

19 May 2011

Attn: Caring for Our Country Review Team
Australian Government, Land and Coasts
Division
GPO Box 858
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Submitted by email to: thereview@nrm.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madame

Re: Discussion Paper: The Review of Caring for our Country: Australia's Natural Resource Management Investment Initiative

The Conservation Council of South Australia Inc (Conservation SA) is the peak conservation body for South Australia, representing over 50 of the State's environment and conservation organisations. Conservation SA is an independent non-profit, non party-political, community based organisation that provides resources, advice and representation for the SA environment movement, and leads many of the key conservation campaigns in SA.

Conservation SA is known for its success in developing long term community development, education, and on-ground environmental restoration programs. Conservation SA regularly liaises with Local, State and Federal Governments, Government agencies, media, educational institutions, NGOs, unions, industry, business and other groups on matters relating to the environment and social justice.

Conservation SA is recognised as a peak body and partner for delivering the goals of the State NRM Plan under the Natural Resources Management Act 2004. We thank you for the opportunity to comment and have provided some general comments about the Caring for our Country (CfoC) Program before discussing the specific discussion points. For further information please contact Jill Woodlands, Conservation SA NRM Facilitator on 08 8223 5155.

Yours sincerely,



Tim Kelly
CE
Conservation Council of South Australia



**Conservation
Council SA**

Address : The Conservation Centre
Level 1, 157 Franklin Street
Adelaide SA 5000

Phone : (08) 8223 5155
Fax : (08) 8232 4782

Email : general@conservationsa.org.au
Web : www.conservationsa.org.au

ABN : 22 020 026 644

General Comments

Conservation SA commends the Australian government for taking this collaborative approach to reviewing the CfoC Program and we look forward to taking part in future regular consultation which promotes a cooperative and transparent culture.

Conservation SA acknowledges the commitment and investment by the Australian Government in natural resource management through the CfoC Program and the emphasis on national priorities.

We would also like to commend the Australian Government for investing in the Facilitator Network and endorse their work in providing the all important link between the CfoC Program and their key stakeholders. We support the continuing investment in this network.

As the peak conservation body in SA with many of our members key NRM and environmental deliverers we want to see the Program accessible and simple to apply. Our concern is that a range of our members have found the process unrewarding and have largely disengaged. For example, a major environmental NGO in SA finds the CfoC process 'a bit of a waste of time and effort and we have more or less given up on a major grant'. Conservation SA has hosted interactions with member groups on the Australian Governments behalf to support engagement with our members. However this latest call resulted in hardly any interest.

Conservation SA would like to see biodiversity recognized as a key driver in all levels of decision making. Biodiversity is a key indicator of the health of ecosystems which underpin food production, prosperity and well being of communities. Biodiversity is critical to human aspirations and we would like to see it valued accordingly. We would like to see that we have the knowledge and tools for sound decision making as it affects biodiversity, with the community engaged in biodiversity management as part of their daily lives. We would like to see indicators of biodiversity health on an upward trend. As such Conservation SA advocates for continued and increased investment in this Program to ensure our Biodiversity assets are protected and enhanced.

Conservation SA is concerned that species projects and former community networks like the Threatened Species Network have not fared well through this Program.

Conservation SA considers that Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and community are crucial partners in the delivery of CFOC and as such require investment in order to successfully manage biodiversity. Therefore we would encourage the Australian Government to broaden the scope of this program to adequately fund capacity building activities.

The links between Australian Government climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives and CFOC is unclear; there are both risks and opportunities associated with both as programs such as the Carbon Farming Initiative (CFI) are further developed. In this area, principles and guidelines will need to be developed such to ensure that the CFI does not become a boom bust program and that it is implemented in a way that improves biodiversity and ecosystems.

Response to Discussion Paper

Discussion Point 1: National Priorities in Caring for our Country

- CCSA is supportive of a national NRM planning process where all States and the Commonwealth set national priorities at a high level
- This process would offer consultation leading up to the priority setting and be an open and transparent process
- Although CCSA is supportive of CfoC focusing on national priorities there also should be flexibility within the Business plan for invest in relevant environmental work at the regional or local scale
- There are a range of SA assets that are worth the Commonwealth investing in. Further there are so few Coast, Estuarine and Marine priorities in the Business Plan leaving the unique South' under high levels of threat.
- CCSA would like to see the CfoC program invest in building the capacity of the community to both value and manage the environment on top of investing in the environment itself. This investment is crucial in order to support the **Regional delivery model which** requires a high level of support and commitment. we cannot assume that capacity resides in all regions or that capacity will reliably follow initial investment. Targeted support and mentoring to enable building capacity to access and apply knowledge is crucial.
- In order to affect positive environmental change research shows that there needs to be much broader engagement across other sectors than just the more traditional NRM partnerships. Real and sustained relationship and capacity building across sectors is vital to position natural resource management at the heart of all decision making.

Discussion Point 2: Setting annual priorities

- In order for CfoC to drive project and partnership development effectively under the annual Business Plan then the Business Plan needs to be released earlier before the call for applications and funds needs to be distributed soon in the financial year.
- CCSA see's that the CfoC program's move away from a cooperative approach with the South Australian government led to not only an unintended change in culture but also a marked decrease in investment from the SA government in NRM. Community partners were previously seen to add value to attract extra national funding under NHT they were now seen as competitors for the small and reducing bucket under CfoC. It will be critical to understand and reverse this trend in the next phase of the program.
- There has now been a significant drop in investment by the SA government in NRM which is an alarming trend which needs to be reversed.
- Conservation SA acknowledges the importance of setting national priorities to capitalize on outcomes for investment, but we consider all Australians have a role to play in managing our natural resources sustainably. Therefore it is vital that community grants, devolved small grant schemes run by regional boards, regional Landcare facilitator activities and other funding streams continue

and that they include interested communities who are not able to directly contribute to national targets.

- Conservation SA is concerned that regional NRM Boards are competitively advantaged in the open call process due to the base funding they receive. Those regional allocations are crucial however other proponents in the open call process must be supported and that there should be a clear onus on regional Boards to demonstrate how they are working with local communities.
- Conservation SA would like to see an increase in the funding cap for community grants to more accurately reflect project costs.
- Conservation SA would like to see the CfoC Program better promote, support and invest in innovative, diverse and effective partnerships to more effectively manage Australia's biodiversity.

Discussion Point 3/4: Community Engagement and Landcare support

- To achieve CfoC's outcomes there needs to be effective community engagement and participation. This requires adequate and long-term funding for community proponents to effectively engage a range of community interests in projects.
- Community groups are key deliverers and CfoC must ensure the level of administration is kept simple and is proportionate to the amount and chance of funding and relative project risk. Unless there is a funded person to apply and manage projects then many local groups will be largely excluded. The previous Landcare officer model offered good support in this regard.
- The Commonwealth is to be commended for re-investing in the Regional Facilitator network which should provide some additional support to groups. Although it must be noted that their capacity to offer support across the range of groups that come under the Landcare umbrella may be limited. It will be important to provide effective support to enable this approach.
- Conservation SA would like to see the CfoC Program provide easy to access information on what is and what is not eligible. For instance there was some confusion in 2010 about the eligibility of Fleurieu Peninsula Swamps and Grassy Woodlands targeted by Environmental Stewardship Program funding.
- Conservation SA believes this Program should enable communities to share results with each other in simple and engaging ways

Discussion Point 5 : Working across scales of government

- The rationale for the CfoC Program is sound with the Commonwealth wanting to invest in their priorities and let the State's deliver on theirs. However without too much effort the States could demonstrate what they are investing in before they get Commonwealth investment on Commonwealth priorities
- Ensuring the level of administration expected of proponents is kept simple and to a minimum, and commensurate with the level of funding, the likelihood of funding and the relative level of risk of the application.

- Reviewing the merit of reinstating regional plan accreditation and mechanisms to better collaborate with states and territories over national priorities and matching funding requirements.
- Exploring mechanisms to better engage and support local government. Local government is a key partner to achieving Caring for our Country outcomes and should be recognised as a valued stakeholder in the development of national priorities.
- Biodiversity does not recognise regional administrative boundaries. It is critical that well integrated cross- regional projects are fostered and supported under CfoC.

Discussion Point 6: Regional base-level funding

- It is good the regions can do some long term planning with the knowledge of base funding. However this base funding is based on historical requirements and does not reflect regional access to other funds (e.g. SA Arid Land NRM Board has a lot less access to funds than the Adelaide & Mount Lofty Ranges NRM Board) relative to their NRM issues.
- The SA regional boards must achieve their regional planning by engaging community. However Commonwealth requirements are for boards to address the national priorities which see a mismatch in engagement.
- The Commonwealth could guarantee, for all regions that can demonstrate effective community input into their long term planning, that they get their base funding to deliver on that plan. The Commonwealth could then utilise other revenue to deliver their priorities.
- There would be enormous value in CfoC providing the funding and impetus for the development of a national online reporting system that streamlines reporting processes, shares learning and provides access to a national database to further the R& D agenda.

Other themes for discussion

The Australian Federal Government has recently released its Strategy: Sustainable Australia –Sustainable Communities. The strategy is designed to support the growth of the nation which is an inevitable outcome of current policies and incentives.

The strategy is based on six principles:

- 1: Freedom of choice:
2. Valuing diversity:
3. Enhancing our prosperity:
4. Good custodianship:
- 5 Place matters:
6. Joint responsibility:

Principle 4 acknowledges that: The protection of the natural and built environment; sustainable use of Australia's natural resources; and the conservation of biodiversity and our heritage is an essential responsibility we owe to past and future generations and the global community.

Conservation SA is however concerned that despite this aspiration and good intentions, neither the Sustainable Australia: Sustainable Communities strategy nor the Caring for our Country strategy have in place the mechanisms to ensure the planning and funding for environmental protection of the places and regions which will grow massively as we head towards a big Australia.

There is a danger that human settlements will continue to grow in a way that smothers biodiversity and ecosystems in more areas around the nation as we encourage movement away from Capital cities. Vast amounts of funding will be poured into infrastructure development including housing, electricity, roads, rail, support services. Placing such infrastructure and growth on the landscape whilst protecting and enhancing biodiversity and ecosystems must be supported with stronger funding and planning mechanisms or biodiversity and ecosystems in these areas will be forever altered as they have been within and near most of Australia's post European human settlements to date.

Our recommendation is that the Caring for Our Country Strategy incorporate a specific investment initiative that is dedicated to invest in biodiversity and ecosystem planning and protection of the growth areas of the Nation whether they be in the outer metropolitan areas, in rural areas or remote areas rapidly expanding with the mining boom etc.