



Ms Christine McDonald  
Secretary  
Environment and Communications References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**Re - Senate Inquiry into the National Landcare Program**

**Name of organisation:** The Nature Conservation Society of South Australia Inc.

**Name of author:** Nicki de Preu

**Position in organisation:** Conservation Ecologist

**Date:** August 14, 2014

Dear Ms McDonald,

The Nature Conservation Society of South Australia (NCSSA) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the National Landcare Program. As South Australia's primary nature conservation advocacy organisation, the NCSSA has an active interest in the protection and conservation of South Australia's natural resources with particular attention being paid to nationally and state listed threatened plants, animals and ecological communities and management of remnant vegetation.

We strongly recommend that the Committee consider the findings and recommendations of previous reviews by both the Australian Government and independent consulting firms as part of this Senate Inquiry. Please refer to the following pages for our comments on key areas to be addressed by the Committee. Also please note that we do not want this submission to be treated as confidential and/or anonymous and that it does not contain personal information of third party individuals.

If you would like to clarify or discuss any of the points raised please contact me on (08) 7127 4633 or via email at [nicki.depreu@ncssa.asn.au](mailto:nicki.depreu@ncssa.asn.au)

Yours sincerely,

Nicki de Preu  
Conservation Ecologist

The NCSSA offers the following comments in relation to the Terms of Reference for this Senate Inquiry that are of particular relevance to our organisation:

***The history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program, including:***

***(a) the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;***

Past and present State of the Environment Reports have recognized that environmental degradation, including biodiversity loss and water quality decline, is a major problem facing Australia. NCSSA considers the establishment of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) by the Australian Government in May 1997 under the *Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act* to have been extremely important in terms of providing significant levels of funding to address some of these problems. We strongly recommend that the current Senate Inquiry consider the findings and recommendations of previous reviews of both phases of the NHT program by previous Australian Government departments and independent consulting firms as summarised in the paper by Pannell (2009).

NCSSA recognize that the transition from NHT1 to NHT2 during 2001-2002 was mostly driven by a change from delivering NHT as many small projects to being a more strategically integrated regional approach to Natural Resource Management (NRM). This resulted in the establishment of eight NRM regions in South Australia with Regional NRM Boards responsible for developing the first Regional NRM Plans during this stage of the program. NCSSA strongly support this initiative and future iterations of these plans that have enabled a more strategic and transparent approach to delivery of NRM programs.

We also strongly support the key findings and conclusions from the Final Report on the Midterm review of the Bushcare Program (CSIRO, 1999) that the program 'will have very limited impacts on addressing loss of biodiversity because of the generally small scale and scattered distribution of on ground projects in relation to the scale of the problems.' We believe that this finding is of particular relevance to the current Federal Government's rollout of the new National Landcare Programme. NCSSA acknowledges the important contribution that the Bushcare program in conjunction with other NHT programs made to raising people's awareness of the importance of native vegetation, biodiversity conservation and raising skill levels in the community on appropriate native vegetation management to achieve long-term benefits to the environment.

In terms of performance of both phases of NHT, NCSSA consider that the monitoring and reporting requirements for project activities did not enable an effective evaluation of environmental outcomes against stated targets or objectives. As identified in Pannell (2009), in order to address technically complex environmental issues, management decisions need to be based on (a) the degree of threat or damage to environmental assets at risk, and (b) the extent to which this threat or damage can be reduced by particular changes in management. NCSSA consider the lack of supporting scientific data for NHT project activities to be a major shortfall in terms of being able to quantify the environmental outcomes of on-ground actions funded through the program. We strongly support the statement that 'Concerns about lack of science in the programs were identified repeatedly in the various inquiries and reviews commissioned by government' (Pannell, 2009) and recommend the current inquiry further consider these findings.

***(b) the establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program;***

NCSSA consider the establishment of the first phase of Caring for our Country (CfoC) program in July 2008 was also extremely important in terms of the Australian Government's commitment to project activities that support and address matters of national environmental significance (MNES) established under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and international obligations in terms of biodiversity conservation.

We submit that the overall design of the CfoC program is a considerable improvement on the NHT program in terms of nationally-focused outcomes and targets and the business plan approach to allow targeted

investment to address environmental priorities. NCSSA strongly support the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) components of the CfoC program in terms of providing a framework for more effective evaluation of project activities and investment. We commend the Labour Government (at the time the CfoC program was established) for reviewing and building on previous natural resource management programs and priorities. NCSSA strongly recommend that the next phase of the program continue to align with identified priorities in regional NRM plans to provide continuity in delivery of program activities.

We support the findings and recommendations from the review of the Caring for our Country program (2012) that involved a wide range of stakeholders and evaluates the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the program. In particular we support the following findings in relation to the effectiveness of the CfoC program:

- The outcomes and targets approach of CfoC has been effective in setting and delivering Australian Government investment priorities and addressing threats to MNES.
- The initiative has recognised that community groups have different needs and has met these needs by providing numerous funding options.
- The Environmental Stewardship Program has secured over 47,500 hectares of nationally threatened ecological communities.
- The mix of investment approaches has been effective in achieving a diverse range of delivery partners and projects and has assisted with the community's need for operational certainty over longer timeframes.
- It is important to continue to support cooperative relationships in natural resource management across the whole of government, recognising the importance of linkages across policy and program areas to maximise natural resource management program outcomes.

***(e) the Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs;***

NCSSA acknowledges the intent of the Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs however we have serious concerns whether the Green Army and 20 Million Trees Program will deliver long-term benefits to biodiversity conservation. As for our comments on the Bushcare Program (under point (a) above), due to generally small scale and scattered distribution of on ground projects in relation to the scale of the problems, we believe that these programs will have very limited impacts on addressing loss of biodiversity.

***(h) the role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and***

NCSSA support the role of regional NRM bodies in past, present and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes of programs and activities to address the ongoing decline in biodiversity conservation values, management of threatening processes and land degradation across South Australia. We believe they have an important role to play in terms of engaging local communities in management of natural resources and increasing knowledge, capacity and expertise in relation to these matters. We strongly recommend that this Inquiry also acknowledge the large number of community based groups and non-government organisations that continue to contribute significant skills and resources to planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes of natural resource management programs. These groups/organisations provide not only local skills and knowledge but also a significant amount of volunteer time and expertise that provides support to paid staff and program activities undertaken by NRM bodies.

***(i) any other related matters.***

NCSSA strongly support the findings from the review of the Caring for our Country program (2012) in relation to the Australian Government's involvement in securing improved strategic outcomes across the National Reserve System (NRS). The NRS program is a key element in meeting Australia's commitment to the 1993 Convention on Biological Diversity, which specifies a global 2020 target of conserving 17 percent

of terrestrial and inland waters through ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas. The NRS is a longstanding Government initiative, underpinned by a scientific framework to ensure that Australia progressively extends protection to examples of all our ecosystems. NCSSA strongly recommend that the current Government continue to commit adequate resources to enable establishment of protected areas in IBRA regions and subregions that are currently under-represented.

## **References**

Australian Government Land and Coasts Caring for our Country Review Team (2012) Report on the Review of the Caring for our Country Initiative. Canberra, ACT.

CSIRO (1999) Final Report on the Midterm review of the Natural Heritage Trust - Bushcare program. Centre for International Economics, CSIRO Resource Policy & Management. Canberra, ACT.

Pannell, D. (2009) Australian environmental and natural resource policy – from the Natural Heritage Trust to Caring for our Country. Invited Paper 53rd Annual Conference of the Australian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society. University of Western Australia.