

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 Sydney on Friday 11 October 2002 to consider progress on issues associated with Australia's pressing natural resource management issues.

This was the third 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.

Specific issues dealt with by Council are detailed below.

National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP)

The Council reviewed progress in implementing the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and welcomed advice that a total of nearly \$87 million in funding has now been committed for regional communities to start taking action to improve salinity trends and water quality. The Commonwealth and States have jointly committed funding for regional plans and priority actions in Victoria (\$50.6m), South Australia (\$15.1m), Queensland (\$15m), NSW (\$5.6m) and Tasmania (\$0.5m).

Council recognised the need to accelerate the regional implementation of the National Action Plan by:

- urgently concluding all remaining Bilateral Agreements;
- early consideration of regional plans for accreditation, following public consultation by regional bodies and submission to governments; and
- continued investment in priority projects and foundation funding prior to accreditation of plans.

Natural Heritage Trust

State/Territory and Federal Ministers endorsed the Framework for the implementation of the Natural Heritage Trust extension. The framework provides the strategic basis for investment against the Trust's objectives at national, regional and local levels and includes the basis for matching contributions from the states and territories. The endorsement paves the way for finalising bilateral negotiations for the delivery of the Trust with each State and Territory and the commencement of regional activities.

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Transitional arrangements will be rolled out over the next few months to help regions to get on with the job of developing the regional plans that will underpin Trust investment. The regional plans will ensure that investment is targeted at the most important natural resource management issues in each region. The first stage of these transitional arrangements has been put in place with the funding of some 600 facilitator and coordinator positions to assist communities develop regional plans and actions to implement them.

National Outcomes and Matters for Target

The Ministerial Council has finalised an amalgamated list of national natural resource management outcomes and matters for regional targets that now include biodiversity. This will make the outcomes and matters for target relevant to all NRM programs including the extension of the Natural Heritage Trust. The national outcomes and matters for target will help guide regional bodies as they develop regional plans.

Progressing the Water Reform Agenda

Ministers today considered a report prepared by its Standing Committee's Chief Executive Officers' Group on Water (CEOGW) on water property rights and reform. The report considers opportunities and impediments to better define and implement water property rights regimes, including water trading markets, and the role of structural adjustment in managing the transition to sustainable levels of water extraction.

Council's discussion highlighted the fact that there is no simple solution to resolve problems with property rights. Property rights, sustainability, environmental water, more efficient markets, and economic and social issues associated with adjustment are all interrelated. Opportunities lie in establishing common principles for water allocation and trading and for sharing the costs of necessary adjustments between water users and the community at large.

This issue is to be considered by COAG in its November meeting.

Community Forum and Scientific Advice to Council

Ministers agreed that an annual working community advisory forum would be held in conjunction with the next Council meeting in April 2003. Attendees will be drawn from NAP and NHT regions and include community partners, and experts in natural resource management programs. The forum would allow an opportunity for Ministers to communicate directly with key community players about strategic NRM matters.

Integrated Coastal Zone Management

The Ministerial Council agreed to progress the development of a public consultation paper on a national approach to coastal management issues.

The Council is interested in identifying coastal management issues that could benefit from a national approach with stakeholder views as an integral part of this.

Ministers will be looking to consider the outcomes of the consultation process in developing a way forward to give effect to national action on issues that have been identified as being of national significance.

Commonwealth Fisheries Policy Review

Ministers today discussed progress towards the finalisation of the review of Commonwealth Fisheries Policy. On 23 July the Sustainable Environment Committee of Cabinet (SEC) agreed that the Commonwealth should finalise the review and release a Ministerial Statement on Commonwealth fisheries policy by the end of 2002. The review process included an extensive public consultation phase and the use of an expert Steering Committee to provide advice to Government on issues raised during the interview.

National Fisheries Issues

Ministers provided their support for the progression on a range of cross-jurisdictional issues identified to improve national fisheries management. These include the management of recreational/charter fishing, aquaculture development and fish health.

Council endorsed the development of a whole of government paper on the development of an explicit policy framework and national agenda for Australia's engagement in international fisheries. This paper will establish a vision for Australia's international engagement in regional fisheries with finalisation anticipated by early 2003.

Introduced Marine Pests

All governments re-committed to the development of a National System for the prevention and management of marine pest incursions, with Council agreeing to extend the interim arrangements until 30 June 2004 to allow sufficient time to develop and implement the National System. These interim arrangements include the extension of the Commonwealth/State/ Northern Territory cost-sharing arrangements for emergency eradication responses to new introductions of marine pests.

The National System will minimise threats to Australia's marine environment, fisheries and mariculture resources, and marine industries by minimising the risks of introducing and spreading unwanted aquatic organisms. Council supported the formation of a High Level Officials Working Group to further develop and negotiate options for the National System, including governance, legislative and funding arrangements. This work is to be completed by April 2003.

Indigenous Reconciliation Action Plan

Council agreed to the Natural Resource Management Implementation Plan for Advancing Indigenous Reconciliation. Endorsement of the 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 Implementation Plan was closely aligned with those of its associate Ministerial Councils, the Primary Industries and the Environment Protection and Heritage Conservation Ministerial Councils. The Council Chair noted 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.

Environmental Management Systems in Agriculture

Council endorsed Australia's National Framework for Environmental Management Systems in Agriculture. EMS has important potential as a management system to assist primary producers to stay competitive and to protect the resource base that sustains production.

The Framework was developed to provide a basis for governments, industries and the community to work together in partnership to harness the growing interest in EMS as a management tool that could contribute to both market and environmental outcomes across industries and regions. It aims to avoid the development of multiple and incompatible approaches to EMS and provides a national context for supporting and building on existing industry and individual efforts in EMS.

The Framework is based on a set of key principles that were strongly endorsed during public consultation: The principles state that EMS in Australian agriculture should be:

- voluntary and industry and/or community led;
- able to be combined and integrated with existing business management activities wherever possible;
- link competitiveness and natural resource management;
- simple, cost effective, user-friendly, able to be phased in at any level with clear benefits to the adopting enterprise;
- adaptable and allow for continuous improvement; and
- consistent with internationally recognised systems (such as ISO 14001) and capable of independent audit.

The Framework provides the links between on-farm EMS and environmental objectives for agriculture at the regional scale and it will help individual efforts to align with regional targets and contribute to larger scale environmental outcomes.

Firewood Collection and Use in Australia

Council noted progress made in developing a performance standard and certification system for the Voluntary Code of Practice. The draft standard is out for public comment until 18 October, while a tender has been let to develop guidelines for a certification system. It is intended that the system be simple, cost effective to administer and linked to a public awareness campaign to encourage consumers to buy eco-friendly wood.

Council also noted the completed Commonwealth and Western Australian Action plans to implement the National Approach.

Red Imported Fire Ants – Eradication Program Update

Council was pleased to note the progress of the red imported fire ant eradication program. The Program, which is being carried out by principally by the Fire Ant Control Centre of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, has just entered its second summer of intensive baiting. Monitoring and surveillance conducted during the first year of the program indicate that fire ant nests are being killed at the rates required for eradication by 2006. With the assistance of the Brisbane community, fire ant teams have been able to delimit the infested areas much more precisely and locate and treat outlying populations of the pest.

Fisheries Compliance – Standardisation of Data Collection and Management

Council noted that considerable work has been undertaken across Australia to improve the integration, quality and timeliness of compliance information. All jurisdictions are committed to progressing cross-jurisdictional frameworks to standardise compliance and intelligence data collection so as to facilitate the meaningful analysis, comparison and sharing of fisheries compliance data.

Certification and Labelling of Australian Forestry Standards

Ministers endorsed the Australian Forestry Standard, which will provide a basis for voluntary and independent third-party certification that supports a continual improvement towards sustainable forest management practices in Australia.

Standards Australia has recognised the Australian Forestry Standard as an Australian Standard. The Standard seeks to provide an assurance to purchasers of Australian timber that it has been sourced from sustainably managed forests. The Standard was developed by forest owners and managers, indigenous, scientific and community representatives and contains environmental, social, economic and cultural forest management performance criteria and requirements.

Governance Arrangements for the National Land and Water Resources Audit Stage 2

Ministers received a report on the progress of the National Land and Water Resources Audit as it moves into its second phase after the first successful five years of operation. New governance arrangements are being established that will further strengthen the Audit's reporting roles. These measures will ensure that the Audit maintains the strong partnership focus and connections with its client base. These linkages are crucial for the Audit to maintain the world's most comprehensive natural resource information system that is used to help monitor and assess Australia's natural resource base.

Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos

Ministers agreed to endorse a review of the 'Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos' (the Code) in recognition of strong community support for high animal welfare standards. The Code was first developed in 1985, and reviewed in 1990, and has ensured that the suffering of kangaroos is minimised. A review at this time is widely supported by State and Federal Governments, the kangaroo industry and the RSPCA.

The review group will be chaired by Western Australia and include representatives from industry and animal welfare groups. The review process will be consultative and focus on a number of issues, including those arising out of a recent report by the RSPCA on industry compliance with the Code.

Wild Dog and Fox Management

The Council has supported the development of an integrated cross-tenure and cross-jurisdictional approach to control wild dogs and foxes over large areas of public and private land. The Council considered a paper prepared by Victoria which notes considerable potential benefits to be gained from such an integrated approach, including reduced losses for graziers, and improved conservation for threatened native species.

The Council has noted the current review of the use of compound 1080 for wild dog and fox control by the National Registration Authority for Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals, and has requested that the Vertebrate Pest Committee review current wild dog and fox control programs and cross-jurisdictional collaboration, and recommend options to improve these.

Groundwater Management

Ministers agreed on a nationally consistent definition and approach to Sustainable Yield of groundwater. Groundwater is an important natural resource for very large areas of Australia, and its use and management within sustainable limits is a key issue for jurisdictions. This definition is an important component in the determination of these limits

so that stakeholders will know how much water is available for extraction and how much is to be retained for environmental needs.

Great Artesian Basin – Incompatibilities in Groundwater Management

Ministers agreed that the differences in groundwater management approaches across some State borders in the Great Artesian Basin may be impeding good management of the precious groundwater resources, and may be putting at risk the gains in pressure recovery being achieved through public investments. Standing Committee was asked to identify any incompatibilities in approach and develop arrangements to remove these incompatibilities.

Australia's Genetic and Biochemical Resources

Ministers endorsed fourteen common principles to underpin future management action of genetic and biochemical resources by individual governments. The approach also identifies practical considerations important to industry and the scientific community and for securing ecological sustainable use of resources.

Commenting on Australia's possession of 10 per cent of the world's genetic resources, the Council Chair and Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon Warren Truss MP, said, "Australia is rich in resources that can be used in scientific and technological research for valuable products. These may include pharmaceuticals, agrochemicals, disease control, and bioremediation products.

"It is our responsibility to ensure that such opportunities are undertaken in an ecologically sustainable way and that the community shares in the benefits that come from making resources available.

"Importantly, this approach provides greater certainty to industry and encourages continued investment in biodiscovery research and development. This is a world's first for Australia and it marks us as a desirable location for biodiscovery investment over coming years."

Ends