outcome measures fall out of a logic rather than individual discipline priorities and political based imperatives.

13. Would Caring for our Country best complement the Biodiversity Fund by prioritising actions that protect and conserve listed matters of national environmental significance under the EPBC Act?

1. No, as this would require a rewrite of the strategic basis of the whole program ie currently “three new strategic objectives in the sustainable environment stream and five in the sustainable agriculture stream” would surely become invalid.
2. If this approach was taken, surely only government agencies who have a legislative framework to support the Act would be relevant. Jurisdictionally, the State governments would need to actively support this approach. In Queensland, there has been no evidence in the past that this support will be practically forthcoming and under the new government this is also less likely.
3. This may also have some validity in States where regional NRM organisations are also statutory but would not have any teeth where they aren't.

14. What role should legislative tools such as Conservation Advices, Species Recovery Plans, Threat Abatement Plans and the Threat Abatement Advices proposed under the EPBC Act reforms play in informing Caring for our Country investment decisions?

1. They would be a good strategic basis but the status and support for development and review of these would need to be greatly improved as they currently seem to have little practical support or validity within the Commonwealth's conservation programs/system.

2.2 Delivery Mechanisms

The Caring for our Country review found that offering a mix of investment strategies and funding options tailored to the outcomes sought has been successful in the first phase of Caring for our Country. However concerns were also raised about supporting partnerships, especially under competitive approaches. For the next phase of Caring for our Country:

15. Which investment strategies are likely to be most effective in protecting and conserving nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity?

1. The program should focus on implementation and the attitudinal changes required by landholders to adopt and implement best practices on their properties. This would require less investment in Commonwealth and State Government Department projects which should be delivered through their own portfolios. The past investment in Government Departments is not rational and reduces the available funds for significant regional projects.
2. There should be a strategic basis for major project funding – currently this appears to be based on one question in the open call application process about meeting National program objectives which are difficult to articulate at a local level and not particularly relevant. The strategic basis should be for example, species recovery plans, regional NRM plans/priorities, or other well articulated strategies such as those developed by conservation organisations such as Greening Australia and BirdLife Australia.
3. The current Open Call process is particularly ineffective in achieving any landscape scale change as it operates on a project site basis which has limited impact on biodiversity at the appropriate scale.

16. Are there alternative investment approaches that could also be effective?

1. The previous tendering process for the Stewardship program was a highly effective option to ensure delivery of required outcomes. It was clearly defined, well organised from a Commonwealth level, and required very tight and accountable delivery mechanisms and timeframes. This approach should be considered for focussed landscape scale project delivery.

17. What types of partnerships are likely to be most effective in protecting and conserving nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity?

1. Partnerships between Landcare groups, industry groups and regional NRM organisations would be an effective way to make some headway. This has not been supported through the current Open Call process despite the rhetoric.
2. There needs to be close (and demonstrated) linkages between the delivery agent and the landholders who need to adopt and implement any actions. This does not seem to be apparent in many current projects.

18. How can these partnerships be encouraged and supported, including through competitive delivery mechanisms?

1. There could be a 2 step process for major projects ie an expression of interest where the partnerships and project idea is articulated and then a negotiated project where the partnerships are developed and realised.

19. How can the community, including Indigenous, local and regional stakeholders, be best engaged in activities to protect and conserve nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity?

1. Firstly, regional realities for Aboriginal participation need to be clarified. Not all regions have the capability, relationships with indigenous communities or the relationship with landholders to realise any meaningful involvement of Aboriginal communities in NRM implementation. Saying that they should needs to be supported by the Commonwealth.
2. There needs to be better articulation of what this question means and what relevance it has to protection and conservation. There needs to be some examples of how this engagement is envisaged as this is very unclear in the current program eg there is no recognition that this is a specific task in itself and currently must be incorporated into projects. This does not provide for the long term change that is required to engage communities in conservation.

2.3 Regional Planning

In the next phase of Caring for our Country, regional natural resource management organisations will continue to drive regional level natural resource management planning and prioritisation, in partnership with other key stakeholders such as local government, industry groups and community groups.

20. What role can regional planning play in addressing matters of national environmental significance such as listed species and ecological communities?

1. A significant role as regional plans can translate national priorities to the realities of regional and local community structures and culture.
2. Regional planning can be incorporated into assessment processes by having a filter (local assessment) to review project applications in relation to regional plans.

21. What role can regional planning play in promoting landscape-scale approaches to managing species, ecosystems and biodiversity?

1. Again, a regional filter should be applied to projects so that ad-hoc, non-strategic and property level projects, which do not deliver at a landscape scale, are not prioritised for approval.

22. What opportunities to improve the protection and conservation of nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity could arise as a result of amendments to the EPBC Act to allow regional species recovery and threat abatement planning?

1. Regional species recovery and threat abatement plans are a really good way of coordinated action at a landscape scale and could be a basis for project development and delivery.

2.4 Glossary

- **Ecological communities:** Ecological communities are naturally occurring, interlinked groups of plants and animals. Their composition can be determined by factors such as soil type, position in the landscape, climate and water availability.
- **Ecosystem services:** Ecosystem services are necessities for life provided by a healthy natural environment, which are fundamental to the physical well-being of all living organisms and also the social, cultural and economic well-being of humans. For example, we need oxygen to breathe, clean water to drink, fertile soil for food production and physical materials for shelter and fuel.
- **Listed species and ecological communities:** This refers to both migratory species that are listed as a matter of national significance under the EPBC Act and listed threatened species and threatened ecological communities under the EPBC Act.
- **Matters of national environmental significance:** The EPBC Act defines and protects eight matters of national environmental significance:
 - World Heritage properties
 - National heritage places
 - Wetlands of international importance (listed under the Ramsar Convention)
 - Listed threatened species and ecological communities
 - Migratory species protected under international agreements
 - Commonwealth marine areas
 - The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park
 - Nuclear actions (including uranium mines).
- Under the EPBC Act, any actions that have, or are likely to have, a significant impact on a matter of national environmental significance require approval from the Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.