

HC Coombs Policy Forum NRM initiative

Synthesis of broad issues and opportunities (Document I)¹

This is the first of three final documents produced as part of a joint initiative on Natural Resource Management (NRM) by the HC Coombs Policy Forum and the Fenner School of Environment and Society at The Australian National University. This document provides background to the initiative and presents a synthesis of the broad issues and opportunities for integrated regional natural resource management policy and planning in Australia. The synthesis draws upon a review of the NRM literature (see Document II) and a workshop that brought together NRM professionals representing a range of stakeholders across the NRM sector (see Document III).

Background to the NRM initiative

The HC Coombs Policy Forum NRM initiative formed in response to a request from the Australian Government's joint Natural Resource Management team, which brings together the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC) and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF). At The Australian National University (ANU) the initiative was led by the HC Coombs Policy Forum, in partnership with the Fenner School of Environment and Society, and formed a collaborative arrangement with the Australian Government on integrated NRM and regional policy and planning. In line with the mission of the HC Coombs Policy Forum, the NRM initiative sought to strengthen the connection between relevant research and current priority issues for the Australian Government, by contributing to an enhanced evidence base and links between researchers, government representatives and a broader practitioner community.

Two key activities were undertaken as part of the initiative – a review of the NRM literature (Document II) and a stakeholder workshop (Document III). The literature review captures some of the key issues arising within Australia's approach to NRM policy and planning, and the workshop was designed to identify and further develop insights from the Literature Review in dialogue with NRM stakeholders and government.

A Reference Group was formed as part of this initiative, to guide the literature review and workshop. The Group included representation from the Australian Government's joint NRM team and the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government; the regional planning sector; and the HC Coombs Policy Forum and the Fenner School of Environment and Society at ANU.

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The Australian Government's immediate interest in the outputs from the NRM initiative relates to their major 2011 review of the Caring for our Country (CFOC) program. The agreed aim was to both deliver specific outputs to feed into the CFOC review, while also stimulating broader discussion of issues identified by the Reference Group as significant relating to the roles and responsibilities in progressing towards integrated NRM, regional policy and planning.

Looking beyond the specifics of the CFOC program review, a number of 2010 election commitments will also be important as the Australian Government works to shape its future regional NRM policies and programs. The detail of these is still unfolding and will continue to be the subject of dialogue and debate before final policy arrangements will be established. The election commitments of particular relevance to NRM are:

- > Integration of 'resilience thinking' and 'landscape focus' into the Commonwealth's environmental programs
- > The Carbon Farming Initiative
- > National Wildlife Corridors
- > The regional development agenda established under the newly established Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government.

Several other policy-related issues or initiatives have also been identified as having potential bearing on future Commonwealth and State/Territory government NRM programs. These include the EPBC Act review; on-going water planning and reform; the initiative to establish national environmental accounts; and programs to address Indigenous disadvantage (including the Closing the Gap strategy).

Synthesis of broad issues and opportunities

The literature review and structured discussions undertaken as part of this collaborative initiative between the ANU and the Australian Government have aimed to inform current and future policy debates around regional NRM in Australia. The synthesis outlined below seeks to identify a small number of higher-order themes and opportunities that, while not attracting full consensus, or agreement as to solutions, do capture the essence of major areas deserving closer consideration, debate and attention. We highlight ten key issues. These are not areas where definitive recommendations can, or should, be made, but are issues ripe to be pursued by the Commonwealth, States and Territories, regional organisations and their communities, researchers, and combinations of these.

1. First, there is strong consensus that addressing NRM at the regional scale is justified and effective. That is, between the local and state scale, there is the opportunity for optimal data gathering, integration of issues, community engagement, and linking between policy initiatives and on-ground outcomes. It is also recognised that the investment in information and organisational and human capacity in current regional organisations should not be squandered or endangered – it represents a valuable build up of 'capital'. It is felt that arguments over definitions and borders of regions are not necessary, accepting that any redefinition will have positive and negative outcomes. However, regional definition issues do arise in relation to other emerging regional scale initiatives that may create confusion, overlap or competition for human and other resources in regions (eg regional development, ROCs, strategic assessments). Clear re-commitment to the regional scale in principle by governments would be timely, recognising the right and need for governments to adjust their engagement (with other scales and participants) and investment priorities over time.
2. Related to (1) above, it is apparent that in the context of the changes implemented under CFOC there is a perceived decrease in Australian Government commitment, leadership and clarity of role regarding its relationship with regions in NRM. A clarification of commitment to regional NRM would assist the operation and forward planning of regional organisations, and this would need to be matched with greater clarity over the nature and limits of the relationship and of the Commonwealth's role in regional NRM. This is an issue that invites attention beyond the life of current investment programs.

3. It is apparent that in the literature and in policy and management debates at the national scale, the roles and responsibilities of the States and Territories have received less attention than the Commonwealth. This is inarguably an unbalanced situation given that the vast bulk of NRM responsibilities are constitutionally State and Territory matters. The Commonwealth is a relatively recent entrant in NRM matters, and questions arise as to why it should be expected to address issues in many ways outside its jurisdiction, in the absence of clarity over roles and responsibilities in a Federal system. There is scope for the re-commitment and clarity in (1) and (2) above to be extended to the States and Territories, not necessarily through former bilateral arrangements but through other less arduous means.
4. There is a strong sense in debates, and considerable support in the literature, that the capacity and longevity of NRM organisations, and thus of their NRM efforts, is a significant problem. The capacity issues relate to financial, administrative, informational and human resources, and to the lack of stability of these in the face of cyclical funding. Issues of longevity also relate to unevenness of funding over time, to the statutory or policy basis of the organisations, and the perceptions of unguaranteed government funding for the regional scale over time. Government funding has been allocated to capacity building but there are questions about how this should be evaluated in terms of outcomes from public investment, and what level of ongoing funding and other support is needed and justified. This highlights the need for renewed attention on where to strike the balance between investment in capacity and NRM priority areas, and about how capacity building translates to achieving both NRM outcomes and effective use of public funding. There are also uncertainties to be resolved by governments about their respective roles in supporting capacity across regions through funding commitments and other means such as providing leadership, facilitating information exchange, and implementing funding policies that may leverage private sector investment in regional NRM (eg funding matching policy).
5. There is an ongoing tension and debate over the very apparent need for flexibility in the face of large variations in biophysical, social and economic contexts between regions. This requires a carefully managed hierarchy of Commonwealth and State/Territory principles, guidelines and processes, through to a devolved flexibility in planning, prioritisation and investment that allows regions to define and address issues of most importance regionally.
6. In the context of (5) above, a particularly difficult issue is government involvement in NRM in the Indigenous estate. The capacity of Indigenous Australians to participate in national NRM programs is different from other groups, and the issues faced are similarly different (eg. in the mixture of environmental, cultural and livelihood imperatives that comprise NRM encapsulated in the term 'Working on Country'). It is clear that the level and evenness of support for NRM in the Indigenous estate has been insufficient to drive the desired outcomes overall, but also that outstanding successes have been achieved in places. There is a coherent argument that NRM in the Indigenous estate may be better addressed through separate programs, and especially that there is a serious need for better coordination of employment, NRM, health, education etc programs in this area to gain synergies and avoid inconsistencies.
7. The context of regional NRM is changing, and several new or emerging national-scale policy and management activities require coordination with NRM to avoid overlaps and competition for resources, if not conflicting incentives and outcomes. These include water planning, carbon sequestration in the landscape, new energy and extractive industry developments, regional development, and possible landscape-scale strategic assessment. There is also rapid change occurring in the peri-urban zone sometimes leading to intense conflict, and with significant implications for NRM. The Commonwealth-led cross-sectoral policy reviews underway are timely to ensure the rationalisation and cohesion across the various regional scale initiatives.
8. At the State/Territory level, it is a widely held perception by regional stakeholders that existing statutory frameworks affecting the NRM domain are complex and inefficient – across land use planning, water, forests, biodiversity, transport, etc. This issue requires further investigation in each jurisdiction, and if the issues are substantial, then some degree of statutory review and coordination may be justified.

9. The role of NRM planning is confirmed in the literature and discussions as being of significant value. Regional plans have the potential to allow community ownership of local-regional issues and opportunities, enable integration (eg across vegetation, land, biodiversity, water), can guide management and investment at an effective scale, and serve as an accountability mechanism for State and Commonwealth investment. The scope to optimise these benefits is constrained by the resources and capacity to produce, implement and evaluate plans; clear but flexible principles of what comprises regional NRM planning are required, along with clarity over the role of NRM plans relative to other plans (eg land use, water), and sufficient base resourcing (funding, skills) and information availability. It is strongly believed among practitioners that best practice examples and lessons are available in NRM planning and implementation, but that these are not easily accessible and that facilities to enable learning across regions and jurisdictions could be enhanced. This best practice dissemination need indicates a role for government.
10. On the relation of NRM plans and regional capacities to other sectors and initiatives, the question of how NRM planning manages and responds to disturbances such as extreme events (fire, flood), major developments (eg mining, population and land use change in peri-urban areas) and to shifts in policy (eg carbon sequestration) is the subject of current discussion. This is related to the rapid increase in attention and policy activity around climate adaptation. The concepts of 'adaptive governance' and 'resilience' at regional scale have been advanced in response to the need for flexibility, learning and coordination, however operationalising this approach requires further development. This issue does not attract clarity in suggested ways forward, but is an emerging issue worthy of further attention.

Considerable forward progress, agreement and practical benefit could be achieved by pursuing the ten issues outlined below. The diversity of the issues emphasise that attention and resolution of remaining challenges in regional NRM require the involvement of the Commonwealth, regional organisations and their communities, the States and Territories, and the research community.