



QMDC comments to Inquiry into the administration and transparency of the Register of Environmental Organisations and its effectiveness in supporting communities to take practical action to improve the environment

21 May 2015

Submission to:

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment
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These comments are presented by the Chief Executive Officer, Geoff Penton, on behalf of the Queensland Murray-Darling Committee Inc. (QMDC). QMDC is a regional natural resource management (NRM) group that supports communities in the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin (QMDB) to sustainably manage their natural resources.

1.0 Background

QMDC is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation that has delivered natural resource management (NRM) services across the QMDB for 21 years. QMDC represents a diverse range of member organisations and delivers programs, and services to support its members' community and business interests. We have 3 regional offices located in Toowoomba, Goondiwindi, and Roma.

QMDC's core business is to work directly with landholders and local government within diverse catchments and across all land tenures; assisting in changing attitudes, and behaviours; developing NRM management practices; contributing key service abilities to fill knowledge gaps; contributing to NRM policy developments at regional, state, national levels; and facilitating greater access to information by many community organisations.

QMDC staff work with a wide range of stakeholders, Traditional Owners and Elders in the region, Landcare groups, farmers and graziers, regional councils, agencies from all tiers of government, agricultural industry bodies, agribusinesses, the corporate business sector, the mining and resource sectors, the health sector and rural communities.

A key element to QMDC's success has been our partnership (both technical and financial) with Landcare groups and Catchment Management Associations in our region. Along with QMDC's technical staff, the Landcare and Catchment coordinators are our frontline of interaction with the community. This partnership has enabled QMDC's technical officers and Landcare and Catchment Management groups to work with hundreds of agricultural and rural businesses, many other community groups, and urban communities.

QMDC currently has 40 full-time, five part-time and four casual staff members with key skills in the natural resource management and environmental arenas including technical, engagement, training, education, communication and policy. We have DGR status.

Current key programs:

QMDC advocates for the sustainable use of our region's natural resources, works to protect vital habitat for vulnerable and endangered flora and fauna and educate our community about the importance of sustainability both in the paddock and around the home. QMDC's activities and key programs are guided by the community-driven Regional Natural Resource Management Plan. The Plan was endorsed by the State and Federal governments and serves as a guide to implement programs that:

- improve the health of the region's soil and water e.g. community water quality monitoring, soil conservation advisory service
- improve the health of the rivers, wetland and floodplains e.g. carp buster, assisting landholders with fencing creeks/rivers, installing fish ways on weirs
- protect native plants and animals e.g. improving local government biodiversity reserves, restoring native habitat on farms
- protect cultural heritage e.g. cultural site management planning
- reduce the threat of weeds and pest animals e.g. coordinated trapping and baiting programs
- implement regional energy efficiency and waste management measures e.g. conduct energy audits on small to medium business enterprises and coordinate waste management across 6 local governments to improve recovery and recycling of resources
- increase community capacity e.g. facilitate educational activities and workshops.

Characteristics of target beneficiaries:

- Isolated rural communities
- Rural landholders
- 8 Traditional Owner groups and Aboriginal communities
- 12 member organisations
- Agribusinesses – grazing, cropping and mixed enterprises
- Landcare groups (Milmerran, Mitchell, Tara, Chinchilla, North East Downs, Goondiwindi, Warwick, Stanthorpe, Pittsworth, Roma, Inglewood –Texas, Miles)

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2012- 2013 Achievements of organisation

- In 2013, QMDC won the Regional Landcare and Environment Award for its 'Dirty Gloves' Flood Recovery program.
- Became a signatory to Australian Packaging Covenant & has begun to implement action plan to reduce, reuse and recycle organisation's packaging waste
- 152 landholders participated in integrated landscape planning processes to improve land management practices e.g. grazing, cropping, manage salinity risks, improve water use efficiency
- 63 land managers applied improved land management practices across 26,405 hectares through on-ground works
- Helped a local school to plant 130 native trees on National Tree Day
- Supported the protection of 20,138 hectares of native vegetation by landholders
- Completed draft Healthy Waters Management plans for 3 planning region catchments
- Estimated 591,757 hectares of Barwon-Darling floodplain northern tributaries being protected by QMDC's feral animal control program
- 1,112,409 hectares being managed for feral animals
- 2,891 hectares of blackberry & 7,282 hectares of Parthenium managed
- Organised carp buster events that resulted in over 10,000 carp being caught
- Organised a Naturally Resourceful Summit for rural women - 100 attendees
- 16 Farm Ecology events held - 301 attendees

Please see Annual Report for more details

<http://www.qmdc.org.au/publications/download/1828/reports/qmdc-reports-2012-13/qmdc-annual-report-2012-13.pdf>

QMDC's Public Fund 'Sustainable Landscapes, Viable Communities':

QMDC has a separate 'public fund for all DGR monies. No advocacy expenditure comes from this public fund. To date the biggest use of the public fund has been for drought assistance, we get 100% rebate on transport for hay to drought affected graziers in Southwest Queensland. The fund provides a viable means for the public to support local environmental projects, which directly benefit the QMDB. It is an accountable and reputable funding mechanism supporting our local communities.

2.0 Specific comments

2.1 The definition of 'environmental organisation' under the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997*, including under Subdivision 30-E

QMDC's environmental objectives as stated by its constitution clearly align the integral relationship between community advocacy and on ground activities. Establishing a forum by which community can discuss and influence social, economic and environmental policy and legislation helps rural and regional communities to communicate the important and current NRM matters amongst stakeholders and members.

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It also enables the region's communities to represent key NRM management strategies adopted or aspired to in the QMDB to government and the private sector.

Although QMDC has not used its public fund to resource community advocacy activities, we support the autonomy of other environment organisations having non-partisan community advocacy as an objective that is tied to their DGR status and donations. In many ways this allows other sources of funds (government, philanthropic, commercial services, corporate sponsorships and partnerships) to be spent on on-ground works resulting in key environmental outcomes on a range of crucial levels.

QMDC asserts that governments and the private sector should welcome community and public interest advocacy for its well established historical and common law value. In a world where there are more and more people to feed, clothe, shelter and support, environmental advocacy should be legislatively protected and politically respected. Environmental advocacy is informed by the work of NGOs and NFPs, which includes a body of social and scientific research, local and traditional knowledge and experience, volunteer labour and skill, social cohesion and justice principles, democratic and collaborative governance and administrative structures.

It has long been realised in legal jurisdictions that political integrity requires the rights of individual citizens and persons, communities and societies to advocate for environmental protection, social harmony, equity of standing and justice. It stimulates innovation and improves industrial practices, site and infrastructure design. It better aligns policy, science, planning and governance. It enables the allocation of more strategic funding.

QMDC does not support any changes to legislation that limit the public to donate as they freely wish to the public funds of environmental organisations' for non-partisan public good activities. These donations are given in accordance with an organisation's stated constitution and/or objectives.

2.2. The requirements to be met by an organisation to be listed on the Register and maintain its listing

QMDC agrees that all organisations with DGR status should be listed on a public register.

2.3 Activities undertaken by organisations currently listed on the Register and the extent to which these activities involve on-ground environmental works

QMDC's public fund provides a key community service role in relation to sustaining natural assets and for general engagement of the local and wider community in environmental activities in the QMDB.

Our public fund will contribute to on ground works and prioritise projects according to recognised community aspirations encapsulated within the regional NRM Plan, and which lead to natural asset protection projects becoming a reality.

QMDC is committed to supporting the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin and encourages everyone to consider the opportunities that this public fund provides.

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Currently monies in the fund are minimal owing to its relatively new establishment. It is envisaged that each year projects to fund will be selected on basis of our public good objectives and the value of environmental benefits they will provide. They will also be considered in regards to their alignment with the Maranoa Balonne/Borders Rivers Natural Resource Management Plan.

The public fund will provide support to projects that broadly meet our constitutional objectives including on-ground works, education and training, monitoring and evaluation and are identified as important issues for the region in stakeholder Natural Resource Management Plan workshops and Members meetings held regularly throughout each year.

2.4 Reporting requirements for organisations to disclose donations and activities funded by donations

QMDC has an excellent track record in the reporting for a wide range of projects and has a demonstrated capacity to deliver regional scale programs. QMDC employs a qualified Corporate Services Manager to oversee its Financial Operations and legal administrative obligations.

QMDC has no issue with the current reporting obligations. We believe all monies raised by way of donations to public funds, should be disclosed in terms on how they were spent in accordance with an organisation's constitutional NFP status and environmental objectives.

2.5 The administration of the Register and potential efficiency improvements

We do not see the need for any extensive change as it is a straightforward administrative role.

2.6 Compliance arrangements and the measures available to the Department of the Environment and the Australian Taxation Office to investigate breaches of the Act and Ministerial Guidelines by listed organisations

We assume the Taxation Office already has such powers of investigation.

3.0 Recommendations

DGR status should remain for organisations that have non-partisan public good environmental objectives like QMDC.