

National Landcare Network: What follows the National Landcare Programme?



Submission to the review of the National Landcare Programme and recommendations for future program design.

Summary

The National Landcare Network (NLN) supports continued government investment in Landcare to empower communities across the country in addressing Australia's ongoing environmental and agricultural sustainability issues. We believe community should be at the heart of decision-making and delivery for management of natural assets, focussing on long-term achievements which provide benefits across social, environmental, agricultural and economic sectors.

The way to do this is through placing the community at the core of a renewed regional delivery model. Such an approach would leverage the vast capacity that exists across the country in the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who care for our lands and waters. It would be based on cooperation, local leadership, and strong partnerships, and would incorporate rather than replace successful components of the existing model. This approach needs to embed ownership of projects and programs within the communities where they are delivered, enabling the development of local capacity and mutual support.

These fiscally demanding times challenge us to find original and collaborative approaches. We recommend a review not only of the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme, but of the broader framework within which it operates, to stimulate innovation and renewal.

Purpose

The Australian Government's National Landcare Program (NLP) ends in June 2018. The government is conducting a review of the program to determine the lessons that can be learned from the current program to ensure that the next iteration builds positively on those lessons. This submission presents important considerations to assist with this process, focussing on the regional delivery approach which has the greatest direct impact on Landcare.

What is the National Landcare Network?

The NLN provides the representative voice for Australia's grassroots Landcare movement. It is the organisation capable of leveraging the Australian Landcare community and its partners. It is a national peak body made up of the peak Landcare organisations from each state and territory, all of whom are supported by the Commonwealth through the NLP. Together we represent over 100,000 grassroots volunteers who care for our lands and waters throughout the country. These groups are involved in Landcare in all its forms, including 'traditional' Landcare, coast care, bush care, sustainable agriculture. Our grassroots volunteers come from farming groups, Aboriginal groups, youth groups, and urban and peri-urban groups.

The Landcare approach:

- Is community-based.
- Focusses on improving natural resource management for agricultural production and conservation.
- Welcomes partnerships.
- Is non-hierarchical; individual groups are autonomous in their management.

What are we seeking?

The NLN membership calls for a comprehensive review of natural resource management approaches, programs and processes within Australia.

Such a review would seek out the most effective components of the current approach and incorporate these into the next iteration of the NLP. Equally, inefficient aspects of the existing model should be discarded and funding be redirected to more effectual projects within the new program. We believe that the implementation of any new program which did not incorporate the findings of such a review

would be irresponsible, given the current challenges facing the Australian environment and agricultural sectors, and the constrained financial conditions under which the government is operating. Interim measures may be needed to ensure this is done properly.

The new program would incorporate a national vision for Landcare, plan for future scenarios including critical industry and environmental issues, and make effective use of partnerships. It needs to be designed to encourage the numerous stakeholders in natural resource management to work together, not in competition.

The NLN offers strong and robust leadership, and is well supported by a range of community volunteers and experts through its members. We have access to more than 30 years of knowledge, corporate history and experience. We have many constructive contributions to make, both to the review of the current NLP and the design of a new program. It is our belief that the new program should be agreed between the Commonwealth, and state and territory governments at COAG, and implemented through new bilateral agreements where required.

The NLN and its members feel it is essential that the program retain the reference to Landcare in its name as this empowers Australia's hundreds of thousands of Landcare volunteers and supports continuity with past investment.

The Regional Delivery Model

The NLN and its members strongly believe there is need for effective and efficient regional planning and delivery of natural asset management, with the community as its cornerstone.

What we have now

The Commonwealth's regional delivery approach is currently channelled through the country's 56 Natural Resource Management Organisations (NRMOs). The NLN and its members consider themselves important stakeholders of these organisations, and there are many examples of successful collaborations between Landcare and NRMOs.

However, the NRM model in its current form presents some significant challenges as a result of the vast array of legal models and functional variations across the NRMOs. This makes it difficult for the NLN and its members to adopt a consistent approach to cooperative engagement. Community consultation and regional planning are two areas in particular which are frequently identified as problematic by NLN members. It has also been identified that transaction costs under this model are high.

What we recommend

The NLN supports the continuation of a regional delivery model for community engagement and participation, natural resource planning, and project devolution. We feel that a reassessment of the current model should focus on making this approach more cost-effective, and improve focus on long-term social, environmental, agricultural and economic outcomes. Investment should seek to strengthen capacity at the community level, rather than relying on duplicating that capacity within an NRM or service provider.

A renewal of the system should deliver: greater transparency in planning and reporting; greater efficiency; greater consistency of function and performance across the country; greater community engagement at all levels, and greater integration with community and regional structures, particularly in implementation. Wherever possible, Landcare and other community groups should play a key role in design and implementation of regional delivery.

The role of Landcare and the community

It is the engagement of community that creates Landcare, and brings with it all the benefits of the Landcare ethic. Implementation, delivery and planning should at all times be conducted as close to community as possible. Land management without community engagement is simply public works.

In line with its principle of natural resource management activities being implemented as close to community as possible, the NLN believes a key function of NRMOs should be to work with Landcare to build community capacity and knowledge through programs and on-ground activities. The trend of NRMOs developing internal capacity in competition with community is one which the NLN and its members would like to see reduced through the adoption of a more consistent NRM functional model across the country.

Providing local and regional Landcare organisations with coordination capacity would facilitate the delivery and increase of on-ground work in a very cost-effective way. It would also grant social license for activities within local community and build trust.

The role of service providers

By service providers, we mean organisations which are contracted directly through the NLP to deliver on-ground outputs. The NLN's members support the use of service provider organisations in certain circumstances to deliver government programs. In many areas, Landcare works side by side with service providers on projects which benefit the environment, landowners and the local community. The NLN considers many of these organisations to be important stakeholders and partners.

However, there are instances when contracting a service provider – often with no competitive tender process – to implement a program results in investment in the capacity of that service provider at the expense of the community. Projects that are delivered through what is effectively a 'fly-in-fly-out' model do not enjoy the same level of community co-investment and ongoing commitment to maintenance as do Landcare projects. Having in place joint plans and regional plans will help to overcome this issue. NLN members consider that service providers should be used in ways that are complementary to Landcare, rather than duplicating or replacing Landcare activities.

The role of state and local government.

The NLN believes there is a role for state and territory governments to play in the resourcing of a new regional delivery model, and bilateral agreements implemented at a COAG level should be considered to facilitate this. These agreements could be tied to Commonwealth investment and use other existing regional infrastructure which does not require the current duplications of infrastructure and function which exist in some places. The reinstatement of state and territory contributions to Landcare, particularly at the Landcare Coordinator level where this does not already occur, should be a key feature of a new program.

Many of the NLN's members live in regional and rural communities where they witness every day the duplication of capacity and divisive and destructive competitions between agencies, local boards and a range of other organisations for their 'patch'. In circumstances of declining funding it is a major frustration to see these 'patch wars' continue while on-ground works and community support diminish.

Regional planning

Regional planning and the integration of Commonwealth, state, regional and local priorities in natural resource management are somewhat inconsistent under the current regional delivery arrangements.

Consultation that is well-incorporated into regional planning to ensure that community interests are included in regional priorities result in the community feeling included and respected. This is partly a matter of process; through its members the NLN is aware of many instances where on paper community consultation had been conducted as part of regional planning, but the community itself did not feel this was the case. This results in a real risk to the creditability of both the funders and delivery agents, in a

loss of faith in the process, and in a reduction in community buy-in. A new NLP model should give careful consideration to ensuring this aspect of the program is designed to give local communities confidence in regional planning, and working with Landcare should be a central part of this.

Program design

It is important that the regional delivery model is designed to be consistent with existing regional, and in particular community, infrastructure so that it can be structured to be compatible with that infrastructure. A lack of understanding of this issue has resulted in some programs disenfranchising Landcare rather than engaging it. This can lead to the effective failure of programs, which is in no one's interests. It is self-evident that making use of and building on existing capacity offers a far more cost-effective and efficient approach than undermining and fracturing that capacity through the introduction of a new approach.

Importance of partnerships

The Landcare movement has always been a partnership model – between government, farming communities, environmental groups, and simply those people who care about 'their patch'. The NLN and its members believe that this is as important now as it has ever been, and are fully committed to partnerships, cooperation and collaboration at all levels and with all stakeholders. There are many organisations and agencies operating in the area of natural resource management and partnerships are the most effective way to reduce duplication and maximise on-ground results.

Aboriginal engagement in Landcare

We believe Landcare and the NLN can offer a new forum for Aboriginal involvement in and direction of land management through community talking to and leading community, and engaging with key stakeholders and partners.

The NLN already has Aboriginal representation on its Members Council, and is seeking to increase this. Having Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal volunteer land managers sitting together to make a contribution to the development of national policy and programs is a significant opportunity to integrate traditional knowledge and practices into 'mainstream' natural resource management. This is reconciliation in action leading to the potential for collaboration rather than conflicts. A future NLP must provide resources to focus on this critical partnership work.

Role and importance of Landcare Australia

The NLN membership considers Landcare Australia (LA) to be a valuable asset of the Landcare movement. The NLN recognises that LA has important roles in custodianship of the caring hands Landcare logo and special DGR status on behalf of Landcare volunteers and other Landcare organisations. They also run public sector fund-raising, promote and provide education about Landcare, and celebrate and recognise Landcare achievements. All of these functions can better be performed with the support, involvement and engagement of the grassroots. Landcare Australia currently lacks a direct connection with community Landcare, yet it is the actions of community Landcare that provide the value to the Landcare brand. To address this disconnect, delineating and formalising the roles of the NLN and LA would seem a logical step within the life of a new NLP. There are a number of options which could be explored to facilitate this which the NLN and LA are already investigating.

Telling the story

One of the key value propositions in the Landcare model is the endurance of both outputs and outcomes of projects achieved through investment in community. If however these are only measured against short term criteria, it is very hard to make the case for community investment. This is especially the case when there is a particular interest in a neat, quick, reportable output in a short cycle.

The NLN and its members want to be better resourced and supported for telling the story of what they achieve, to build confidence, trust and relationships and social consent for both the NLN and

government. This requires reporting tools to properly capture this data, and for funding to allow capacity to monitor, record and report this data.

Monitoring and reporting

Current monitoring tools are largely designed to do the short cycle output monitoring described above. In addition to this, funding for community groups to carry out administrative functions is generally severely capped or not provided at all. This has meant that the Landcare community implementation model has not had the resources in many instances to effectively coordinate, monitor and report on its outputs and outcomes.

The NLN would like to see future programs include funding for the capacity to better monitor the long term real sustainability, environmental and social outcomes of all projects across all implementation models. The NLN and its members would like to work with the Commonwealth on reporting and monitoring tools which better capture the story and the outcomes, not just the short cycle output data. This will also ultimately assist with cost-effectiveness and assist with identifying inefficient approaches.

Priority Issues

Our submission has spoken a lot about underlying structures and functions, partnerships and systems. This is because if we don't get these right, we cannot be effective in addressing the broader issues. Nonetheless we would like to spend some time talking about issues which we think are important to address in a new program.

Water and food security

Water and food security are critical issues that must be the focus of the NLP going forward. The Australian community is focussed on these two important matters for a sustainable future. They are potentially closely related to Australia's national security and regional stability in the next decades. If we are to be prepared for those issues we must put in place policies and practices to ensure that we have clean water and food for our population, clean water for our environment and everything it supports, including tourism. Local community Landcare groups are keen to engage with industry, as they are part of the community. The NLN can help facilitate this where there are opportunities to work together.

Agricultural profitability and sustainability

At a time when many farmers face the dual challenges of increasingly competitive international markets and increasingly unpredictable and unforgiving weather patterns, sustainable management of Australia's agricultural lands has never been more important. It is essential that addressing these issues through approaches that support the long-term viability of farming enterprises continues to be a focus of government funding. The NLN can use its networks to build and strengthen relationships on the ground with local initiatives.

The Landcare movement arose in farming communities, and still has an important role to play today. Innovation, diversification, and the long-term restoration of productive landscapes will pay greater dividends than short-term fixes like drought relief subsidies and emergency loans. This can occur with the assistance of programs like the existing environmental stewardship projects, incorporating robust monitoring and evaluation.

Social capital

There are many pressures on Australia's social infrastructure ranging from rural decline, urbanisation, globalisation, natural disasters and many others. Few programs have the ability to reach community in so many ways and places as does Landcare. The Commonwealth must continue to invest in the growth and maintenance of Australia's social capital and its ability to be resilient in times of stress.

Natural capital

Large parts of the Australia economy rely either directly or indirectly on the health and maintenance of our national natural capital. The obvious example is the tourism industry based on and around the Great Barrier Reef. Another is the Murray-Darling Basin, which is totally reliant on the maintenance of the natural capital of the region's hydrological ecosystems. The role that community and Landcare play in maintaining Australia's natural capital must remain a focus of the Commonwealth investment. The true cost of not maintaining healthy ecosystems, including climate change adaptation, needs to be embedded into program design.

Support for the Landcare Networks

The NLN seeks continued support for itself and its members through a revision of the NLP, including a substantial increase in base funding to provide financial stability and sustainability for state and territory Landcare organisations. Within just a few years since its formation, investment in the NLN has delivered a wide range of benefits to both the grassroots Landcare community and Landcare's many stakeholders, including government. We have an opportunity to harness the power of the Landcare movement in a way which has not been possible before.

Landcare's track record

Landcare is one of many community organisations. It is however also a movement, a phenomenon, not just an organisation. Landcare has a 30 year history of capacity building, of endurance, and of incredible outputs and outcomes. This is because Landcare is based within community, and when government invests in a project through community it gets a long-term result which is about a lot more than trees in the ground or hectares of weeds removed.

Successive Commonwealth governments and state and territory governments have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Landcare for in excess of 30 years. This investment has delivered innumerable outcomes in sustainable agricultural production, social cohesion and resilience, and in environmental restoration and repair. If it is not maintained, many of these gains will be lost.

Numerous reports and studies have reported on the many benefits of Landcare; on co-investment generated through community projects, on the avoided future cost of repair of environmental degradation, and on reduction of losses in agricultural production. Fewer have reported on the social benefits also generated, although these are recognised and understood to include building community capacity and resilience. The NLN, Landcare Australia, and NRM Regions Australia have jointly produced a report which details by case study some examples of these values of Landcare.

In addition to this, benefits of Landcare associated with protecting significant natural and tourism assets such as the Great Barrier Reef and the Murry Darling Basin catchments are starting to be recognised. Landcare plays a role in natural disaster recovery, and urban and peri-urban amenity. The importance of community cohesion in mental health and other social issues, and the contribution of community Landcare and similar groups in this space is also starting to be better understood.

In 2010 - 2012 the Australian Landcare Council, with an enormous amount of input from the community and others involved in the NRM and Agriculture sphere, developed the Framework for Landcare and the Community Call to Action, to guide the development and implementation of Landcare in the period 2010-2020. The aim of this was to ensure that the gains of investment during the previous twenty years would continue to be built upon. However many programs implemented since this time have not utilised this framework, and have "missed the mark" in ensuring that the project investment builds lasting outcomes owned by the community.

A new NLP offers an opportunity to ensure that we have programs delivered with the community, not programs delivered to the community.

Landcare is 'science, local knowledge and traditional knowledge pulling together to make a real difference on the ground and to the community'. Landcare offers a model for us all to work together to improve our environment while reaping social, productivity and economic benefits.



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