

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT MINISTERIAL COUNCILS

Communiqué

NRMMC 12 and PIMC 12

20 APRIL 2007

Natural Resource Management, Environment, Water and Primary Industries Ministers from across Australia met in Brisbane on Friday 20 April 2007 to consider issues impacting on Australia's natural resources and primary production sectors. This was the twelfth meeting of the Ministerial Councils and the first joint Ministerial Council meeting. Specific issues dealt with by the Councils are detailed below.

Regional Chairs Forum (Community Forum)

Council received a comprehensive presentation from the NRM Regional Chairs Forum which met earlier in the week. The Forum comprises mainly chairs of Natural Resource Management regional organisations that focused, during the 2007 meeting, on their response to matters raised in the *Framework for Future NRM Programs*. Council discussed with the Forum a number of issues relating to regional delivery and future directions including enhancing the role of local government, expansion of market based instruments and more cohesive and effective communications. The regional chairs also raised discussion on themes identified in the *Framework* including climate change and coastal and peri-urban pressures.

McKell Medal

Council presented the 17th (2006) McKell medal to Ms Kate Hadden from Palmerston, Northern Territory. Ms Hadden was awarded the medal for her outstanding and long-term contribution to NRM, and most notably, her work over the past decade with the Indigenous landowners of Bathurst and Melville Islands. Ms Hadden has supported the Tiwi Islanders' return to ethical and sound natural resource practices by providing planning and technical tools for increasingly sophisticated land management.

Salinity in Australia: Next Steps

Council considered a paper on Salinity which reviewed the significant measures taken by jurisdictions to address salinity, including through the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and the Natural Heritage Trust. Council agreed to a set of principles which will guide investment in salinity in future NRM programmes.

Water Accounting

A robust water accounting system is essential for providing confidence in water plans and the operation of water markets. Work on water accounting underpins key elements of both the National Water Initiative (NWI) and the National Plan for Water Security. At this meeting, Council endorsed a workplan for developing national water accounting standards, an initial conceptual framework and chart of accounts to inform these standards. Council reiterated the importance of this work in developing a full understanding of water resources and their effective long term management.

Water Metering

As water becomes more scarce and subject to greater demands, it is imperative that we can accurately measure and monitor the resource and its use. This applies at the national and basin scales, as well as for individual farms. Inaccurate measurement of water diversions from rivers and water use on farms is leading to unintentional and intentional over-use. Under the NWI, jurisdictions have agreed to implement metering accuracy and measurement standards. Council noted that under the National Plan for Water Security, \$600 million has been allocated to upgrade non-urban water meters and associated data systems. Council also noted that national and state metering implementations strategies will be completed by September 2007.

Water Data Sharing

Declining water availability and riverine health demand a dramatic improvement in the efficiency, productivity and sustainability of water use. Access to data on water resources is crucial for effective management of these resources. All jurisdictions have recognised that existing data provision arrangements are inefficient and prevent the optimal use of data.

Council noted that a national capacity for water data and forecasting services using common systems and standards is a priority under the National Plan for Water Security. Under the Plan, there will be mandatory water data reporting requirements, giving the Bureau of Meteorology responsibility to hold and manage all of Australia's water data. Council endorsed principles for water data sharing and agreed to further explore the Creative Commons approach to legal licensing for water data sharing.

Water Trading

Water trading ensures that water is used efficiently and where it is most valued. Water trading is a key element of the NWI and the National Plan for Water Security, providing farmers with flexibility to optimise their production in light of declining water resource availability. Council noted that while a functioning interstate water trading system exists in the southern Murray-Darling Basin, further effort will be required to achieve more efficient water markets.

Enhancing Water Planning

Water planning based on good science and robust data is important for ensuring the sustainable use of our water resources into the future, as outlined in the NWI. Council

agreed that appropriate measures should be developed to enhance integration between water planning and natural resource management planning, and better incorporate groundwater resources into water planning processes. Council requested Standing Committee to report to the November 2007 Council meeting on appropriate measures to address these challenges to water planning.

Water Benchmarking and Pricing

Council noted progress on the benchmarking the pricing and service quality of water service providers. Council also noted a stock-take of water charging approaches across States and Territories. Council reiterated its commitment to benchmarking and pricing as key elements of the NWI. Respective agencies and economic regulators should dedicate sufficient effort and commitment to delivering on these NWI commitments.

Urban Water Reform

Council noted progress on developing guidelines for Water Sensitive Urban Development under Clause 92 of the NWI. Council requested Standing Committee to report to the November 2007 Council meeting on progress with, and impediments to, implementation of the National Guidelines for Residential Customers' Water Accounts and measures to address these impediments. Council further agreed to discuss at its next meeting the range of key policy issues raised by pending reports on urban water issues, including approaches to planning, pricing and investment in general and community confidence in recycling options in particular.

National Water Recycling Guidelines – Phase 2

Following the release of Phase 1 of the *National Water Quality Management Strategy Australian Guidelines for Water Recycling – Managing Health and Environmental Risks* in November 2006, Council noted the significant progress of Phase 2. This phase of the Guidelines will include Recycled Water for Drinking, Stormwater Reuse and Managed Aquifer Recharge. The draft module on Recycled Water for Drinking is expected to be released for public comment this year.

Drought, Water Availability and Climate Change

Council discussed the impacts of drought, water availability and climate change on agriculture and the need for continued cooperation in the interests of farmers for the duration of the current drought, in particular, in responding to the potential impacts of emerging water shortages. To assist with establishing future policy and program linkages, Council agreed to review the recent uptake of drought assistance measures with a view to developing future responses to these issues. Council also recognised the need to support the reallocation of NRM funds to facilitate replacement NRM projects to respond to drought and encourage recovery.

National Agricultural Monitoring System (NAMS)

Council welcomed progress in the development of the National Agricultural Monitoring System (NAMS) and its expansion to include information for irrigated industries.

Council acknowledged the important role that the NAMS plays in streamlining Exceptional Circumstance applications and assessments, and agreed to provide \$1.5 million in 2007/08 for the ongoing operation of the system. Council noted that a review of the NAMS would be undertaken for Council consideration on the future options for the continued operations of the NAMS.

Effects and Impacts of Bushfire

Council discussed the impact of major fires during the past summer, especially in Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia and agreed that a working group drawn from the Forestry and Natural Resource Management sectors would examine the options for the future development of a forest and rangeland fire management policy and research at a national level. Council acknowledged the efforts of fire fighters in difficult conditions in minimising damage caused by these fires.

Rural Research and Development Priorities Refresh

Council noted a refreshed set of Rural Research and Development Priorities have been developed in order to achieve a national understanding of critical R&D investment needs and to better target agricultural, fisheries, forestry and food industry R&D efforts. Council restated its commitment to drive a strategic approach to national research development and extension (RD&E). At its next meeting, Council will consider action on areas where applying the national RD&E framework could have the greatest impact. Council noted that the refreshed Rural R&D Priorities will be launched by the Australian Government Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

Australian Biosecurity System for Primary Production and the Environment (AusBIOSEC)

Council noted progress in the continual improvement of Australia's biosecurity arrangements through the enhancement of the Australian Biosecurity System for Primary Production and the Environment (AusBIOSEC). This will include the provision of an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) which will commit the Australian and State and Territory governments to high level policy principles and approaches for improving Australia's biosecurity system.

Council agreed that there is a need to review and restructure national institutional arrangements to support enhancements to AusBIOSEC, and that these arrangements would be included in the IGA.

National System for the Prevention and Management of Introduced Marine Pest Incursions

Council noted progress towards implementing the National System for the Prevention and Management of Marine Pest Incursions. Council agreed to the designation of alternate areas for ships to exchange ballast water where it is not possible to exchange ballast water in the deep ocean. Council also put in train processes which will enable Australia to ratify the international Ballast Water Convention, subject to the required legislation coming into effect.

Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program

Council noted the need for ongoing commitment to the eradication of Red Imported Fire Ant from Australia beyond 2006-07 and agreed in principle to additional cost-shared funding of a five year program to achieve freedom from fire ants but only agreed to two years funding of \$23.971 million at this stage with a review to validate the continuation of the program

Electric Ant Eradication Program

Council approved, in principle, a four year eradication program for the electric ant incursion in Cairns. Council agreed to \$4.067 million for the first two years funding followed by a review to validate program effectiveness.

Australian Pest Animal Strategy

Council agreed to the Australian Pest Animal Strategy, which provides a comprehensive national approach to the prevention and management of threats posed by vertebrate pests to primary production and the environment. Council noted that the approach taken in the new strategy reflects that successfully used in the Australian Weeds Strategy. The new strategy sits under the Australian Biosecurity System for Primary Production and the Environment.

Cost-sharing for Management of Four Tropical Weeds in Queensland

Council approved an extension of the cost-sharing arrangements for management of the Four Tropical Weeds Eradication Program in Queensland, amounting to funding of \$2.417 million subject to an annual review and assessment by the Australian Weeds Committee. An external review of the program in 2006 concluded that the program has made progress in significantly reducing the area infested by the following weeds - Koster's curse, Limnocharis, Mikania vine and Miconia. Council agreed that eradication remains achievable.

Please note that a separate media release was issued by the Primary Industries Ministerial Councils relating to issues considered by this Council alone.