

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 Brisbane on Friday 11 April 2003 to consider progress on issues associated with Australia's pressing natural resource management challenges.

This was the fourth meeting of the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council. Specific issues dealt with by Council are detailed below.

Community Forum

This Council meeting included a Natural Resource Management Community Forum during which Ministers met with 80 community representatives from regional and national natural resource management organisations. The Community Forum was attended by over 60 Chairs of regional natural resource management bodies and catchment management boards, as well as Indigenous representatives and representatives from peak national natural resource management-related organisations such as the Australian Landcare Council.

The purpose of the Community Forum was to provide an opportunity for exchange of ideas regarding regional natural resource management, especially implementation of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and the Natural Heritage Trust. Community representatives presented a set of strategic, solution-focused suggestions to Ministers addressing some of the key issues related to integrated regional natural resource management.

Discussion focussed on the issues associated with the shift from local project level approaches to natural resource management to integrated regional approaches and what this means for community participation and natural resource management outcomes.

After the Forum, Ministers further discussed the Forum's key recommendations and agreed in principle to progress several of these items. This included a recommendation to meet with the Community Forum in a year's time in order to continue the valuable exchange between Ministers and community representatives. Council agreed to establish a taskforce with representatives of the Forum to review mechanisms to simplify the administration of the NAP and NHT. Council also agreed to ask its Standing Committee to review all the Forum's recommendations and report back to Council.

A publicly available report of the Community Forum will be produced and distributed shortly.

National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and the Natural Heritage Trust Extension

The Council reviewed progress in implementing the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and the Natural Heritage Trust Extension (the Trust).

Under the National Action Plan a total of some \$160 million joint funding has been approved in those states that have Bilateral Agreements in place (New South Wales - \$27.7 m, Victoria - \$52 m, Queensland - \$42 m, South Australia - \$35.8 m, and Tasmania - \$0.35 m). Of this, over \$70 million joint funding has been released to regions or invested in statewide projects.

Ministers were pleased to note that all 62 regions across Australia are now engaged in an integrated approach to natural resource management planning and are bringing forward focused strategies for targeted investment. These plans and strategies are being developed and owned by the community, consistent with nationally agreed frameworks for standards and targets. Once accredited, these will form the basis of major investment in addressing the pressing issues of salinity and water quality.

State/Territory and Federal Ministers commended the constructive way jurisdictions had been progressing bilateral negotiations on the extension of the Trust, and noted agreements had been signed in Victoria, Western Australia and the ACT. Bilateral agreements were also noted to be close to finalisation in several other jurisdictions. Council was keen that funding flow to regions under the Trust in those states where agreements are in place in the near future to maintain momentum.

Addressing Key NRM Issues

Ministerial Council endorsed proposed work to identify the most effective public policy approaches to valuing environmental services in the market place as a means of addressing one of the root causes of natural resource degradation. This work is based on the findings and conclusions of major reports – the analysis of the National Land and Water Audit reports, the 2002 State of the Environment report, the Prime Minister's Science and Engineering Council's report on Sustaining natural Systems and Biodiversity and also the Wentworth Group's 'Blueprint for a Living Continent'. Rangelands degradation, loss of native species and communities, soil acidity and soil erosion and its relation to water quality, are examples of issues where the underlying causes of natural resources decline will be investigated. This follows on from the work that is being done in salinity and water quality.

NRM Best Practice Governance Standards

The Ministerial Council considered the development of national management standards defining best practice natural resource management (NRM) by governments. Council agreed to best practice governance principles for NRM that will provide a basis for guiding governments in natural resource policy development and program implementation, particularly the National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality and the Natural Heritage Trust. They also will be applicable to regional delivery mechanisms. The principles for NRM are consistent with agreed national standards and international directions in good governance.

A National Approach to Water Efficient Appliance Labelling and Regulation

The Council noted progress made in developing a national mandatory water efficiency-labelling scheme (WELS). The WELS feasibility study will provide the basis of an implementation plan for mandatory labelling, including: indicative cost-benefit analysis, consumer research, product coverage, general issues raised in discussions with key stakeholders and recommendations on how to fully implement the program.

It is intended that WELS will provide a national approach to reducing water consumption within households through a labelling program and possibly minimum water efficiency standards attached to some products, similar in style to the national energy labelling program.

The NRMCC has supported and encouraged this project from the early stages of its development, now referring the matter for further consideration to the Environment Protection and Heritage Council. The final report on the feasibility of WELS is expected in May for endorsement by the Environment Protection and Heritage Council.

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. Council discussed a number of areas where investment could be made to build on existing strengths and accelerate progress. In particular, Ministers discussed the importance of a nationally compatible and well articulated system of access entitlements, trading regimes and adjustment mechanisms and sound registration systems that provide for investment certainty and the needs of the environment. Ministers' views will provide some guidance to the CEOGW as it prepares its final report to the Council of Australian Governments.

Integrated Coastal Zone Management –

Ministers today agreed to release the paper '*A Framework for a National Cooperative Approach to Coastal Issues*' for targeted consultation with key stakeholders, to begin in late April and conclude in May 2003.

The Framework identifies six themes for national cooperation and action. The themes are: integration of management across catchments, coasts and oceans; impacts of climate change on coastal environments and coastal communities; management of threats to coastal environments and natural resources such as introduced marine pests, acid sulfate soils and estuarine water quality; sustainable coastal resource use and managing changes such as population increase; and building the capacity of coastal communities and industries.

Ministers will consider the outcomes of the consultations and key actions to be included in the Framework by the end of July 2003.

Ministers noted that New Zealand is also making progress on coastal zone issues through work on the New Zealand Oceans Policy. Eleven subject-related discussion papers are available at www.oceans.govt.nz

Commonwealth Fisheries Policy Review

Ministers today were advised that the review of the Commonwealth Fisheries Policy is close to finalisation and it is anticipated that the Ministerial Statement will be tabled in Parliament on 15 May 2003.

Ministers noted that most issues covered in the review are specific to the Commonwealth. However there are two policy areas that have implications for the States and Northern Territory. These are, the review of Offshore Constitutional Settlement (OCS) arrangements, and resource allocation and management issues.

Ministers were advised that the Commonwealth is convening a workshop in early May 2003 to explore these two issues.

Red Imported Fire Ants – Eradication Program Update

Council was pleased to note the progress of, and approve further funding in 2003-04 for the red imported fire ant eradication program. The Program, which is being carried out principally by the Fire Ant Control Centre of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, has been underway effectively for two seasons. Interstate surveillance has been increased and no red imported fire ants have been detected outside Queensland. Monitoring and surveillance continues to indicate that fire ant nests are being killed at the rates required for eradication by 2006.

National Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks

State/Territory and Federal Ministers today noted the considerable progress on the development of National Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (Shark-plan). The Shark-plan provides the basis for addressing shark conservation and management issues on a nationally coordinated basis and addresses Australia's international commitment to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's Committee on Fisheries.

The Shark-plan was developed following extensive consultation with Commonwealth and State government agencies, recreational and commercial fishers, scientists and the general community. It sets out the roles of fishery/environmental agencies and promotes the active partnership between, not only government agencies, but all stakeholders with an interest in shark resources.

Council agreed to make a final decision on this item out-of-session by 30 June 2003.

National Reserve System – Future Directions Statement

Ministerial Council discussed and agreed to further progress a paper on the future development of Australia's protected areas system, Directions for the National Reserve System - A Partnership Approach. The paper recognises that to achieve a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system, collective efforts will be needed from the Commonwealth, States and Territories, non-government organisations and the community. The need to adequately manage protected areas, consolidation of scientifically accepted approaches to monitoring processes, data sharing, standards for protection and future consideration of targets are discussed within the paper. Council agreed to consider this paper again at its next meeting in October 2003.

Nature Links

Ministers were pleased to note today the progress in developing 'NatureLinks' in South Australia. This program is based on the 'wild country' philosophy and involves community partnerships to find solutions to ecological issues impacting on the State. An implementation strategy for *NatureLinks* is based around having core protected areas surrounded by buffers managed in accordance with biodiversity objectives and connected through linkages with other areas to facilitate the movement of individuals and genes.

Water Recycling and Water-Sensitive Urban Design

Council discussed water recycling and water-sensitive urban design as a means to facilitate taking an integrated whole-of-water cycle approach to water management and to encourage the most efficient use of water in the future. Council has asked its Standing Committee to consider this issue further and to report back to Council.

Ends

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