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From:

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Options for future community engagement in regional natural resource management

Introduction

The Department of Natural Resources and Mines released a discussion paper on ***Options for future community engagement in regional natural resource management*** in April 2005. The discussion paper provides information on and promotes discussion about options for future community engagement in regional natural resource management in Queensland.

The discussion paper, as downloaded from the regional NRM website (http://www.regionalnrm.qld.gov.au/options_paper/index.html), has been used as the basis for comments from the Health and Environmental Services Regional Organisation of Councils – North Queensland (HESROC). HESROC Councils are; Burdekin Shire, Charters Towers City, Dalrymple Shire, Hinchinbrook Shire, Thuringowa City and Townsville City.

Comments are based on the experiences of HESROC, which, in conjunction with the Burdekin Dry Tropics Board, has been involved in coordinating local government input to the regional planning process in the Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM region. A brief history of the HESROC local government NRM capacity building initiative is attached.

Landcare to Accredited Regional NRM Plans

Community involvement in natural resource management (NRM) in Australia is not a new phenomenon. Formation of soil conservation boards and catchment groups was encouraged by Agricultural Departments and Soil Conservation Departments as early as the 1930s in NSW, and in the 1960s on the Darling Downs in Queensland. Individual community members, landholders and other land and water managers, are involved in natural resource management on a day-to-day basis.

Commonwealth and State government have increased their support for community based NRM over the last twenty years as indicated by the investment in community based programs;

- **National Soil Conservation Program (NSCP)** - commenced in 1983.
- **Decade of Landcare** - announced in 1989 was the first major Commonwealth commitment to community-based NRM.
- **Natural Heritage Trust (NHT)** superseded the Decade of Landcare funding program and placed more emphasis on strategic planning as the basis for distribution of natural resource funding.
- **National Action Plan (NAP) for Salinity and Water Quality**, was launched by the Commonwealth Government in October 2000. Regional NRM groups in the 21 priority catchments became the main administrative bodies for funding under NAP, as government support for community-based natural resource management moves towards a strategic regional investment approach.
- **Natural Heritage Trust extended (NHT2)** - announced in 2002, has similar requirements for the distribution of regional funding to states and territories i.e. the development of accredited Regional NRM Plans and accompanying Investment Strategies.

The change of scale of community based NRM has not been matched in many cases by an increase in capacity to implement the new systems. This is the case for both community based Boards and the staff employed to 'guide' the planning and corporate governance processes. There is a significant difference between developing and implementing a Landcare project and developing and implementing a multi-million dollar regional NRM plan. The same group of people i.e. community volunteers, are often expected to move seamlessly from Landcare style activities to a more demanding role for which they may not be equipped.

The degree of responsibility asked of community volunteers in the regional natural resource management process through the national approach has been onerous due in part to the capacity of the volunteers and the inadequacy of conceptual support provided to emerging regional NRM groups. The emphasis on accreditation and target setting as the basis for guiding activities and investment served to exacerbate the situation as regional NRM groups struggled to come to terms with the new regime with few guidelines and no precedents. Uncertainty associated with financial support continued to create management, administration and social issues, as has been the case with past short-term NRM programs.

Imbedded social and cultural attitudes such as Commonwealth versus State Government, and community versus government also conspired to disrupt the transition from a government 'owned' and controlled NRM delivery arrangement to full community ownership of the process in partnership with government.

In essence the move from Landcare to Integrated Catchment Management to Regional Strategies and then to Accredited Regional NRM Plans required the employment of significant resources and skills to manage the transition. If the same process was imposed on a corporation without adequate change management resources the most likely outcome would be the demise of the corporation.

It is only due to the fact that the regional NRM planning process involved volunteers genuinely committed to making the process work that it hasn't collapsed. Any significant changes to the way community is engaged in NRM, especially if it involved a 'new' planning exercise, would most likely alienate the community volunteers who have invested significant amounts of time and energy in the regional NRM planning process to date.

Any future changes need to be managed sensitively and in consultation with the people involved in regional NRM. In that respect the ideas generated by the discussion paper need to be properly investigated in conjunction with the regional NRM groups and principle stakeholders. This should be done as a part of any decision making process with the most suitable option/s then judiciously introduced with the minimum degree of disruption to an already stressed network of NRM volunteers.

Local government and natural resource management

Involvement in natural resource management is a normal component of local government activities whether the activities are recognised as natural resource management or not. Local government contributes substantial amounts to natural resource management (NRM) through both routine 'business' activities and voluntary initiatives.

The difficulties faced by Regional NRM Groups in the new funding environment have not resulted in processes for effective involvement of local government in community based NRM. Instead local government in many cases has been expected to engage itself in the somewhat nebulous community volunteer framework. Regional NRM groups have not necessarily taken into account the function/s, processes and culture of local government and their capacity to self-engage.

Local government is an important part of the 'community' and at the same time is an inherently different 'business' entity and service provider when compared to other stakeholders involved in community

based NRM initiatives. One significant difference between local government and other entities involved in NRM is that local government is made up of representatives locally elected by the community they serve.

Considerable effort is required to engage local government in regional NRM arrangements as all Councils do not operate in the same way, or have the same division of responsibilities amongst departments. Additionally there may be significant differences in the relationships and interactions between the administration, departments and political components of individual local governments without even considering the complexities associated with inter-Council relationships and interactions.

There is a huge difference in NRM capacity between Councils and given there are 14 regional NRM groups in Queensland compared to nearly 140 Councils it is not surprising that adequate resources need to be committed to engage local government in regional NRM. At the minimum some form of coordination is required, as local government is not well positioned to self-coordinate in the unfamiliar environment of catchment-based regions that do not necessarily align with administrative, regulatory planning or socio-economic boundaries.

The statement made in Appendix 4 (Interstate approaches to regional community-based NRM) under local government involvement "*Regional bodies participate as key stakeholders in the planning scheme making process*" (DNRM 2005, p.30) is far from reality in most parts of regional Queensland. While it may be ideal to integrate regional NRM planning and local government Planning Schemes there are few Councils who have seriously considered NRM plans as a component of or a significant influence on Planning Schemes. This is the case with other NRM components local government is involved in.

Discussion Paper - Section two: Criteria for success

The questions (see text box below) posed to determine whether the goal of regional NRM i.e. to improve the condition of natural resources and environmental assets, may have been best left as questions or directly translated into criterion rather than 'translated' into the large number of criteria suggested. The large number of criteria will serve to confuse any assessment process when it needs to be made as simple and transparent as possible.

The Questions

- Will it help to achieve long-term NRM outcomes through the protection and restoration of natural assets?
- Will it provide accountability and a good return on public and private investment?
- Is it the most efficient way to achieve good NRM outcomes?
- Will it help to integrate regional planning and action?
- Are community aspirations recognised?
- Is it flexible enough to adapt to different regional requirements?
- Will it encourage improved NRM practices by land managers and other resource users?

Even with a set of clear questions/criterion the subject matter is difficult to assess. Predictions of success based on proposed human activity systems are highly speculative and generally impractical to measure until after the event. The big question to contemplate may be '*Are stakeholders involved (likely to be involved) in regional NRM willing to support the suggested model for future community engagement in regional natural resource management*'. Without that support and ownership of the process there is little chance of the goal of regional NRM being achieved in which case all the criteria are more or less superfluous.

The most relevant/important suggested criteria to incorporate in consideration of the options for future regional NRM arrangements from a community and local government perspective appear in the table below.

While all the criterion have some merit it is proposed that the key components/criteria for success will focus on:

- Supporting community capacity in NRM, including continuity of capacity;
- Building effective communication processes;
- Building effective partnerships;
- The development of effective information sharing and dissemination systems;
- Improving extension services and processes for landholders and land managers.

Accountability components, 'value for money', improvements in NRM practices and achievement of NRM goals and targets should logically follow if the appropriate underlying principles and processes implied in the key components mentioned above are used as the platform for community engagement and innovation in NRM.

Local government is a significant player in community based NRM and must be included to a greater extent in future community engagement activities (given their role as community representatives, facilitators etc). Greater effort also needs to be made to ensure proposed community NRM activities and plans align with those already undertaken/developed by local government.

Table 1 Criteria Considered Important in Framing Future Community NRM Arrangements

Criterion 1 Achieves long-term NRM outcomes
Encourage retention of knowledge, skills and human resources in the long term
Criterion 2 Provides for accountability and a return on investment
Build on, recognise and capitalise on existing community effort and government investment.
Criterion 3 Maximises efficiency in achieving results
Coordinating the implementation of regional NRM plans and avoiding duplication of effort
Contributing to the efficiency and effectiveness of Queensland's overall land and resource use, management and planning system
Improving information management and sharing at regional levels
Criterion 4 Helps to integrate regional NRM planning and action
Criterion 5 Recognises community aspirations
How community aspirations might be defined and balanced with scientific evidence, and how competing objectives might be handled
Criterion 6 Maintains flexibility
How easily the arrangements might be adapted over time in response to changing conditions and priorities
Criterion 7 Encourages improved NRM practices
The degree to which regional NRM arrangements might foster innovation in management practices
The potential of the regional arrangements to encourage the willingness of resource users to use better NRM practices, and to adopt changes
The potential of the regional NRM arrangements to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the various constraints that resource managers face when attempting to implement change; • Engender the sharing of information and knowledge about best practice management; • Develop strong links with local governments; • Build people's skills and capacities.

Discussion Paper - Section three Options

The options for future arrangements from the discussion paper (partly paraphrased) have been included in text boxes with comments on the suggested options below the relevant text box.

Option 1 Non-statutory community based regional NRM bodies

Continuation of some form of community-based regional NRM bodies. Non-regulatory approach to encourage the adoption of more sustainable practices. Regional NRM bodies would continue to be responsible for the development, implementation and reporting of integrated regional NRM plans.

Sub-option 1.1: Maintain current system of regional NRM bodies

Regional NRM bodies and associated government support arrangements would be continued. As the regional bodies have no statutory powers, their focus would remain on implementing NRM plans through non-regulatory strategies outlined in agreed regional investments strategies, and on regional monitoring and reporting. They would also continue to inform and assist in integrating existing regional statutory planning mechanisms. The current arrangements include monitoring and evaluation. These allow for continuing improvements in matters such as governance, business performance, partnership arrangements with other agencies, and engagement with the wider community. Under this sub-option, such improvements could continue to be made on a gradual basis.

Sub-option 1.1

The main advantage of maintaining the current system of regional NRM bodies is that they are 'established'. Community volunteers have invested considerable time and energy (and financial resources) into regional arrangements and regional planning since the regional strategic approach was instigated in 1997 through the Natural Heritage Trust. Continual rearrangement is seen as an unnecessary use of resources (financial and human) that could otherwise be used on improving NRM practices and outcomes. While the need for accountability is understood there comes a point where the planning process is seen as excessive and counterproductive.

Scrapping the current arrangements would be seen as a dismissal of the efforts of community. While the arrangements are not perfect, and never will be, a serious attempt has been made by community volunteers to adapt to the 'new' arrangements imposed under NAP and NHT2 (targets and accountability). If some semblance of these arrangements, which were developed to meet Commonwealth and State government requirements, is not retained there may be a backlash from community NRM volunteers as the preceding arrangements are likely to be seen as a cynical attempt by 'government' to appease community aspirations rather than as a method to fulfill them.

There is a real need for the structure and processes involved in delivering government funded NRM programs to be developed in advance of the announcement of a new program. It seems from past experiences that the guidelines for delivery, apart from strategic intent as outlined in Intergovernmental agreements etc, are not available at the same time that community NRM groups are expected to implement them. Expecting the train to reach the station at a certain time while the track is still being laid has created a myriad of issues both between different levels of government and between government and community.

In some regions the current arrangements may be fully functional. In the Burdekin Dry Tropics there have been a number of issues associated with capacity, corporate governance and the lack of development of adequate processes and structures, including from all levels of government, to effectively operate under the new and evolving 'rules'. The issues are now being addressed by the recently appointed Executive Officer of the Burdekin Dry Tropics Board and a more functional regional NRM group is expected to emerge over the next twelve months.

Sub-option 1.2: Maintain current system with some specific improvements including stronger links to other planning processes

Continuation of the current system with some specific improvements. In particular, it proposes stronger links between existing regional NRM bodies and regional planning advisory committees (where they exist) to focus government and community effort on agreed regional results. This can be achieved by developing the necessary policy and administrative arrangements to encourage more coordination between the two bodies and define their respective plan-making and implementation roles. This may involve measures such as amending the terms of reference of some RPACs.

The extent to which regional NRM bodies and these committees should be linked would be determined on a region-by-region basis depending on local circumstances, such as the alignment between the boundaries of NRM bodies and RPACs. Other specific improvements that could be addressed under this option include:

- Strengthening the role for regional NRM bodies in community engagement and program delivery processes of state government agencies
- Strengthening the functions of regional NRM bodies to review and improve the quality of regional NRM plans and monitoring progress against targets
- Providing greater recognition and support of the voluntary sector
- Helping the voluntary sector to encourage better NRM practices improving the corporate governance of regional NRM bodies and their ability to engage with and build the skills, knowledge and relationships of regional communities.

Sub-option 1.2

In the context of current knowledge and without the benefit of further investigations of other options this option is probably the most likely to achieve wide support within the community and from local government.

There is little doubt that the current system needs to be improved primarily as a result of its immaturity rather than as a result of major faults in the general delivery concept. There has been little time to this point to develop relationships, define roles and establish linkages with other planning processes and bodies. Regional NRM bodies have been engaged in the 'business' of achieving functionality and have had no capacity to do anything but meet the requirements imposed by the Commonwealth (and state) with respect to regional plan development and administration of interim funding and projects.

As NRM regions are based on water catchments the realignment of boundaries to coincide with RPAC areas will only be practical in a limited number of cases. Where RPACs do not exist or where there is significant overlap between NRM regions and RPAC areas it may be more practical to regionally coordinate the engagement of local government and develop frameworks and processes for the interaction of local government and regional NRM bodies in the critical areas of growth planning, development assessment, land use constraints and conservation and preservation of significant natural assets.

The role of NRM bodies, in conjunction with RPACs and/or local government networks needs to be expanded to integrate the various social and economic aspects of sustainability that accompany natural resource management. RPACs and local government networks require support to engage in NRM matters particularly where there is an expectation that responsibility for delivery lies with these bodies. Without the necessary resources there will be a reluctance or inaction with a resulting diminution of relationships.

Sub-option 1.3: Introduce full integration of regional NRM bodies with RPACs

Integrating regional NRM bodies into the system of planning established under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997*. This could involve establishing regional NRM bodies as regional planning advisory committee working groups—where RPACs exist. It may require amending the Act to make specific provision for these groups, and formally recognise them as sub-committees of RPACs, which have been established to undertake specific tasks.

As these committees have a planning role, this option proposes that regional NRM bodies would be responsible for the implementation of regional NRM plans and on-ground actions, monitoring and reporting. Funding would flow to them to decide how best to deliver on the regional plan's actions. The bodies would be the implementers of the NRM component of integrated regional planning frameworks developed by the RPACs, which cover all issues in the region.

Sub-option 1.3

By admission, in the discussion paper, there are eight Regional Planning Advisory Committees (RPACs) under the Integrated Planning Act (IPA) in Queensland which include 60% of local governments and only 40% of the area of the state. While 95% of the state's population is covered by RPACs that leaves 5% of the population managing 60% of the states natural resources. From a natural resource management perspective the integration of regional NRM bodies, which cover 100% of the state, with RPACs, which cover 40% of the state, is not a practical or feasible option.

RPACs are more likely to work effectively in areas with denser populations and therefore well-resourced local governments, such as in South East Queensland. Local government in sparsely populated regional and rural areas are less likely to see the necessity of RPACs and are less likely to voluntarily participate in RPACs due to a paucity of resources and capacity.

Whereas full integration of regional NRM bodies with RPACs as a sub-committee may be feasible in South East Queensland it is more likely to be a recipe for disaster in other parts of Queensland. Sub-option 1.3 and sub-option 1.2 could be combined with full integration applying in SE Qld and better linkages between planning processes instigated in other regions.

Ultimately the role and function of RPACs may need to be reassessed for rural areas as it is doubtful that in their current form they meet the needs of non-urban areas. A bigger picture approach may also need to be investigated whereby a sustainability framework is developed for Queensland, which looks at integration and coordination of all other forms of government, industry and community activity especially with respect to impacts on the natural assets of the state which underpin our social, cultural and economic well-being.

Option 2 Providing a statutory basis for regional NRM bodies

Queensland's regional NRM bodies be provided with a statutory basis, as has occurred in Victoria and South Australia.

Sub-option 2.1: Establish regional NRM bodies under legislation without statutory powers

Formally establishing regional NRM bodies under an appropriate piece of legislation and maintaining their main role of coordinating the development and implementation of regional NRM plans. This could be done through existing or new legislation. Under this option, regional NRM bodies would not have any specific statutory powers, but legislation could:

- Establish statutory regional NRM bodies and define certain matters such as their membership, appointment processes, operating procedures and accountabilities
- Define the bodies' roles, responsibilities and relationships with other statutory entities
- Prescribe requirements for community engagement, monitoring, evaluation and public reporting.

Some of the improvements outlined in sub-option 1.2 could still apply to sub-option 2.1

Sub-option 2.1

The provision of a statutory basis for Queensland's regional NRM bodies has merits in administrative and governance terms and had it been instigated prior to the establishment of the current arrangements may have served to improve the way regional bodies have operated to date.

Having a statutory basis may also have helped to define relationships between regional NRM bodies and other organisations and statutory planning processes. Currently the recognition of regional NRM bodies is largely based on the knowledge of their role as the potential conduit for NRM funds to a region. This role has the potential for creating dysfunctional relationships as well as altruistic partnerships.

There is no simple way to determine whether it would be useful to provide a statutory basis for regional NRM bodies in Queensland. If such a proposal has a possibility of working a significant amount of background information needs to be gathered and disseminated, and consultation with regional NRM bodies undertaken. Matters that need to be investigated and addressed include:

- How statutory arrangements have operated in other states in Australia;
- How existing regional NRM bodies could continue to function under proposed legislation;
- How it is intended to define matters such as membership, appointment processes, operating procedures and accountabilities;
- How it is intended to define requirements for community engagement, monitoring, evaluation and public reporting;
- The framework for interaction with other statutory entities and planning processes;
- How the autonomy and independence of regional NRM bodies can be maintained;
- What arrangements would be put in place to ensure the continuity of support and resources required to operate a statutory body.

Such an option could result in a greater certainty of tenure for regional NRM bodies particularly if backed with sufficient state resources to continue to engage community in a meaningful way. The main disadvantage of the option is the potential for the move to be seen as a means to control the operations of regional NRM groups thereby making them a de facto government department or additional level of bureaucracy.

Sub-option 2.2: Establish new statutory bodies with statutory powers

New statutory bodies would be established, with statutory roles and powers. These would have responsibilities for developing and implementing regional NRM plans. This option would require amending or introducing legislation to establish the statutory authorities and to define their roles, responsibilities, powers, reporting and funding arrangements. This sort of arrangement has been adopted in South Australia and Victoria.

Unlike sub-option 2.1, such statutory bodies could have some specific powers and associated accountabilities. For example, they could be given the capacity to receive funds raised through levies such as a local government levy. They could also be given referral agency status for development assessment under the IPA, which means they would play some role in the development assessment process under the Act. If they had such powers, they would also need a higher level of responsibility in terms of accountability and reporting.

Sub-option 2.2

As with sub-option 2.1 this option has the potential to alienate and disenfranchise community if it was instigated without the proper level of investigation and consultation. The addition of statutory powers could also prove to be divisive as this may be perceived as a regulatory role rather than a voluntary role. There may be reluctance and resistance on the part of community volunteers to take on what is seen as a regulatory role. Again this option may be perceived as the formation of another arm of government rather than a legitimate extension of community participation in 'government' jurisdictions.

There is a significant cultural difference between regulation and volunteerism. As a generalisation Queenslanders, and especially people in rural and regional areas, are wary of 'authority' and dislike imposed management regimes. A serious commitment to the background investigations and consultation mentioned in comments on sub-option 2.1 would need to be made for this option to have any chance of success.

Option 3 Government delivery of regional NRM with community advisory bodies

Under this option, state government support for the existing regional NRM bodies would cease at the end of the NAPSWQ program (and similarly with the Trust program if it were to end). Unless the Australian Government (or other investors) continued to provide funding, the regional NRM bodies would change from planning and implementation to advising on government-led NRM. The type of advice could range from identifying regional priorities to commenting on regional NRM plans. Delivery of regional NRM would revert to the various statutory and non-statutory planning processes that existed before the commencement of the NAPSWQ and Trust bilateral agreements. Such government-led activity could still be based on a regional NRM plan. Responsibility for community capacity building, monitoring and reporting would lie with government.

Option 3

The delivery of regional NRM with community support is only likely to work if community sees itself as an equal partner. We do not believe that the model based on government delivery of regional NRM with community advisory bodies will have the support of community, as it will be seen as a reversion to the 'old way of doing business', where decisions are made by government independently of the community with the advisory bodies established as a token gesture rather than an operational entity.

Option 4 Government delivery of regional NRM

This option is similar to Option 3, but without specific provision for a community advisory body for regional NRM. At the end of current NAPSQ program—and if the Trust program were also to end—the state government would wind up support for the community-based regional delivery arrangements. However, existing statutory and non-statutory NRM planning activities would continue. Under this option, the government could still seek to align its work with regional NRM plans where appropriate. Government would be responsible for monitoring and reporting. The community would still be involved in government-led planning via public consultation or the establishment of issue-specific community advisory bodies.

Option 4

Landcare and similar community based NRM initiatives were launched as a response to the generally held view that government alone could not effect the change necessary to turn around the degradation of Australia's natural assets. In many cases it can be shown that government policy has unwittingly led to the degradation of these resources. To maintain the goodwill and energy of the community in the effort to improve natural resource management practices a genuine partnership approach is required. Option 4 would be seen as disempowering the community and far from the concept of partnership.

It is unlikely that option 3 or 4 would achieve improved NRM outcomes as there would be more resistance to community involvement due to the disempowerment experienced through the perceived withdrawal of support. This would signal a return to the government as regulator model and remove the principle of partnership built up through Landcare, catchment management and regional NRM planning over the last fifteen years. Just as retrograde motion is a matter of relativity withdrawal of support will be perceived by the community as a backward step.

Conclusion

Guiding the process of reviewing options for future community engagement in regional natural resource management needs to done as fully consultative process with regional NRM bodies and other significant stakeholders. This will not be an easy task as regional NRM bodies are currently immersed in getting their 'houses' in order and simultaneously preparing for the roll out of regional plans including development of detail and arrangements to support regional investment strategies.

Of the suggested options Sub-option 1.2 is the most supported by HESROC and Burdekin Dry Tropics Regional Local Government Network (NRM) Councils. The support is based in part on the absence of any substantial information on benefits of other suggested options and the desire to avoid the creation of further bureaucracies which are perceived to be associated with option 2.

Sub option 1.3 is not supported in the Burdekin Dry Tropics region as there is no RPAC in existence that covers the region and 'excising' the Townsville Thuringowa sub region for inclusion in an RPAC, corresponding to the Townsville Thuringowa Strategy Plan area, would be seen as an alienating move rather than inclusive.

Options 3 and 4 are seen as a withdrawal of support for community NRM, regardless of the mechanisms than may be put in place in the way of 'advisory' bodies.

Option 2, some form, may be supported more widely if background investigations and consultation are conducted prior to any decisions being made to introduce or amend legislation. Roles, responsibilities and resourcing arrangements all need to be defined and agreed for such options to be accepted and owned.

Hopefully the discussion paper is the start of an inclusive process that will see all regional NRM stakeholders involved in the decision making process that set up sustainable regional NRM arrangements for the future.