

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

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RESPONDING TO LAND AND WATER CHALLENGES

Primary Industries, Natural Resources, Environment and Water Ministers from across Australia met jointly in Hobart today, to consider progress on issues associated Australia's pressing natural resource management issues.

This was the second meeting of the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council which was set up by the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers to develop a coordinated approach to issues affecting the sustainability of Australia's land and water resources. The move recognises that the sustainable use and conservation of Australia's natural resources is a critical part of ensuring the continued enjoyment of a high standard of living by all Australians.

The current Council Chair, the Hon Dr David Kemp MP reiterated that protecting natural values is fundamental to long-term economic prosperity. He saw one of the key principles for success as governments and the community working in partnership to ensure that rural and regional communities are supported in maintaining and expanding profitable food and fibre production, but on a sustainable basis.

Specific issues that the Council dealt with are detailed below.

National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP)

NAP Progress:

The Council reviewed progress in implementing the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and supported COAG Ministers' commitment to accelerate implementation of the NAP including by:

- ?? signing of the Intergovernmental Agreement by all parties that have not yet done so;
- ?? concluding the remaining Bilateral Agreements by the end of June 2002, including progress on foundation funding, capacity building and priority projects; and
- ?? making substantial progress on regional plans in all jurisdictions by the end of 2002.

The Council agreed to the importance of achieving this progress on the development, finalisation and accreditation of plans and delivery of program action. Council noted that regional planning is progressing well in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, and that funding for priority actions, foundation funding and capacity building activities totalling more than \$30 million has been approved.

The Council also noted that COAG agreed to support arrangements that include adequate:

- ?? local government representation on regional bodies;
- ?? local government involvement in the development of integrated natural resource management regional plans; and
- ?? awareness of regional objectives in local planning.

Market Based Instruments:

Council's endorsement of the process for selecting and implementing Market Based Instruments (MBI) pilots represents a strong commitment from all jurisdictions to developing new and innovative natural resource policy tools. While there is considerable interest in using MBIs to achieve environmental goals, the practical application of MBIs is still limited in Australia.

The MBI pilot program will assess the usefulness of MBIs in natural resource management. A public call for expressions of interest will be advertised shortly across Australia.

Council agreed to initial funding for the MBI program of \$5m with additional funding up to a maximum of \$10m to be made available subject to review of outcomes resulting from initial expenditure.

Communications:

Ministers agreed to develop as a matter of urgency a national communications strategy for the National Action Plan to fund national, State, and regional level communications activities under the NAP. The strategy will complement jointly funded communication activities already underway in some regions. Ministers recognised the importance of a national communications effort in engaging the broader community (including urban Australians) and which recognize the partnership between the State/Commonwealth in the important activities being pursued under the NAP, and the importance of salinity and water quality as national issues.

Ministers agreed that the Commonwealth would develop a national communications strategy to be agreed by the Council. The Commonwealth would then implement the national component. The States would fund State-based communications or other activities and the Commonwealth and States would jointly fund a regional component. These arrangements will be subject to protocols developed by the Commonwealth and jurisdictions to ensure consistency and complementary of activities and messages.

Extension of the Natural Heritage Trust

State/Territory and Federal Ministers furthered their aims in creating partnerships to address natural resource management and environment issues by endorsing a strategic framework for the delivery of the Natural Heritage Trust which incorporates agreed funding principles.

Lessons learnt from the first phase of the Trust and the establishment of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality have been taken into account in the finalisation of the framework. Regional investment will be a focus of the Trust extension, with arrangements based on the model used for the National Action Plan, including bilateral and regional partnership agreements, investment against accredited regional plans, and the provision of foundation and priority funding.

Agreement to the strategic framework clears the way for an immediate start to discussions

between the Commonwealth and each State or Territory to settle a bilateral agreement for delivery of the Natural Heritage Trust.

Ministers' agreement to the framework for the Trust extension and a basis for joint Commonwealth/States/Territory funding means regions and communities can now confidently move forward in developing and implementing plans for improving natural resources management and conserving valued environmental assets.

The extension of the Trust will focus on investing in large strategic projects at the regional level. The Trust will have the capacity to provide funding on a three year basis for implementing regional strategies.

Regional bodies will be responsible for developing and implementing integrated natural resource management plans in consultation with a range of community interests. The plans will then be accredited as the basis for investment by the Commonwealth and the States and Territories.

Under the framework investments will also be made in key issues at the broad scale or of a national nature such as the National Land and Water Resources Audit and National Reserves System.

Local communities will also have opportunities to continue their important contribution to improving natural resources management through the newly announced Australian Government Envirofund.

The extension involves an additional \$1.032 billion in Commonwealth funding for a further five years, as announced in the May 2001 Commonwealth Budget.

Governance arrangements for NRM programs

Council agreed on a number of national frameworks to govern the delivery of natural resource programs.

Accreditation Criteria

Ministers endorsed criteria for accrediting integrated natural resource management plans. The Commonwealth and the States will use these criteria for accrediting the plans that will be the basis for National Action Plan and Natural Heritage Trust regional investments. Ministers also welcomed the preparation of national guidelines to accompany the accreditation criteria

The accreditation criteria promote a planning process that is: community owned and initiated; based on science; and fosters targeted and collective action for landscape change.

The Council considered that plans produced with the guidance of these criteria will provide a sound basis for effective and strategic Commonwealth and State NRM investments. Ministers agreed that the core set of national information in the more detailed guidelines will allow consistent jurisdictional specific material to be developed to meet the needs of communities finalising plans.

Standards & Targets

The National Framework for NRM Standards and Targets provides a sound structure to guide regions in setting targets within their integrated regional plans, and for focusing

action and investment under those plans. It will be a vital tool to ensure we are able to measure the impacts of programs, such as the National Action Plan and the Natural Heritage Trust, on natural resource condition and management.

The Council welcomed the identification of national outcomes and matters for targets for salinity and water quality, and noted the further development of biodiversity and other NRM targets, and of protocols for monitoring and reporting progress on targets. These will be incorporated into the framework by the end of the year.

Best Practice Management Standards

An approach was also agreed to best practice standards for natural resource management by governments. Work to develop best practice principles and to share experience between jurisdictions will now commence.

NRM information, monitoring and evaluation

The Council endorsed the National Natural Resource Management Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. The Framework has been established to assess the progress and effectiveness of the National Action Plan and the Natural Heritage Trust Extension to assist improved land and water resources management and natural resource condition. The Framework sets in place a means to assemble accurate, cost-effective and timely information on the:

- ?? performance of programs, strategies and policies; and
- ?? health of the nation's land, water, vegetation and biological resources.

The Framework sets out protocols for data collection and management and will ensure that data can be accessed easily by natural resource managers, including governments and community groups. The Framework supports a key set of change indicators which are used to monitor and evaluate changes in management actions, and eventually, changes in the condition of the natural resource base. To ensure simplicity and cost effectiveness, existing systems and data collections are to be used wherever possible.

Application of the Framework will provide the information needed by managers to support their active adaptive management leading to improved outcomes for the natural resource base.

Coastal management planning

Council agreed that the Commonwealth, with the States and Northern Territory, will explore a new approach to coastal management issues that could benefit from national cooperation.

Council work program

Council confirmed its workplan for the immediate future. Key issues being progressed are of the national Environmental Management Systems framework; a high level review of the current water reforms including an assessment of progress to date; developing a national approach to genetic and biochemical resources; identifying the priorities to be addressed to improve Australia's national fisheries resource management arrangements; and reviewing the development and implementation of the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas.

Action Plans for Indigenous Engagement

Council was addressed by Mr Geoff Clark, Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, on natural resource management and indigenous Australians.

Council agreed to the Natural Resource Management Action Plan for Advancing Indigenous Reconciliation for implementation. Endorsement of the Action Plan sets in motion Council's firm commitment to addressing the economic and social disadvantage experienced by indigenous people, in-line with the Council of Australian Governments Framework for Advancing Reconciliation.

Council also highlighted that the development of the Action Plan was closely aligned with those of its associate Ministerial Councils – that is, the Primary Industries and the Environment Protection and Heritage Conservation Ministerial Councils. The Council Chair, said these linkages form an important foundation for achieving better coordination and outcomes across government in advancing indigenous reconciliation – which is a cornerstone of the COAG Framework.

Community and scientific advice to Council

Ministers agreed to establish an annual working community advisory forum, based on NAP and NHT regions and including community partners, and experts in natural resource management programs. The forum would report annually to the NRM Ministerial Council.

The Council welcomed an arrangement for expert scientific and technical advice through the preparation of an annual report prepared by CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology.

Progress on water reform including 2002 National Competition Policy

Council considered a report from its Standing Committee's Chief Executive Officers Group on Water (CEOGW) on progress with water reform. Council heard that implementing a more sustainable water management regime based on greater clarity of property rights will have impacts on communities, businesses and individuals which require government attention. Clarifying and gaining community understanding of the meaning of property rights and their delivery will be important. Council requested that the CEOGW bring to the next Council meeting, key options for progressing issues arising from the report prepared by jurisdictions for COAG on water property rights regimes.

Voluntary code of practice for firewood merchants

Ministers endorsed a voluntary code of practice for firewood merchants. The voluntary code promotes a more environmentally friendly firewood industry and will help to ensure a sustainable future for the industry. Merchants who sign up to the code will:

- ?? ensure firewood they sell is collected in accordance with relevant legislation;
- ?? promote firewood sourced from plantations and sustainable managed forest;
- ?? ensure firewood they sell is not sourced from critical habitat of threatened species; and
- ?? promote good storage and burning practices and the use of seasoned firewood to minimise air pollution.

A fox free Tasmania

The Council noted the significant threat posed to Tasmanian wildlife and the agricultural industry from the introduction of foxes to Tasmania. The Commonwealth has provided \$400,000 emergency funding to participate in the fox eradication program with Tasmania to assist the existing Tasmanian effort, focusing on enhancing the involvement of the Tasmanian community and the science behind the detection and eradication methods used in the project. The meeting noted that Tasmania proposes to spend up to \$4.5m over 3 years.

Red imported fire ants – continuation and funding of the eradication program

Ministers discussed in some detail the Red Fire Ant problem and the continuation of the eradication program.

They noted progress of the eradication program and agreed to an extension of the program, including an increase in the zone where treatment is applied.

Southern elephant seal research

Council discussed and noted a presentation by Minister David Llewellyn of Tasmania on the conservation status of the Southern Elephant Seal.

Ends