

Regionalism, regionalisation, and natural resource management

a discussion paper

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Abstract

A plethora of policies and programs have been developed by Commonwealth and State governments in an attempt to improve management of natural resources in rural Australia. Increasingly, it is accepted that the regional level is the most appropriate scale at which to tackle many of the problems which have emerged. Arising from a short consultancy for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, this discussion paper attempts to make some sense of the mish-mash of regional activities. Stakeholders in natural resource management and rural development at regional, state and national levels were interviewed, and key documents reviewed, to provide a perspective on the state of play in sustainable regional natural resource management, focusing on the potential to improve integration of State and Commonwealth policies and programs. There are two predominant forces driving regional-level discourse and activities—regionalism and regionalisation, for which a short-hand notation could be bottom-up and top-down approaches, respectively. The values, assumptions and aspirations underpinning regionalism are quite different from those driving regionalisation of government programs and services. How these differences are embraced and built in to policies and institutions will be extremely important in determining the persistence and influence of efforts to improve management of natural resources at a regional or landscape scale.

¹ This paper was written in late 1995, while Andrew Campbell was a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (CRES) at the ANU. It was based on a consultancy for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet which looked at the plethora of regional programs at that time and how a more coordinated approach might be achieved. It was published as *CRES Working Paper 1996/2*, Australian National University, Canberra.

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Preface

Australia is debating fundamental issues as it approaches a century since federation: the constitution, in particular the head of state, the status of its indigenous peoples and the nature of its economy. Another fundamental relationship is yet to achieve similar recognition in the broader body politic. That is the relationship between the Australian people and the landscape—how the land is used, how we make decisions about it, how we reconcile often competing demands on natural resources.

A plethora of policies and programs have been developed by Commonwealth and State governments in an attempt to improve management of natural resources, as knowledge and awareness has grown of some of the side-effects of primary industries and human settlements. Increasingly, it is accepted that the regional level is the most appropriate scale at which to tackle many of the problems which have emerged. Regions are bigger than municipalities but mostly smaller than States, and often based on water catchments. Publicly funded initiatives with a regional focus have mushroomed in the last decade.

This discussion paper arises from a short consultancy for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and from research partly funded by the Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation, and the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Stakeholders in natural resource management and rural development at regional, state and national levels were interviewed, and key documents reviewed, to provide a perspective on the state of play in sustainable regional natural resource management, focusing on the potential to improve integration of State and Commonwealth policies and programs.

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1. In an ideal world

The map of Australia would be a patchwork of regions, numbering probably more than fifty but less than one hundred, defined according to biophysical features, primarily watersheds, modified to recognise human settlement, local government boundaries and land use patterns. Most people would have no trouble identifying with their region, using terms such as “the Wimmera”, “the Darling Downs”, “the Liverpool Plains”, “the Riverina”, “the Great Southern”, “the Eyre Peninsula”, “the Green Triangle”, “the Atherton Tablelands”, “the Northern Rivers”, “the Sunraysia” and so on.

Information management would aim to ensure that sub-regions or coalitions of regions can be configured around particular issues, from managing habitat of a particular endangered species, to planning infrastructure such as transport. The boundaries for administrative purposes would however be consistent across State and Commonwealth programs.

Each region would have a representative body (say Regional Assembly), made up of elected representatives drawn from its constituent local governments. This body would be served by specialist groups for economic development, for natural resource management, and for social and cultural development. There would be cross-representation and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between the Assembly and the specialist groups, which would comprise key stakeholders and people with relevant expertise. Federal electoral boundaries might eventually conform with these regions (or aggregations of regions), providing an even more direct linkage into national government.

Regions would be encouraged and assisted to develop integrated development strategies, implemented with cocktails of resources from State and Commonwealth agencies and programs, accessed through a single desk, and assessed (in rural areas) according to their consistency with a National Rural Development Policy. A given program might integrate, for example, components such as resource assessment and inventory, structural adjustment, enterprise and infrastructure development, natural resource management, green jobs and education and training.

In developing their strategies, regional entities would be able to draw upon comprehensive, accessible resource centre(s) for regional development, providing insights into generic issues such as planning processes, best (and worst) practice cases, information management, stakeholder participation, accessing resources, attracting investment and so on. Regions would have professional staff, assisted by local part-timers and volunteers trained in particular aspects of rural development, such as enterprise facilitation, business planning, landcare facilitation and catchment management; using skills gained through various modules of a National Rural Development Training Program delivered through the existing education infrastructure. Commonwealth and State-funded people working in fields as diverse as landcare facilitation, rural counselling, labour market programs and business incubators would share core training modules within their region, and would be supported by cross-program networks.

The respective roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth, state and local governments, and regional entities would be clarified; cost sharing arrangements, resource allocation processes and principles underpinning public investment would be widely understood; the value of stakeholder participation at a regional level would be recognised and non-government people adequately rewarded for their time.

1.1 Regionalism and regionalisation

One of the most striking points of convergence encountered in interviews with people across Australia at local, regional, state and Commonwealth levels during this short consultancy is the need to adopt, adapt and refine **regional** approaches to many of the issues facing rural Australia. The following quotes illustrate some imperatives for, and advantages of, regional approaches;

...there is no alternative to regional action... Turf battles are harder to justify and sustain at the regional level.

The regional thrust assists in streamlining the provision of services and in achieving an essential goal—the devolution of decision-making process to lower levels. The region then becomes a communication forum and a basis for negotiation.

Sustainable Regional Natural Resource Management

Why regional? We need to look at things more holistically to take natural resource management into account; we need to link forwards into servicing issues and agribusiness; we need to focus on what we mean by ESD and social justice; and we need to sort out a plethora of programs through better delivery mechanisms; we need to react to the National Regional Development Strategy, the Kelty/Fox initiatives and the McKinsey report.

People are capable of discriminating and of mobilising around issues in their own backyards. Regional approaches allow bundling, local value adding, appropriate developments.

There is a mind-set in state and federal agriculture agencies that the market will fix things. It won't. Equity issues become more manageable at the regional level.

People who devise programs remotely, make assumptions about what solutions might look like on the ground. The best solutions provide flexibility within clear objectives and standards, at the regional level within the broad framework.

Many natural resource management (NRM) issues require strategic intervention at scales greater than the farm or the district. Similarly, structural adjustment, which often has profound NRM implications, especially in the rangelands and irrigation districts, needs to be considered from a regional perspective even if interventions occur at the scale of families. Finally, economic and social development, and constituent issues such as demographic trends and infrastructure planning, require strategic approaches at scales usually significantly larger than local governments. From a government perspective, it is increasingly acknowledged that there are great advantages in designing programs to allow flexibility in interpretation and delivery to accommodate the great diversity in bio-physical, social and economic circumstances across the continent.

So there is a convergence from two directions, meeting at the regional level. The bottom-up phenomenon is **regionalism**, and the top-down move to a regional focus for program delivery is **regionalisation**. This is not an academic distinction, as the imperatives driving them are distinct and different. Regionalism is about autonomy and identity at a regional level, and about 'scaling up' to better engage with particular environmental and social issues, driven from below. Regionalisation is about central governments achieving efficiencies and effectiveness by concentrating program delivery at the regional scale, usually while retaining financial control and hence program direction. It is not uncommon for the two forces to be at cross purposes, with regional community leaders having very different aspirations for particular programs from those held by policy makers in Canberra or state capitals. These tensions are not unmanageable, but they often lead to misunderstanding and frustration among regional players, and within government.

2. Regional Australia 1995

We do not live in an ideal world. Regionalism and regionalisation are prevalent in rural Australia, but it is far from the neat vision outlined above. A map of the continent with all the various attempts at carving it into regions overlaid on it, marking in the mish-mash of boundaries from bioregions to groundwater provinces and labour markets, would be a scribbly mess. The reasons for this situation are as old as bureaucracy and human nature. They are summarised in this quote from an address by Angela Munro, an experienced operator in regional development and local government, to the Regional Economic Development Conference hosted by the Royal Institute of Public Administration at Bendigo in March 1995, in which she also postulated the key structural elements of the vision sketched earlier;

...there's widespread agreement (mostly off the record in order not to jeopardise funding) that the status quo is a mess. What's blocking a strategic framework for regional economic development, in essence, is that Commonwealth, State and Local government agencies set up their own regional programs, organisations and boundaries for their own purposes without regard for or even, at times, knowledge of what already exists. In Victoria we have been radically reforming local government, planning, water and land management, (all fundamental to economic development), in four separate portfolios. This is resulting in four unrelated sets of regional organisations, unlike New Zealand which had the political leadership and long term vision to get it together. Hence, in Victoria, each local authority (and hapless citizen) finds itself in countless overlapping regional jurisdictions, dealing with differently located regional offices and a multiplicity of associated committees.

It's the same story at Commonwealth level. On the one hand we have RDOs emerging in response to offers of short-term funding by the Department of Housing and Regional Development. They have tenuous links to both state and local government, cover certain huge, new regions and are superimposed upon pre-existing state funded Regional Development Boards. Significantly, the claimed capacity of RDOs to foster international competitiveness is not necessarily clear to major business lobbies. At the same time, a parallel White Paper exercise in DEET involves setting up more numerous and well funded Area Consultative Committees (ACCs), drawing on similar interest groups but adhering to quite different regions.

Thus our de facto fourth sphere of government is the arena in which the failure of our governmental arrangements is plain to see. The reason for lack of public clamour over this is a combination of fatalism, fear of the funding and political consequences of speaking out, and ignorance.

The themes of duplication and confusion have been echoed in numerous other documents, most recently in a paper prepared by an independent working group for the Prime Minister's Science and Engineering Council's June meeting, which focused on the sustainability of the agricultural resource base;

The recent expansion in Commonwealth Government support across regional development, rural adjustment and agribusiness, landcare and labour market programs, hinges on the development of an integrative framework which can deliver at the scale of natural resource management problems, and their communities of interest....All this needs to take place under a shared policy framework for development of sustainable agriculture, shared across Ministerial portfolios, across levels of government, industry and community. Despite the rhetoric of 'integrated natural resource management' and the facade of 'one stop shop', there is still a confusing and incompatible plethora of program initiatives. It is suggested that Government starts with re-visiting the reports on ecologically sustainable development in agriculture, reviewing their implementation to date, and working towards a truly coordinated approach.

Possible elements of and steps towards a more coordinated approach are discussed later, but first a brief overview of the range of government activity bearing on sustainable regional natural resource management.

2.1 Programs and policies

At the Commonwealth level, the Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) and the Department of Environment Sport and Territories (DEST) administer the National Landcare Program (NLP), which incorporates support for community landcare groups, catchment management, land resource assessment, property management planning, regional initiatives, water services (all DPIE); and the One Billion Trees, Save the Bush, endangered species, feral pests and River Murray Corridor of Green programs administered through DEST and the Australian Nature Conservation Agency (ANCA). These programs are well summarised in Alexander (1995), and are all explicitly directed towards improving natural resource management (NRM). However NRM is also influenced by the profitability and management skills of rural land users and communities. Thus other programs administered by the DPIE also impinge on NRM, including the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS), the Rural Counsellor network, the Agribusiness Program and the Rural Communities Access Program.

While agriculture and pastoralism may be the predominant land uses in inland Australia, the way in which natural resources are managed and the economic viability of rural communities are interdependent. In many rural and inland regions of Australia the ability of land users and communities to invest in NRM will depend not only on distorted international commodity markets, but also on the availability of income sources outside agriculture. We need to move beyond our characteristic conflation of agriculture with rural, and farmers with rural people. Depending on the definitions of 'farmer' and 'rural', farmers make up between four percent and seventeen percent of rural populations (Sher and Sher 1994), which means that we need to be considering broader notions of rural development than just improving the profitability of agriculture, crucial as that may be.

Economic development, in particular industry development, often has significant environmental effects in terms of its demands on natural resources as a source of inputs and amenity values, and as a sink for wastes. Regional economic development in the broadest sense is a crucial natural resource management issue. The Regional Development Program (RDP) announced in Working Nation and administered by the Department of Housing and Regional Development (DHRD) has potentially important implications for NRM. Equally, the labour market programs (LMPs) administered by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), in particular the Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP) and the Landcare and Environmental Action Program (LEAP), which offer training and environmental employment opportunities to long term unemployed people, also have a bearing on NRM and represent the Commonwealth's single largest environmental investment.

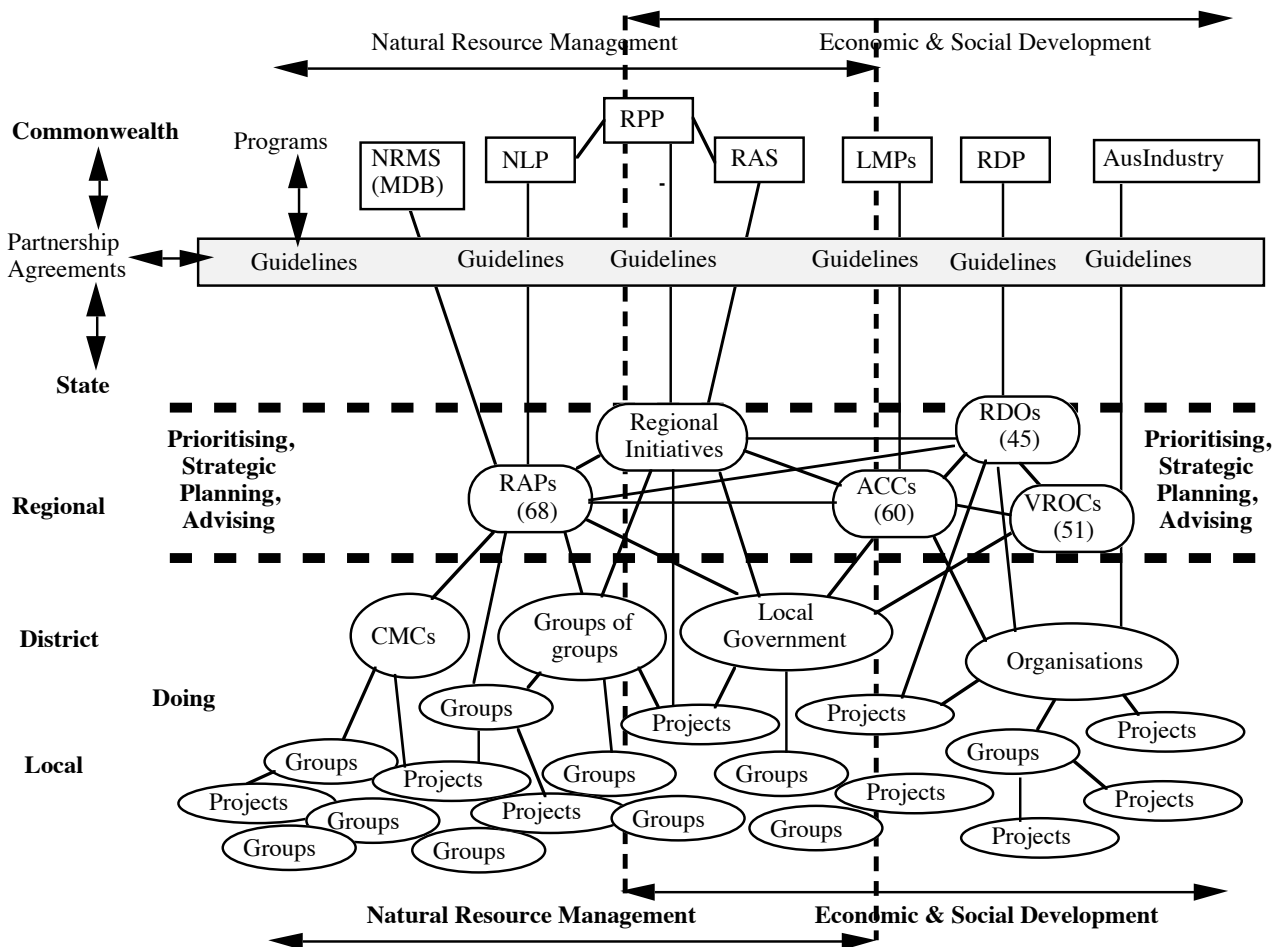
Many Commonwealth policies impinge on the changes necessary to improve the sustainability of natural resource management: notably those dealing with Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD), biodiversity, greenhouse, the Decade of Landcare, vertebrate pests, weeds, exotic diseases, chemical residues, rangelands management and Working Nation; but also including broader strategies dealing with macro- and micro-economic reform and structural adjustment, and strategies for resource-based industries such as the Wood and Paper Industries Strategy.

Most of these policies recognise the need for coordinated effort at a regional level, combining the resources of all levels of government and the community. Regional approaches to program delivery allow for diversity across the continent, whether expressed in biophysical, economic or social terms; regions are hopefully sufficiently large to enable effective action on particular issues, tailored to the particularities of the region; while being sufficiently small to enable key local stakeholders to have an input and ensuring that people can identify with programs at a scale meaningful to them.

2.2 Regional entities

In terms of regional structures established through Commonwealth programs, NLP projects are assessed by Regional and State Assessment Panels (68 RAPs and 7 SAPs), DEET labour market programs draw on the advice of 60 Area Consultative Committees (ACCs), and the DHRD regional development program supports 45 Regional Development Organisations (RDOs). Figure 2.1 below attempts to portray some of the institutions and programs involved in NRM and economic development, focusing mainly on the commonwealth and regional levels.

Figure 2.1 Some elements and relationships in regional NRM



This diagram would be even more confused if programs run by state and local governments were included. New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria are in various stages of developing regional committees based around major catchments, South Australia has Soil Boards and Western Australia has (albeit much smaller) Land

Conservation District Committees. These entities (CMCs) have varying statutory bases and emphases, although all of them are aimed at achieving better coordination of NRM at a district or catchment scale, and providing a mechanism for partnership between local communities and government agencies. In Victoria and New South Wales the catchment committees act as the RAPs for the NLP, whereas in other States RAPs tend to cover larger areas, although they may be based on aggregations of district committees.

In the economic and enterprise development arena, Western Australia has well-resourced Regional Development Commissions, South Australia has Regional Consultative Groups, and Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania all have Regional Development Boards, most of which are based on groupings of local government areas. The energy and achievements of these boards are patchy, and their focus tends to be parochial. At the local government level, there are 51 Voluntary Regional Organisations of Councils (VROCs), in which 375 of the total 771 local governments in Australia are involved.

What Figure 2.1 fails to convey is that the various regional entities, the RDOs, RAPs, ACCs and VROCs all have different, overlapping geographical boundaries, which means that a given local area might be covered by four different strategic planning processes at the regional level alone, ie. distinct from local and state government planning frameworks, which themselves often cover different boundaries. Working down through these area-based strategic planning groupings (the RDOs, RAPs, ACCs), are project-based programs; the RDP, NLP, NRMS and labour market programs respectively. The Rural Partnership Program (RPP) is somewhat different in that it is a framework for facilitating integrated approaches combining elements of NLP, RAS, agribusiness and other programs (including eventually DEET and DHRD programs), to tackle specific complex problems (usually with a structural adjustment component) in defined areas, which are usually at a regional scale but not necessarily coinciding with any of the other regional bases.

It is easy to get hung up on the issue of boundaries. The extent to which the spaghetti of different overlapping regional boundaries is a problem for sustainable natural resource management, and possible ways of improving the situation, are discussed later.

2.3 Mechanisms for integration and coordination

Ministerial Councils on Agriculture and Resource Management (ARMCANZ) and Environment (ANZECC), and their respective standing committees, provide an overarching structure and mechanisms for developing more integrated approaches to rural development and natural resource management, in particular the coordination of Commonwealth and State government programs. In fact ARMCANZ has already taken steps in this direction by commissioning case studies of the development of regional approaches to structural adjustment and natural resource management issues in South-western Queensland and Sunraysia.

The Commonwealth Programs Regional Impacts Committee (CPRIC) is chaired by DHRD and is charged with coordinating Commonwealth programs bearing on regional development. It is currently overseeing trials of three different models of program coordination derived from a study done by Price Waterhouse. Each model is being trialed in three DHRD regions: the 'lighthouse' model, in which the RDOs and DHRD work to ensure program coordination; the lead agency model, in which the agency most active in a given region acts as the coordinating agent; and the CALGRI (Commonwealth Agency Liaison Group on Regional Initiatives) model, in which the various agencies operating in a given region get together in a liaison group to manage cross-program issues.

The Advisory Committee on Environmental Employment Opportunities (ACCEEO) is Chaired by Dr Joe Baker, who also chairs the National Landcare Advisory Committee (NLAC). ACCEEO is an interdepartmental committee concerned with green jobs. It initially consisted of five portfolios, but since it started to compile an inventory of relevant programs, twelve departments have become involved. NLAC advises the Minister for Primary Industries and the Minister for the Environment on issues relating to the NLP, and is comprised of Commonwealth, State agency and community representatives including farmers, conservation groups and local government.

The RPP, a recent initiative of DPIE, is attempting to establish a framework "*through which communities in rural regions can, in a single submission, access a range of existing programs including the Rural Adjustment Scheme, National Landcare Program, Agribusiness Programs and the Rural Community Access Program.*" (DPIE 1995) The DPIE sees the RPP as complementary to the Regional Development Program, by focusing on the development of smaller communities based around agricultural industries.

In terms of the relationship between the different levels of government, the partnership agreements between the States and the Commonwealth under the NLP represent one of the best efforts to date. Under these agreements, the responsibilities of each level of government are clearly defined and agreed to by all levels, and each level commits to specific priorities towards specified outcomes. Under such agreements, resource allocation can then take place at lower levels. Within the NLP, projects are assessed by regional and State assessment panels (RAPs and SAPs), which also involve community representatives, key NGOs and local government. While it

took a great deal of hard work and considerable time to develop and sign off on the partnership agreements, it has resulted in a solid basis for cost sharing, a clear understanding between each State and the Commonwealth as to respective roles and responsibilities, and mechanisms for genuine community input at regional, state and national levels into priority setting and resource allocation decisions. There would seem to be great potential to build on this model across other programs, and to extend it to the regional level, as is virtually the case with the RPP.

2.4 A solid platform

Before analysing perceived problems, it is worth reflecting on what has been achieved in recent years with sustainable natural resource management in Australia, and acknowledging strengths upon which we can build.

Firstly, it must be recognised that the task of turning around processes of land degradation and rural decline is awesome. We are trying to develop export-oriented, internationally competitive resource-based industries within a small, deregulated, open economy, on the driest, flattest, most poorly drained continent with the most variable climate and some of the oldest, most impoverished soils on the planet. Achieving sustainable, profitable farming systems and viable rural communities in Australia will be extraordinarily difficult, much more so than in New Zealand, America or Europe, simply because of the nature of the landscape, climate and demography of rural Australia. In order to approach sustainability our land use systems need to diverge ever further from what we are doing now and from systems in use elsewhere. This means that we need to learn not just to cope with externally imposed change, but to initiate and manage reform from the ground up, and from a shared national strategy down.

In natural resource management Australia has made great progress over the last decade, a decade which has seen profound increases in awareness, widespread changes of attitudes, and increasing resolve to pursue sustainability, that slippery chameleon of a concept. The issues we are tackling are long term and intractable, not amenable to quick fixes or magic bullets. Success will come only with patience and sustained effort. Criticism of the status quo is fine, but it should be tempered with knowledge that progress has been and is being made.

Secondly, there is a growing acceptance at all levels, of the idea that the people who live in a community, a catchment or a region, are central: to any efforts to improve management of natural resources; to attempt to define preferred development trajectories; and to manage change. Even where strategic planning is taking place within government, the participation of key stakeholders from outside government is now a feature of the way Australia goes about shaping policy, particularly in the natural resource management arena. The fact that one in three farm families is involved in a landcare group is unparalleled in other industrialised democracies, creating a foundation upon which quite innovative approaches to natural resource management, new institutions, social technologies and policy instruments can be developed.

This consultancy encountered widespread frustration among people at a regional level with a messy and confused situation across different programs and between different levels of activity. Nevertheless, Australia is getting structures in place through which people can make real contributions to the issues which affect them, at effective scales. The combination of landcare groups at a local level and groups of groups or CMCs at a district or catchment level, with strategic planning and funding allocation taking place at a regional level through RAPs, and formalised contracts between State governments and the Commonwealth in the form of partnership agreements clarifying aims, roles and responsibilities; has already established one of the most comprehensive frameworks for community participation in NRM anywhere.

It is a structure which is breeding a sophisticated understanding of the policy development and strategic planning processes among non government stakeholders. It is generating and harnessing a great deal of investment of time and energy from community leaders. It establishes fora for confronting some tough issues such as structural adjustment and patently unsustainable use of natural resources. It has now developed to the point where it provides a framework for significantly higher levels of public investment in long term, public good issues. Devolution of resource allocation and decision making, which has accompanied the evolution of this structure, encourages the development and adoption of integrated approaches at a community or regional level, combining environmental activities with labour market programs and economic development. Local communities, particularly rural communities, are not compartmentalised as much as government agencies, and their perceived self interest tends to work in favour of more holistic approaches, unlike the situation within and between governments.

At the same time, as people understand the system better they become more demanding of it, they become more frustrated with slow progress, they are better able to target criticism and they potentially become much more cynical about governments, where they suspect that their own inputs have not been sufficiently matched by public investments. As the community starts to get involved in strategic planning, setting priorities and allocating resources, they become less tolerant of the degree to which government structures and processes get in the way of outcomes. Thus, as NRM groups at local and district levels attempt to scale up to the regional

level, or to widen their focus to look at social or economic development issues, they confront the complex, messy array of policies, programs and institutions, they see duplication and inefficiency, and they don't like it.

Words and phrases including devolution, bottom-up and community-based are hollow unless devolution of responsibility is accompanied by commensurate resources. Encouragement from governments to adopt more integrated, strategic, cooperative approaches is similarly unpalatable where communities see governments doing the opposite.

Significant progress has been made on an issue of vast scale and complexity, particularly in getting people involved and giving them opportunities to contribute. Valuable alliances and structures have been established. A great deal of learning has taken place. There is a cadre of rural people, still a small minority, who are thinking and acting strategically about managing change. The challenge is to get the structures, the relationships and the processes right, to enable regional groupings of stakeholders to make a real difference to the development of their part of Australia. Increasingly, this will mean coming to terms with external forces, threats and opportunities, which means crossing the gulf between natural resource management and economic development.

3. Perceived problems

Rural Australia is diverse and patchy. Not all regions are going broke, neither are they all suffering population decline or disappearing amenities and services. Some issues are, however, common. Rural Australia lacks a sense of direction. A wide cross-section of groups and individuals are dissatisfied with business as usual, which is neither sufficiently economically viable, socially equitable nor ecologically sustainable.

With few exceptions: rural (especially inland) regions face environmental challenges, whether due to economic pressures for short-term survival, adjusting away from unsustainable land uses; they lack a clear vision of where they are headed and how to get there; the number of talented people with energy and vision and an ability to think and act strategically is very limited, and such people are already over committed (or committed); they have an at best rudimentary information base upon which to build planning and decision-making systems; they have little or no idea of how to go about regional development; they are confronted by a confusing array of policies, programs and initiatives from state and federal governments, many of them short-term, which make an art form out of knowing who to go to for what and how to access money; and their cynicism about the commitment of governments is fuelling a cargo cult mentality rather than regional autonomy.

3.1 Regional program delivery

With respect to delivery of government programs, CPRIC commissioned a study by Price Waterhouse, which identified generic issues, based on workshops in six regions and interviews with key informants at regional, state and national levels. These are summarised in the table below.

Table 3.1 Generic issues affecting government program delivery

(after Price Waterhouse 1994).

Issue	Details
Knowledge of government programs	Lack of awareness of available programs Inability to find out basic information and contact points when needed
Access to government programs and help in understanding and applying for them	Knowing about programs is not enough - they change quickly (new depts/people/guidelines/criteria) - funds can be quickly exhausted - relevance to applicant needs is often not readily apparent from initial sources Too little information too late, making application and access difficult Inability to find out about related or alternative programs until too late
Duplication and overlap of Government programs, need for rationalisation	Policies and programs affecting regions are formulated and administered outside the region Assessment and decision making on applications is usually outside the region - for both discretionary and non-discretionary programs - flexibility to incorporate regional factors is often limited
Coordination of government programs within regions	Program providers (especially when not directly represented in the region) are unaware of other government's or other portfolio's programs - lack of referrals/access to alternative and complementary programs - lost opportunities and erosion of 'competitiveness' Regions all look to greater physical presence of program providers in the region.
Recognition of regional boundaries	Multiplicity of regions for different governments, agencies and programs - calls for harmonisation of regions for all government programs Commonwealth seen as not respecting its own endorsed regions/regional policy - new regional administrative arrangements being decided without reference to the regions. Concerns relating to ABS regions and availability of RDO-relevant data.
Consultation and coordination at the central agency level	Regions felt their consultation and planning networks were OK, and recognised they would need to be the advocates for their strategy and priority projects with Commonwealth and State agencies outside the region. Regions are uncertain about how governments would be coordinating their delivery activities.

Interviews with a wide range of stakeholders during this consultancy revealed the same array of issues.

3.2 Fomenting integration

The Price Waterhouse study arose from the Regional Development Program. The regional people interviewed were mostly involved or potentially involved in emerging RDOs, and thus the concerns expressed above stem more from government programs relevant to economic development than to natural resource management. It seems likely that these generic problems are amplified across the environment/economy divide. There are many systemic biases against the development of projects or programs which genuinely engage in fostering sustainable natural resource management at a regional scale.

Some specific comments from various informants flesh out the integration challenge:

Regional development has been so badly delivered in the past. They want to do it, but don't know how. We don't need another program; we need to understand delivery much better. There is no general prescription—success relates to the dynamics of the process.

People don't recognise each others' regions, boundaries vary enormously, there needs to be much better coordination and agreement on what the regions are. We can't all continue to talk about different regions. The community in a given area do not know who to go to for what.

If you can combine ACCs and RDOs, that is by far the best. If not, there should at least be cross-representation. This should be a formal requirement, organised through [Ministers] Crean, Cook and Howe.

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The Commonwealth has created these major pots of dollars, then they have unilateral short-term initiatives funded from the same pots; then they come in with something more overarching like the Rural Partnership Program. It may be better to continue refining existing programs, over 10-30 years. The RPP sets up mechanisms for creating major regional short-term initiatives—a good idea which should be built on. Every time an initiative is announced, there is a reinforcement of the cargo cult mentality and there is an undermining of the key principles that landcare or regional development or whatever is about. Farmers won't thank us for it.

At the Commonwealth level we have to create the inter-relatedness of the issues we are dealing with across the various agencies. They've got to drop their guard a bit. People on the ground are frustrated by the multi-headed approach to issues that they know need to be dealt with on an holistic basis. We get hassled for having too many plans and insufficient action. The real problem is entrenched positions, falling onto opposing forces around particular development proposals.

The most obvious problem is the sheer complexity of institutional arrangements. The variability between regions is compounded by the tendency to set up a new committee for a new program, rather than use existing bodies. The reason for this 'clean slate' approach may be that existing committees are deemed ineffectual or 'owned' by another program area, department, sphere of government or unacceptable interest group or individual. Quite often a new regional body is formed in complete ignorance of what already exists. The result is too often fragmentation and the diffusion of money, talent and effort, with associated loss of credibility and withdrawal of support. These arrangements... are a recipe for 'disintegrated' planning and management. They prevent concerted goal-setting, or measurement of the achievement of such goals. Further, short-term funding encourages short-term decision-making and the frequency of election mode of one or other government, accelerates the discontinuity.

Not everyone believes that program integration, even at the regional level, is a panacea. Several people, mainly from within government, pointed out that integration will not necessarily solve those problems that are attributed to a lack of integration;

The different regional bases of the different programs are probably necessary, and very problematic for integration of delivery mechanisms. A lot of the DPIE agenda is delivered through State agencies, and things such as traditional RAS and the agribusiness programs deal with individual land users. None of these things are thus very amenable to being pooled or otherwise integrated with programs from other portfolios. DPIE will always want to take a farm/rural community perspective, and it is equally valid for DHRD to work from the economic development end.

Integration could be throwing the baby out with the bath water. The other approach is to ask what we are trying to achieve, and to try to bring that about at the regional level across a range of programs. The region then becomes a communication forum and a basis for negotiation. We don't need to get hung up on the boundaries of regions, as one could have catchment or issue based regions co-existing within larger economic frameworks.

If natural resource management is too closely integrated into regional economic development, there is a great risk that natural resource management will be marginalised. It needs to be kept at a distance and quite transparent so that communities know what is going on, yet with sufficient interaction so that catchment boards are aware of economic issues and RDOs are aware of environmental issues such as water quality.

We don't think program duplication is the problem, the problem is rather duplication of delivery mechanisms.

The ...community doesn't care which agency things come out of.

The need for better communication and coordination within and across governments and portfolios is paramount. There is a general frustration that governments need to 'get their act together.' There is less consensus as to how that can be done, particularly over the extent to which program integration is desirable. When people talk of integration, they are usually referring to program delivery mechanisms, to the interfaces between programs, and between programs and their clients.

To a large extent, confusion and frustration at a regional level stems from:

- A lack of clarification of roles and responsibilities at different levels of government and across different portfolios within governments;
- Institutional cultures which foster organisational parochialism and consequent turf battles;
- The absence of a shared corporate strategy for rural Australia which sets out long term goals and directions and establishes principles for guiding public investment.

3.3 Managing information

When regional entities, whether RDOs, CMCs, ACCs, VROC or RAPs, begin to get serious about developing a regional strategy, the issue of information invariably becomes problematic. All over Australia we are expecting cobbled-together groups of people with varying levels of formal education, many of whom are part-time or voluntary, all of whom are busy, to collectively develop strategic approaches to managing change. If we are serious about getting some integration across the natural resource management/economic development divide, then the people around the table are likely to be even more diverse in terms of backgrounds, training, interests and values than say a catchment management committee or an economic development board. The issue of how to develop a shared problem appreciation is critical.

We appear to be assuming that regional groupings know what kind of data to gather, at what scales, and how to gather it, analyse it, interpret it and apply it. The old maxim that data is not information, information is not knowledge and knowledge is not wisdom, should inform our investments in regional development. Effective planning, decision-making and implementation at the regional scale requires information which simply cannot be gained by aggregating data collected at a local scale, or by disaggregating ABS or ABARE data. As well as the question of reconciling information gathered at different scales, techniques are not well developed for integrating information from baseline data, trends, trajectories and scenarios, from demographic, economic and biophysical sources. Regional development practitioners have to work at the interface between economic, environmental and social issues. Existing information systems make these interface issues problematic in the extreme.

While useful publications exist and many reviews have taken place, there is no obvious source of information on how to go about developing a regional strategy and assembling the required information; no repository of stored intellectual capital; no register of case studies—the good, the bad and the ugly; no centre at which leading research in regional development processes is occurring; and no focus for strategic, independent evaluation, as opposed to accountability or effectiveness evaluation.

Once again, it is worth revisiting some views expressed in the field, starting with a precautionary note.

Information is important, but if you are not careful the information and its management becomes an end in its own right, a displacement activity.

...the study of regional development is so fragmented and highly specialised that a body of knowledge useful to practitioners scarcely exists. Regional economics, regional geography, regional planning and regional science flourish in isolation and, remarkably, may involve no consideration of the boundaries, structures and political processes whereby such regional development may be fostered.

An information base is the critical thing for a region to get a handle on what it has got and where it is going. If you want to empower local initiatives, information is the way to start.

*With information technology, we are no longer constrained by what we **can** do, we need to be thinking about what we **should** do!*

Disparities among issues and regional boundary definition are not a big problem if the information base is good enough. ie with sufficient baseline data on a GIS, one can switch easily from one scale or area to another, without being constrained by particular boundaries.

3.4 Facilitation, knowledge and skills development

Even if we had the information systems sorted out, we still do little to support the gaining of knowledge and wisdom among practitioners in regional development. Information management is inextricably bound up with the question of the knowledge and skills of the people expected to be playing key roles in rural development, as

local communities scale up to plan and act more strategically, and governments move to devolve a measure of responsibility for decision-making and resource allocation to the regional level. Regional entities need to deal with many issues other than information management, issues for which they are often equally poorly equipped.

Working with people as individuals or in groups and helping them to think and act more strategically requires more than just technical expertise in a particular subject area. It requires an understanding of and skills in facilitation, something which is handled poorly by the formal education sector. Facilitation is a much (ab)used word which is worth expanding upon briefly, as it is fundamental to the likely effectiveness of attempts to give regional communities a greater role in working out their own direction, a greater say in the allocation of public resources and a greater collective capacity to make sound judgments and wise decisions.

Facilitation

Facilitation is about fomenting group synergy. Fomenting, because its connotations of fostering and nurturing are accompanied by an element of blending ingredients in such a way that something develops which is more than the sum of its parts. In this case the synergy comes from a regional entity being able to achieve more or differently than aggregate individual contributions, for example in improving collective management of natural resources such as a water catchment, or fostering economic development and improving employment opportunities.

In a practical sense, facilitation involves helping groups to make best use of the people available, and helping to develop a shared sense of direction among the relevant players. This requires a sufficient insight into group processes to be able to assist groups to find and set direction, to identify factors preventing the region from reaching its potential, and the skills to work through these issues with the group, dealing with conflict, apathy, collective decision-making and action without imposing direction. Anna Carr (1994) notes that facilitators are a critical factor in the success of Landcare groups, not least by acting as ‘bureaucracy busters’.

Facilitation is much more a matter of skilled listening, asking the right questions of the right people at the right time, than it is delivery of technical information. This can mean challenging people to open their minds to new possibilities, to new ways of looking at their situation, their resources and the options open to them. Facilitators are often ‘providers of occasions’, organisers of encounters designed to stimulate new ideas, new ways of thinking, new perspectives or new liaisons between regions and sources of assistance. The art of fostering group synergy is delicate. It involves knowing when to lead and when to wait. It also requires empathy with the target stakeholders.

The word ‘target’ may jar in a discussion about something as apparently non-threatening as facilitation, but facilitation should be seen for what it is—a strategic intervention for a more or less well-defined purpose. Effective facilitators do not sit and wait for things to happen. They think, they anticipate, they plan and they act. They have an agenda, which should be explicit.

3.5 Training

Several people raised concerns about the need to improve skills development, of which the following are illustrative;

No-one is actually looking across what national training needs and shortages are. The process needs to involve first setting up the soft infrastructure, then developing strategies and skilling the locals. The Commonwealth has given lip service to skills development. Half-day workshops [for RDO people] are ad hoc, ill-focussed, an output not an outcome. Training needs to incorporate a mentor component to keep it on-going.

we'd be far better off just providing people with a really skilled officer than giving everybody a one day [training] course.

This is not just an issue for voluntary or part-time community members of RDOs, ACCs, CMCs, RAPs, VROCs or whatever, it is also of crucial importance for the effectiveness of the professionals working with these regional entities. The Commonwealth is funding a substantial number of positions at a regional level working on various aspects of rural development, all of which have a facilitation component and thus varying requirements for facilitation skills and group process insights.

Within the DPIE portfolio alone, the NLP funds 142 landcare coordinators and 91 facilitators, there are 80 full-time property management planning (PMP) facilitators, 89 rural counsellors and 47 business advice in rural area (BARA) facilitators—a total of 449 Commonwealth-funded people in the field working at either a farm, family, firm or community level. The DHRD Regional Development Program (RDP) has 25 regional

offices/presences, and intends to eventually have one regional officer servicing each three or so RDOs. The 45 RDOs each receive core funding of \$240,000 over their first three years towards the establishment of an office, which usually means the employment of an executive officer, so across the RDP as a whole there will probably be more than one hundred people servicing RDOs in various strategic capacities.

The number of people working with labour market programs is more difficult to establish. DEET has indicative figures that up to 25,000 participants are currently engaged in 'environmental activities', and over the next three years DEET will commit a further 90,000 environmental places. In those REEP and LEAP programs delivered through Greening Australia (which alone employs well over one hundred people in its supervision of REEP projects), there are an average of two operational supervisors and one coordinator acting more strategically per fifteen participants. So there are literally thousands of people employed in supervision of environmental employment projects, which are supposed to have a training component and be environmentally sound, preferably within the context of a regional strategy. People working with labour market programs require facilitation skills, and although they are only indirectly concerned with rural or regional development per se, they can certainly benefit from knowing the players in their region.

So how do these thousands of people (in addition to those working in various industry sectors or for state governments) acquire the knowledge and skills they need to work effectively with community groups? In a multitude of courses and schemes delivered by a multitude of institutions in many different ways, with virtually no integration or even communication across the various delivery systems across the various States. The training picture is as messy, uncoordinated and anti-synergistic as the bigger rural development picture. Within DPIE alone, the training schemes for rural counsellors are separate from those for BARA facilitators, which in turn are entirely separate from those for landcare people and in turn, PMP facilitators. Of course the DPIE programs are far removed from the workshops run by DHRD for RDO people. There are not yet specific programs to assist deliverers of labour market programs, although Greening Australia is developing materials and processes for helping REEP and LEAP providers.

This is not to imply that there should be a single monolithic training scheme for rural development practitioners. A high level of diversity in content and process is clearly desirable for such a multi-faceted endeavour, and there will always be subject and area specificities which are most efficiently and effectively catered for by unique approaches.

However, given the crucial importance of the limited human resources in rural (especially inland) Australia to any attempts to develop more bottom-up strategic planning and innovative change management; given the common elements in the work of most practitioners in rural development; and given the overlap, duplication and confusion among governments, portfolios and their clients about what is happening where; there would appear to be significant potential gains to be had by taking a whole-of-government approach to training in rural and regional development, both for government funded professionals, and for community members keen to play a greater role at regional levels. These gains would be realised in several areas:

- Combining people within a given region from across different programs and levels of government in some core training modules (for example leadership, working with groups, media, networking, benchmarking, change management, strategic planning, and how to find out about and access government programs), would be one of the best possible forms of inter-program networking, which would at least help to eliminate some ignorance and confusion, if not duplication across the various programs in a given region.
- Taking a whole-of-government approach will, over time, enable better identification of the most effective people, processes and delivery mechanisms for skills development, thus improving the potential to offer best practice training, to develop very good resource material, and to establish measures to ensure quality control, including follow up training and evaluation of training outcomes.
- An integrated rural or regional development training program would be of sufficient size to offer a great array of training opportunities, from short one-off workshops to intensive courses run over weeks or months, to longer term cadetships, secondments and even research scholarships. Various delivery mechanisms could be encompassed, from the university and TAFE system to specialist 'flying squads' and workshops in country schools and halls.
- Avoiding duplication where possible allows for a more efficient use of resources.

Training is no panacea to the problems of program integration, but it can be a very effective team building and networking tool, achieving outcomes far beyond just developing participants' skills. Considerable determination on the part of the Commonwealth and the leverage of its funds will be required to improve coordination and integration of training programs across portfolios and levels of government. However this would be easier to initiate and progress than bringing together programs as a whole. Joint participation in training activities would be an effective first step towards a more integrated rural development program for Australia.

3.6 RDOs

The Regional Development Program run by DHRD is the most recent Commonwealth initiative in this area. The RDOs are the new kids on the block. The brief for this consultancy was sustainable regional natural resource management and the potential for integration of policies and programs to make that more feasible. Most people spoken to in the field, even those preoccupied with NRM issues, were keen to express views about the RDP and RDOs in particular. The positive views expressed endorsed the claims of DHRD staff that RDOs have been a catalyst for bringing people together who have rarely had much to do with each other before, and have given people a much better feel for the economic base of their regions. Several respondents who are on RDOs (notably those RDOs which DHRD regards as most advanced) said that they think their RDO has great potential, and that they are starting to get somewhere.

Most comments however, were critical. Interpretation of these comments should be tempered by two considerations: firstly that the RDP is a new program in an inevitable phase of settling down, developing structures and processes, working out what works and what doesn't and so on; and secondly that for most people criticism is easier than praise, the interview is a forum to get some angst off their chests, and the interviewer is a lightning rod for conveying complaints back to Canberra. Notwithstanding these qualifications, there are some serious concerns here.

Many people mentioned the haste with which the program has been developed and RDOs formed. The time constraints under which the program is operating run counter to the ideals of community ownership, partnership building and strategic planning which it espouses. Several respondents noted the tension for DHRD of talking bottom-up, yet getting closely involved with the running of RDOs and the development of project proposals.

It is even harder for a community-based group to form and act strategically when it is a contrived region with which stakeholders do not identify. Most respondents (including all of those with an NRM perspective) claimed that RDOs are too large, with boundaries which do not reflect social and ecological units. This is an issue with profound implications for the sustainability of the program, and the RDOs when their start-up funds are exhausted. The spatial complexity of NRM issues means that most RDOs are inherently incapable of relating to them.

Another common theme was that it makes more sense to build on existing groupings than to start new ones. People on catchment committees and in local government are particularly concerned about the proliferation of regional entities. The merging of RDOs and ACCs was often suggested as an immediate step to improve the current situation. The focus of DHRD on economic development and the perceived need to ensure that regional development is not captured by local government has led to concerns about the representativeness of many RDOs. Environmental interests are rarely represented to the extent desired by NRM stakeholders. Governments, local and state, elected representatives and professional staff, feel generally marginalised within the RDP. Several respondents were concerned by the lack of democratic accountability of RDOs, by the processes for selecting RDO members, and by the potential for RDOs to in effect be dominated by the executive officer relating directly to DHRD staff in Canberra.

The focus of the RDP on **economic** development (most people still refer to RDOs as **R**EDOs) is seen by many people involved with or on the fringes of regional development to be too narrow. The RDP is seen to be fixated on infrastructure 'projects', rather than considering a broader notion of development. In most of rural Australia, it is impossible to consider economic development in isolation from natural resource management. For people grappling with issues of sustainability, and who have become literate in the debate about ecologically sustainable development in Australia, the RDP is a throwback to the days of ill-considered development projects evaluated in isolation of their relationship to social and environmental values and priorities. When asked about the extent to which the environment or NRM are considered by their RDO, several RDO members stressed their interest in ensuring that projects did not have adverse environmental impacts, but none considered the environment as anything other than an issue to be negotiated, a potential problem to be avoided at least cost. This is a far cry from regarding Australia's natural resource endowment as an area of comparative advantage to be celebrated by aiming for (or bettering) world best practice and developing uniquely Australian products, technologies and services. The composition of RDOs suggests that the natural environment is not viewed as an economic winner *per se*.

In part as a function of these other concerns, many people doubt the capacity for RDOs to act as a coordinating forum at a regional scale. They are seen to be the creatures of one department and one level of government, too narrowly focused, covering too large areas, with insufficient intellectual or financial horsepower to make much of a difference.

With hindsight it would have made more sense from many perspectives to base the Regional Development Program (RDP) more around existing groupings, and to jointly establish RDOs and ACCs with their complementary mandates, based on VROCs where possible. It would have been highly desirable from a natural resource management perspective to link the RDO/ACC/VROC groupings with existing regional NRM bodies

such as RAPs in a more formal sense, in particular for channelling Commonwealth and State funding into integrated projects. In fact just such a course of action was recommended to the Ministers for Environment and Primary Industries and Energy by the National Landcare Advisory Committee (NLAC) following their November 1994 meeting.

In reality however, we have to progress from a situation where the regional level is characterised by many players with overlapping agendas trying to access several overlapping programs. Notwithstanding their expressed concerns, many people said that they agree with the ideas behind the RDP, drawing as they do from the Kelly and McKinsey reports (often referred to by key players at state and regional levels). They agree that there is a need for regions to have more say in their direction, and that this will require them to make collective efforts in planning and action at scales larger than they are used to, involving a wider range of stakeholders. But the messages in the McKinsey report (McKinsey & Co 1994) about building on local leadership and networking existing organisations rather than superimposing new structures, appear to have been only patchily observed.

The RDO which many people hold up as an example, nominated by DHRD as one of the most advanced and successful, is the Northern Rivers RDO in north-eastern NSW. This RDO covers a compact region which makes social and biophysical sense and with which people identify easily. The RDO acts as the ACC, and is the peak body for the 27 existing organisations represented on it. Northern Rivers is also the only RDO based on a pre-existing VROC. This RDO is very active, with a land use study well underway and an ambitious green jobs strategy. According to one of its members though, the committee remains insufficiently representative of women, greens, Aboriginal people and captains of industry—it is rather the staff of representative bodies who tend to sit on these committees. The RDO is not a doer. Its role is to support, coordinate and drive, rather than run projects.

4. Where to from here?

4.1 Rural development policy

A theme which has recurred consistently during this study is the need for an overall direction for rural and inland Australia, a shared corporate strategy which will assist people on the ground to see that serious thinking has been and is being done, and to see where they fit. Again, this does not imply detailed, centralised, top-down planning and prescription, but it does imply leadership to stimulate a national debate on what we expect of and for rural Australia, to bring key groups to the table and to establish some broad national goals, directions and priorities.

A great deal of the necessary thinking and talking has been done, and is reflected in the outputs of the ESD process, in Working Nation, the Decade of Landcare Plans, the Rural Partnership Program and in the strategies for Greenhouse, Biodiversity, Coastal policy and the Wood and Paper Industry. However while these deal with their respective issues, what is lacking is an overarching vision for rural Australia as a geographic and social entity, as a vast proportion of the map.

Minister Collins recently announced an “Agriculture 2010” initiative, to develop long term responses across governments, industries and community groups to six key issues: the management of land and water resources; changes in international and domestic markets; processing and value adding; farm structure and production diversity; productivity growth and technological improvements; and the rural community and social welfare issues. This is seen as a natural extension of the Rural Partnership Program and consolidates attempts to encourage communities to develop integrated approaches ‘which reflect the real complexity of issues in the bush’ (Collins 1995) and which governments resource according to their capacity to achieve agreed outcomes. It is anticipated that the Agriculture 2010 initiative will lead to a major government statement on the long term outlook for a sustainable agricultural sector.

This is to be heartily commended. However from the perspective of this consultancy it would be better to take a broader focus than exclusively on agriculture, to consider rural development as a whole, in which agriculture is of course a major player. In economic, social and resource management terms, agriculture and farmers are not the only players.

Partnerships of all kinds are needed, at many levels: for example between governments, between government and private investors, between researchers, producers and marketers, and between business, unions and community groups. Establishing a framework within which such engagement can take place, partnerships can develop and investments can mature will only be possible under the umbrella of a coherent national strategy. Investment on the scale needed over the necessary timeframes will not be delivered by the market, nor is there

any point in long-term investment on the part of private firms and individuals without the security of a supporting strategic national direction and complementary policy framework.

Establishing goals

It is far beyond the scope of this study to outline a rural development policy framework. However it is worth repeating that such a policy needs to spell out some broad goals which establish a direction for rural Australia. Significant steps have already been taken, expressed for example in the following policy principles for rural development endorsed by ARMCANZ in April 1994 (DPIE 1995):

Community involvement and the role of government; effective community ownership is a prerequisite for successful rural development.

Sustainability; rural development, whether in primary production or associated processing industries, should be environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

Focus on enterprise growth; consistency between industry, government, communities and regions in planning enterprise growth, which should be driven by the private sector.

Recognition of change; increasing viability and dynamism may mean profound change from the status quo, requiring new attitudes, cooperation and tolerance at all levels, all sectors.

Integration across portfolios; “All areas of government concerned with rural development should integrate their policies and programs to avoid duplicative effort and ensure consistency of all programs with national rural development goals.”

Coordination between governments; all spheres of government need to cooperate so that actions and priorities are based on better linkages and targeting of programs.

Micro-economic reform; rural development and structural adjustment should be integrated with processes of micro-economic reform and planning for essential infrastructure, particularly in relation to such areas as water pricing.

Equity in service delivery; rural communities and businesses should have, to the greatest possible extent, equity with urban areas in service delivery, which, at the same time, should recognise the different requirements of rural areas.

Cultural diversity and indigenous reconciliation; rural development policy should encompass the aspirations and contributions of all Australians, and should facilitate reconciliation between indigenous people and the wider community

These principles are excellent, although they do not go as far in expressing explicit goals for rural communities, especially in an economic sense, as those suggested by Sher and Sher (1994): growing rural population and employment, from a growing and diversifying rural economic base; an equitable share of the rewards derived from rural resources should be reaped by rural people and communities; an improved quality of rural life; and stronger, more cohesive rural communities.

I am not suggesting these goals should be adopted, nor that they are sufficient—they refer to only the last of the six key issues nominated by Minister Collins—but simply wish to underline the point that some clear national goals for rural development need to be established. The Agriculture 2010 initiative, provided it is not focused too narrowly on agriculture rather than rural, has a great opportunity to develop a clear sense of direction for rural Australia. The Rural Partnership Program could potentially provide a framework through which the nation could make significant investments in putting rural Australia on a more sound footing.

4.2 Regionalism and regionalisation

Referring back to the vision sketched at the start, and contrasting it with the messy status quo, the question becomes one of how to move on from here. It recalls the apocryphal story of someone in western Ireland, asking an old farmer directions to a certain pub and being told: “*sure I could tell you how to get there, but I wouldn't be starting from here...*”

There are RDOs, ACCs, RAPs, CMCs and VROC, with their multiple, overlapping boundaries, agendas and programs. It is difficult to see how this situation could be resolved by sitting down with the map of Australia

and dispassionately applying objective criteria to delineate a consistent set of regions through which all programs would then operate. The New Zealand example, where the new resource management legislation swept away hundreds of separate pieces of legislation, regional entities, statutory authorities and their respective regional boundaries, replacing them with a single act and a single set of regions, is often held up as a model for Australia. But New Zealand does not have States with a vested constitutional responsibility for land management. Even the Interim Bioregionalisation of Australia organised by ANCA as a basis for biodiversity management, and adopted by all state and territory governments (which one might have thought could be developed objectively according to primary ecological data) is based on systems for determining regions which differ between states.

So what to do?

There are no quick fixes. However there are imperatives for integration and there is a general sense, certainly at a regional level, that something needs to be done to get commonwealth and state programs pulling in the same directions. The ARMCANZ principles, the McKinsey report, Working Nation, and the paper to the Prime Minister's Science and Engineering Council are merely the most recent calls for better integration and coordination of policies and programs across portfolios and levels of government.

In the longer term some harmonisation of regional boundaries is inevitable and necessary. But at the moment the regional-scale activity is insufficiently developed to have generated sufficient recognition of this need, nor sufficient momentum to crash through the institutional and program parochialism which impede the adoption of more integrated approaches. The critical problem is that the beneficiaries of a consistent set of regions combining RDOs, ACCs, RAPs and VROCs are widely dispersed and not at all organised, whereas the institutions for which such a move represents a hassle and a perceived loss of sovereignty, are centralised, organised and controlling the money.

It is more appropriate to focus on desired outcomes and the changes necessary to achieve them. For example, a regional grouping wishing to develop a strategy comprising some structural adjustment, enterprise development and labour market programs on environmental projects within a regional strategy, should be able to prepare a project outline according to its own preferences (and some generic guidelines from government), and submit that to government with some confidence that the public good component of the project will be assessed on its merits. Ideally the group should only have to write one submission, in the knowledge that it will be considered across the range of Commonwealth and State programs and that resources will be brokered from the most appropriate sources for each component of the project. It should not matter in which region in which program the group is situated, the process should be such that all projects are screened and channelled to the most appropriate source(s) of resources and guidance.

Achieving such a situation would require a great improvement in the interface mechanisms between the various programs. Having a single desk, 'one stop shop' process is not necessarily sufficient. If each program retains strict guidelines and interprets them narrowly, then genuinely integrative projects tend to fall through the cracks, as they are sub-optimal for each program. The relationships between programs need to be such that cooperative, coordinated cross-program approaches are favoured. The RPP has been established in part to deal with just such projects. While there is as yet no budget for the RPP *per se*, it can draw on resources from other programs. It is intended to have a desk officer for each regional initiative under the RPP, shepherding proposals through the system and negotiating among different agencies.

If and when regional approaches to issues such as NRM, structural adjustment and economic development have consolidated and are managing significant resources, there is likely to be a more concerted effort from the regions themselves to get together, much as has occurred in the Northern Rivers region.

This is not to imply that there is nothing which the Commonwealth government could do immediately to remove some of the impediments to greater integration. The first step is for the Commonwealth to make a long term, preferably bipartisan commitment to supporting strategic regional initiatives.

4.3 Interfaces

Supporting strategic regional initiatives means being prepared to recognise regions which identify themselves and which have made a genuine local commitment to taking a strategic approach to manage change. For example, regional initiatives such as South-west Queensland (SWQ), Sunraysia and Eyre Peninsula which are tackling hard, intractable issues of adjustment and changing land use systems, should be recognised and supported, even though they may not conform to the notions of 'critical economic mass' used by the Regional Development Program. Natural resource management, structural adjustment and often micro-economic reform, need to be tackled on a scale dictated by the biophysical and social setting, consequently over areas which will usually be smaller than existing RDOs. The NRM issues (and social context) at Birdsville are entirely different from those at Rockhampton, similarly Charleville and Toowoomba, Jerramungup and Mandurah, or even Burnie and Hobart, yet they are all in the same RDOs.

4.3.1 Between programs

We need to improve bridges across programs. Referring back to Figure 2.1, the critical relationships are those between RAPs, RDOs and ACCs at the regional level, and also regional initiatives under the RPP where they exist. In many regions the number of community leaders with sufficient time and energy to act at this level is so limited that the same people are often wearing several hats and sitting on several of these bodies. This can lead to serendipitous cooperation, but it is not built in to the system. Each of the different regional groupings is predominantly concerned with one Commonwealth program, one set of guidelines and timeline for funding submissions. Developing a more integrated approach at the regional level would be assisted by some sorting out of relationships between programs at the commonwealth level. The RPP will achieve this within the NRM arena, but much more work needs to be done at the interface between NRM and economic development. Some horizontal lines allowing for recognition of regional initiatives which might require resources from a number of programs need to be established at the commonwealth level.

It is envisaged that the Rural Partnership Program will facilitate integrated support for regional initiatives which are likely to be on a smaller scale than the RDOs, with a more focused operational dimension. Ideally, regional initiatives approved and supported under the RPP should be able to have smoother access to DEET and DHRD resources (with some sort of fast-tracking system through the respective ACCs and RDOs) as well as those from programs within the DPIE portfolio. The relationship between the RPP and the RDP should be a priority issue, over and above the test-bedding of the three different models of coordination at a regional level. This relationship could be managed through CPRIC, through a bilateral MOU, or through some new overarching unit, for example in PM&C, responsible specifically for interface issues across portfolios.

The most promising area in which progress could be made within existing structures while enhancing linkages across institutional and program boundaries, is the issue of training. As discussed earlier, there are generic issues which apply to any attempts to get groups of different stakeholders together to plan and act strategically at a regional level. The training needs for both community representatives and the professionals working with them are essentially similar, whether one is working in economic development or natural resource management. In rural and inland Australia, provision of accessible, relevant, high quality training opportunities would be one of the most empowering investments governments could make to add value to a scarce resource—rural leaders.

At present much of the training, such as it exists in any of the programs, is in the form of short workshops, which can be little more than an introduction to the issues and sources of further information and support. This is a valuable function. The Public Service Commission (PSC) review of the 1995 regional development training courses carried out by the RDP found that the program has been very well received, with 90% of participants agreeing that courses were relevant to endeavours in further developing their region. However an equal percentage reported that the courses had no significant impact on the development of their region, apart from participants having become more open minded and aware of the wider responsibilities of their role. The PSC and the two groups who ran the training program, KPMG and the Australian Institute on Inclusive Communities (AIIC), all suggested that follow-up training of a more substantive nature is required.

The complexities of the issues rural communities are facing mean that sustained efforts will be required indefinitely. We tend to talk about structural adjustment as if it is a phase to be passed through into a new era of stability and prosperity. But managing change, accelerating rates of change, is now a permanent challenge on the political and social landscape. The knowledge, skills and social technologies required for collectively coping with change are not well catered for by the formal education system, particularly in rural Australia. These are not things which can be provided in a traditional didactic lecture in a teaching institution anyway. It is more appropriate to think about systems based on provision of a spectrum of learning opportunities for people within their normal working environment.

The workshops in rural development being run under the RDP, in group facilitation skills and property management planning under Landcare, and in enterprise development under the BARA and AusIndustry programs, are an excellent first step, a valid introduction. But they need to be consolidated and built upon with a range of further options for people wishing to improve their knowledge and skills within their work environment. The ingredients are already there among existing programs, but the potential synergies of a whole-of-government approach will never be captured under the existing fragmented arrangements.

4.3.2 Between governments

Referring back to Figure 2.1, there is a big gap at the state level, mainly because the situation is different in each state, but also because the linkages between state policies and programs and those of the Commonwealth are quite weak for several programs. This is understandable in areas such as employment, where the primary responsibility lies with the Commonwealth, which has a large on-ground presence through CES offices, but it becomes problematic where states perceive that they have been leap-frogged by the Commonwealth dealing directly with regions.

There are several models for improving understanding and coordination between levels of government, especially the state and commonwealth levels. The most comprehensive in the NRM arena is the State/Commonwealth Partnership Agreement model under the NLP. Others include the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process, the Cape York Peninsula Land Use Study (CYPLUS) and various approaches being applied in the Murray Darling Basin. The States' constitutional responsibility for land management mandates clear relationships and responsibilities between the States and the Commonwealth in the NRM arena. The Partnership Agreement process is relatively recent, and was not easy to put in place. However this process and the SAPs and RAPs have now established a solid basis for involving the States and regional groups in decisions about a national program.

A persistent criticism of the Regional Development Program from people within state and local governments is that they have been insufficiently involved in the establishment of RDOs, which are seen to have been imposed from above without adequate recognition of existing bodies and structures. The RDP would do well to look at the Partnership Agreement model operating under the NLP to establish more formal relationships with the States and local governments. It could be argued that previous approaches to regional development were dominated by local government, and that this may have limited the outlook of regional groupings and the involvement of industry. However it is counter-productive to have local government on the outer feeling disenfranchised, as it has a fundamental role to play in regional development, whether from natural resource management or economic development perspectives.

5. Recommendations

These recommendations assume continued consolidation of public investment in sustainable natural resource management at the regional level. They are consistent with the development of more integrated regional approaches under the Rural Partnership Program.

5.1 Policy process and structures

This is an issue for which blueprint solutions are inappropriate. Successful integration will only come about through negotiation among program managers, not through prescribed solutions. Nevertheless, some ideas have emerged from this study:

- 5.1.1 Recognising the long-term nature and intractability of the issues being tackled, the cynicism of regional communities towards a rash of initiatives with a high turnover, and the long gestation period for effective community-based approaches to issues such as structural adjustment, it would be highly desirable to adopt a bipartisan national approach to rural development, at least around core principles, for at least a decade (1996-2005?), as was done with the Decade of Landcare.**
- 5.1.2 Rework the Agriculture 2010 initiative into a Rural Australia 2010 initiative to look more broadly at sustainable rural and natural resource management issues, rather than solely within the agriculture sector, incorporating:**
- (a) a national workshop for practitioners and policy makers in rural development, identifying opportunities for greater program integration and cross-program communication, leading to the formation of;
 - (b) state and national round tables to draw in key stakeholders including each level of government, industry and community interests, to provide for regional inputs into the 2010 initiative and to improve communication across programs and between levels of activity.
- 5.1.3 When the Rural Adjustment Scheme is reviewed in 1996, an aim of the review should be to integrate the Rural Adjustment Scheme with the Rural Partnership Program and National Landcare Program to ensure seamless delivery of these programs at the regional level, so that a single regional body (a modified Regional Assessment Panel) sets Rural Adjustment Scheme/National Landcare Program priorities, formalised in Partnership Agreements or equivalent.**

The existing mechanisms which offer most promise in delivering a more integrated and coordinated approach to natural resource management and regional development are the Rural Partnership Program, the Commonwealth Programs Regional Impacts Committee, and, to a lesser extent, the Advisory Committee on Environmental Employment Opportunities. Each of these initiatives is identified with a particular agency—DHRD, DPIE and DEET respectively, which tends to work against any one of them becoming the definitive coordinating institution at the commonwealth level. There are several options for achieving better coordination at the Commonwealth level, including (starting with a minimalist position):

- 5.1.4 (i) Rather than trying to integrate programs, or even delivery mechanisms:**
- (a) establish a working group across the Rural Partnership Program, Natural Resources Management Strategy (Murray Darling Basin) and Commonwealth Programs Regional Impacts Committee to;
 - (b) work (within all the existing programs) to ensure that each program is as easy as possible to access, that community groups or regional entities get clear guidelines, with clear indications of what will and will not be funded, with a clear indication of the funds available, with relatively simple procedures at least in early stages of the submission process;
 - (c) and improve accessibility of information about all programs (working with the Rural Communities Access Program and AusIndustry), looking to use State and Commonwealth offices (including Government Business Enterprises such as Australia Post and Telstra) and Telecentres as outlets for introductory information on all government programs.

OR

(ii) Establish a rural development unit within Prime Minister and Cabinet to:

- (a) oversee and energise the Commonwealth Programs Regional Impacts Committee
- (b) work to ensure improved liaison between the Commonwealth Programs Regional Impacts Committee, the Advisory Committee on Environmental Employment Opportunities and the Rural Partnership Program, with a view to developing Memoranda of Understanding concerning cross-program integration of delivery mechanisms to facilitate the evolution of integrated regional approaches, including the measures suggested in 5.1.4(i).
- (c) liaise with DPIE in overseeing a whole of government approach to the Rural Australia 2010 initiative.

OR

(iii) Establish a Sustainable Rural Development Commission, which would:

- (a) advise ARMCANZ and ANZECC;
- (b) incorporate the National Landcare Advisory Committee, the Rural Adjustment Scheme Advisory Committee, the Advisory Committee on Environmental Employment Opportunities and the Commonwealth Programs Regional Impacts Committee, in providing for state and community inputs into national policy development;
- (c) examine the relationships between programs and levels of government with a view to ensuring accessibility (see 5.1.4(i)), complementarity and synergy rather than overlap, duplication and competition;
- (d) oversee the Rural Australia 2010 initiative.
- (e) provide a strategic overview of rural development issues to governments.

OR

(iv) Broaden the remit of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission to foster a national approach to sustainable natural resource management:

- (a) expanding its existing structures and processes to allow for national coverage;
- (b-e) as for 5.1.4(iii)

5.2 New Initiatives

5.2.1 Establish an independent Centre for Rural Development, aggregating intellectual capital and combining research, training and strategic evaluation. Such a centre would:

- (a) not be a new institution, but rather an injection of resources and focus into an existing organisation such as (for example only) the Centre for Resources and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University;
- (b) be at arms length from government, but with a high degree of government ownership, preferably Canberra-based, (like the National Landcare Facilitator project for example);
- (c) be about identifying best practice in rural development and helping people to learn, rather than prescribing what to do;
- (d) provide a point of contact for regional entities, through which they could: access leading research in rural development; learn from experiences elsewhere from thorough case studies; tap into ideas about alternative strategic planning processes, or conflict resolution, or local government involvement or whatever;
- (e) play a major role in provision of training opportunities for rural development practitioners and in evaluating and ensuring quality control in training generally;
- (f) develop a compendium of best practice in rural development, ensuring that lessons are learned and accessible from the great diversity of existing activities and approaches;
- (g) identify barriers to implementation of best practice and broker events to overcome them;
- (h) be made up of a small (7-20) group of people working through existing structures and agencies wherever possible, funded from existing programs and possibly industry funding through the Research and Development Corporations.

5.2.2 Develop a whole-of-government rural development and leadership training program, resourced through DEET and encompassing the training needs of the Regional Development Program, Rural Partnership Program, National Landcare Program, Property Management Planning, Rural Communities Access Program, Rural Adjustment Scheme and numerous state programs:

- (a) to ensure that, within a given region, practitioners involved in the whole panoply of government funded programs, whether voluntary or professional, can share at least core modules of an on-going process of learning;
- (b) through a highly decentralised, flexible and interactive training system using existing infrastructure such as TAFE, adult education centres, Telecentres and country schools;
- (c) with training in a given region synchronised across the various programs (for at least the core modules) to develop a team approach and to establish on-going networks across programs, levels of government and between professional and voluntary practitioners.

5.2.3 Establish a working group across the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Natural Resources Information Centre, Bureau of Resource Sciences, Environmental Resources Information Network and Australian Bureau of Agricultural & Resource Economics to:

- (a) consult with user groups (and the rural development centre) to determine information needs for regional development;
- (b) paying particular attention to the scale at which information is required, and the interface issues between natural resource, economic and demographic data;
- (c) with a view to improving the accessibility for regional entities of integrated packages of information incorporating, for example, natural resource data, and demographic and economic portraits, trends and scenarios.

5.3 Improving integration of regional natural resource management

- 5.3.1 **Regional Development Organisations should be required to demonstrate that natural resource management interests are adequately represented on their committees, preferably from both nature conservation and primary production perspectives. Where possible, such representation should be drawn from Regional Assessment Panels or catchment committees.**
- 5.3.2 **Regional Development Organisations' strategies must have an environmental component as a core element, not merely to ensure that development is environmentally benign, but as a means of identifying opportunities for economic development through fostering environmental innovation and excellence.**
- 5.3.3 **Regional Assessment Panels should be required to submit an annual report to their respective Regional Development Organisations, outlining the natural resource management priorities for the region, and commenting on any proposed infrastructure projects from a natural resource management perspective.**
- 5.3.4 **Area Consultative Committees and Regional Development Organisations should be merged wherever possible. Where this is impossible, substantial cross-membership should be mandatory.**
- 5.3.5 **Within the Regional Development Program, acknowledge the need for sub-regions for natural resource management/structural adjustment, and allow for existing regional bodies such as Voluntary Regional Organisations of Councils, Regional Assessment Panels, Catchment Management Committees and regional initiatives under the Rural Partnership Program to develop and submit project proposals (through the Regional Development Organisation) to the Regional Development Program.**
- 5.3.6 **Strengthen the linkages between the Rural Partnership Program, the Regional Development Program and labour market programs so that regional initiatives approved under the Rural Partnership Program can more easily access DEET and DHRD resources.**
- 5.3.7 **Integrate the electronic networks. Region Link, RegionNet and CouncilNet should be brought together, and better linkages established with other state and commonwealth networks (eg LandcareNet) and databases such as those developed by AusIndustry and state government 'front-ends' for government programs.**

Conclusion

Regional activity in natural resource management in Australia is in an intense, interesting phase.

Regional communities are increasingly trying to take a long view, to work out where their region is going, whether that direction is the preferred one, and how to manage accelerating change in a way which best meets the aspirations of the people (or at least the leaders) of the region. This is the level at which top down meets bottom up. Regionalism is most apparent in natural resource management, where there are pragmatic reasons for taking a regional perspective—issues such as structural adjustment, water management, or pests and weeds are best tackled in a coordinated, strategic way at a landscape scale. Many regional groupings set up to look at catchment issues are confronted by their structural unsustainability, the extent to which their options are limited by forces (mainly economic) outside their control. They thus become more interested in how to initiate more autonomous economic development trajectories in their region, how to keep young people in their communities, how to provide options for people forced off the land and so on.

Regionalism is seeing the evolution (albeit embryonic) of more strategic approaches to understanding the forces which shape a region, and to planning for and managing change. It is seeing the development of community leaders accustomed to having inputs into government planning and decision making, and capable of making important, considered contributions. They are increasingly able to see where government structures and processes constrain their preferred approach, which is often more integrated and holistic than government is set up to deliver. Human resources remain a fundamental limit to community involvement and community-based planning. Greater investment in knowledge and skills development at a regional level is an urgent priority, as is economic development to attract talented people to rural communities.

There are tensions between **regionalism**—the phenomenon of communities coming together to tackle common problems on a scale which is meaningful to them—and **regionalisation**, the phenomenon of governments trying

to deliver their programs at a scale which is meaningful (and cost-effective) to them. Each arm and level of government has its own unique regionalisation, resulting in a plethora of different regions on different bases for different programs. This causes considerable confusion and frustration for people at the regional level driven by regionalism motives.

It is valid for a government agency charged with improving water quality for example, to organise its program so as to be most effective for that purpose, just as it is for a program concerned with economic infrastructure to perceive regions differently. It is equally valid for regional communities to want to tackle their resource management and economic and social development issues in an integrated way.

Sorting out the current shemuzzle means reconciling these conflicting priorities. This is first of all a matter of looking to relationships and processes, rather than structures. There is no value at this stage in trying to sit down with the map to draw one set of regional boundaries. It is more a matter of reaching agreement between different programs about how it can be made much more straightforward for regional groupings to develop genuinely strategic approaches to the management of difficult long term issues, with support from a range of state and commonwealth programs. In the NRM area, the Rural Partnership Program provides the most promising vehicle through which such agreements can be established, building on the comprehensive framework of Regional Assessment Panels and Partnership Agreements between the States and the Commonwealth.

There is some sorting out to be done, and the benefits of doing so will be great. Now is a very good time to start. Forest management and water quality management are two pressing issues of national significance through which more cooperative, integrated approaches must be developed. In each case there are compelling arguments for greater public investment, there is a need to act strategically at the regional scale and there is a complex web of local, state and commonwealth interests and responsibilities. In debating and negotiating these issues, Australia can develop one of the most comprehensive approaches to natural resource management anywhere, with a unique combination of strategic planning and community involvement at all levels. Such a framework sets Australia up to play a leading role in the greatest challenge of the next century—giving meaning to sustainable development. This is a real contribution, financially, ecologically and culturally, to national wealth and international competitiveness.

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Appendix B. Glossary

ABARE	Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACC	Area Consultative Committee (DEET)
ACEEO	Advisory Committee on Environmental Employment Opportunities
ANCA	Australian Nature Conservation Agency
ANZECC	Australia and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council
ANU	Australian National University
ARMCANZ	Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand
BARA	Business Advice in Rural Areas
BRS	Bureau of Resource Science
CALP	Catchment and Land Protection Board (Vic)
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CPRIC	Commonwealth Programs Regional Impacts Committee
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DEST	Department of Environment, Sport and Territories
DHRD	Department of Housing and Regional Development
DPIE	Department of Primary Industries and Energy
ERIN	Environmental Resource Information Network
ESD	Ecologically Sustainable Development
GBEs	Government Business Enterprises
GIS	Geographic Information System
ICMC	Integrated Catchment Management Committee (Qld)
IDC	interdepartmental committee
LCDC	Land Conservation District Committee (WA)
LMPs	labour market programs
MDBC	Murray Darling Basin Commission
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NLAC	National Landcare Advisory Committee
NLP	National Landcare Program
NRM	natural resource management
NRIC	Natural Resource Information Centre
NRMS	Natural Resources Management Strategy (MDBC)
PM&C	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
PMP	property management planning (DPIE)
RAP	regional assessment panel (National Landcare Program)
RCAP	Rural Communities Access Program (DPIE)
RDO	Regional Development Organisation (DHRD)
RPP	Rural Partnership Program
SAP	state assessment panel (National Landcare Program)
TCMC	Total Catchment Management Committee (NSW)
UNE	University of New England
VROC	Voluntary Regional Organisation of Councils