



A Co-operative venture of the municipalities of:
Cockburn, East Fremantle, Fremantle, Kwinana, Melville & Rockingham

Friday, 20 February 2015

Enquiries: Mick McCarthy – (08) 9364 0631

Our Reference: Response To Draft Swan Region Strategy, 2014

Ms Lisa Potter
CEO
Perth Region NRM
PO Box 2206
MIDLAND WA 6936

Attention: Ms Greer Gilroy
NRM Strategy Coordinator

Dear Lisa,

**RESPONSE TO DRAFT SWAN REGION STRATEGY FOR NATURAL RESOURCE
MANAGEMENT, 2014**

The purpose of this correspondence is to respond to the *Draft Swan Region Strategy for Natural Resource Management (NRM), 2014*.

The South West Group, formed in November 1983, is a Voluntary Regional Organisation of Councils. It comprises the Cities of Cockburn, Fremantle, Kwinana, Melville, and Rockingham, and the Town of East Fremantle. The South West Group is managed by a Board consisting of the Mayors and CEOs of its member local governments.

The South West Group seeks to work with these six local governments and through cooperation with industry, community and the other spheres of government to capture a wide range of opportunities to enhance economic growth as well as supporting a diversity of quality lifestyles whilst servicing and sustaining cohesive, productive communities in an enviable environmental setting.

The South West Group recognises the critical need for well-planned and adequately resourced management of the state's environmental assets and importantly, also recognises the crucial role that cooperative, constructive partnerships between state and local governments, business and the community play in maximising beneficial environmental, social and economic outcomes.

The South West Group welcomes and commends the updating of the Swan Region Strategy by Perth Region NRM with guidance from the Swan NRM Committee, on which the South West Group is represented by Peter Nash, the South West Group Regional NRM Facilitator.

The South West Group and its member Councils have provided input and, in some cases, actively contributed to activities involved in the development of the Draft Swan Region Strategy for Natural Resource Management, 2014, (hereafter referred to as “the Strategy”) such as:

- the Swan NRM Committee
- Strategy workshops and forums conducted over the past 12 months, and
- the briefing provided by Greer Gilroy to the Councillors and member Council staff that form the South West Reference Group.

Having already had considerable prior input to the Strategy, the South West Group now offers the following observations and recommendations on the Strategy and its proposed implementation:

1. Strategy Framework

The South West Group is supportive of the adoption of the new systems based approach in the Strategy as a more appropriate mechanism to address the complex nature of natural resource management and see this is an improvement on the assets based approach taken in the 2004 Strategy.

We also support the Strategy being kept as a high level document, underpinned by a 1-2 year Implementation Plan that documents the detailed actions.

2. Stakeholder Adoption of the Strategy and Implementation Plan

The South West Group recognises the diverse challenges of managing natural resources in urban and peri-urban environments where there are a wide range of environmental pressures, conflicting demands of land use activities, a multitude of land managers, and a plethora of relevant stakeholders involved including government, industry, business and the community.

The South West Group is supportive of the need for collaboration and shared ownership in the development and implementation of the Strategy. This approach is important to guide NRM activities and maximise the potential to achieve positive environmental outcomes through the complimentary, timely and targeted efforts of all land managers.

However in the absence of the Bilateral Agreements that supported the 2004 Swan Region Strategy (and the strategies of the other 53 Regional NRM Groups across Australia) and which committed the State and Federal Governments to funding and implementing elements of those strategies, it is considered essential that the current Federal and WA State Governments formally endorse the Strategy.

Given that the draft Strategy is a high level document containing broad aspirational goals and the accompanying 1-2 year Implementation Plan is proposed to contain the detailed actions, we recognise that the Federal and State Governments may be reluctant to formally endorse the Strategy, but recommend that every effort be made by Perth Region NRM to secure Federal and State Government endorsement of the Implementation Plan.

Recommendation 1: That Perth Region NRM request the Federal and WA State Governments, through their lead NRM agencies, to formally endorse the Strategy and/or the Implementation Plan and commit to implementing agreed actions.

In addition, Perth Region NRM will need to work collaboratively with other key stakeholders such as State Government agencies, Local Governments, research

organisations, key not-for-profit and community organisations, to negotiate agreed responsibilities and actions associated with the finalised Implementation Plan.

Recommendation 2: *That Perth Region NRM encourages all other key stakeholders including State Government agencies, Local Governments, research organisations, key not-for-profit and community organisations, to actively participate in undertaking agreed responsibilities and actions identified in the Implementation Plan.*

3. NRM Resourcing Issues

The South West Group is concerned by the continuing decline in State and Federal Government funding and resourcing for NRM activities and the lack of leadership and coordination demonstrated by key State Government agencies with organisational responsibilities for NRM.

In the face of increasing environmental pressures driven by climate change, population growth and a raft of other threatening processes, it is very concerning that the key NRM agencies with primary responsibility for managing the state's natural assets are subject to continually declining funding and resourcing. This includes agencies such as the Department of Parks and Wildlife, Department of Environmental Regulation, Department of Water, and the Department of Agriculture (which hosts the State NRM Office).

We note with disappointment that the State's direct contribution to NRM funding distributed through the State NRM Office to fund collaborative NRM activities delivered by the community, State agencies, Local Government and other organisations has fallen from a peak of \$40 million per annum under the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, to \$30 million per annum in the first year of the State NRM Program, to \$10 million per annum for the next 4 years of the State NRM Program, to \$8 million per annum commencing July 2015.

This declining trend appears destined to continue and reflects a low priority for partnership NRM activities.

There have been similar reductions in Federal NRM funding accessible to Regional NRM Groups, Local Government, community groups, education, and research organisations, business and industry groups.

Available funding has steadily and dramatically declined from the Natural Heritage Trust/National Landcare Program era, through the Caring For Our Country program to the current National Landcare Program component of the Federal Government's Direct Action Plan.

The decline in NRM resourcing is similarly illustrated by the dwindling size and capacity of the State NRM Office, which when formed in 2003 had 12-13 full-time-equivalent staff undertaking policy development, monitoring and evaluation, and the distribution of funding. The State NRM Office team has dwindled to the current 5 full-time-equivalent staff whose function is now to administer a funding program and contribute in a small way to policy development.

The South West Group does not support the inevitable cost shifting resulting from declining State and Federal Government expenditure on NRM, which is demonstrated by:

- An increasing reliance on community volunteers as a source of labour for activities on State and Commonwealth land.
- An increasing requirement for community volunteer participation in projects as a mandatory pre-requisite for Local Governments, community organisations and others seeking State and Federally funded NRM grants.
- State Government agencies being increasingly reliant on Federal NRM grant funds to undertake works and programs considered to be the core responsibility of these agencies.

The South West Group believes that it is incumbent on State and Federal Governments to adequately fund their own agencies to undertake their statutory and prescribed obligations, and that State and Federal NRM grant programs should be prioritised for partnership projects and activities that engage and leverage stakeholder contributions.

This active involvement and collaborative approach ensures lasting, productive partnerships between Regional NRM Groups, Local Government, community groups, education, and research organisations, business and industry groups involved in NRM to deliver tangible on-ground outcomes.

There are clearly major benefits for State NRM agencies active involvement in NRM projects, either as a lead agency or partner organization, through their ability to provide technical expertise, labour, coordination, and/or budgetary contributions.

This approach increases the opportunity to leverage Federal funds where these are available to match project proponent contributions, but should not be used by the State NRM agencies to replace or substitute dwindling Consolidated Revenue funding.

To the contrary, these Federal grants should be seen by State NRM agencies as an opportunity to value-add and extend the scope or scale of their works through partnerships with other stakeholders seeking similar environmental outcomes.

The continuing decline in State and Federal Government funding and resourcing for NRM activities occurs across Western Australia and is not specific to the Swan Region.

The South West Group believes that NRM WA, as the peak body representing all seven of WA's Regional NRM Groups, should take a leading role in communicating the need for a significant boost in NRM funding by both the State and Federal Governments.

Ideally, this state-wide approach should be undertaken through a well-developed and planned, multi-pronged campaign targeting senior State and Federal public servants; relevant State and Federal Ministers and Shadow Ministers; and other State and National organisations similarly concerned about declining NRM funding and resourcing.

Recommendation 3: *That NRM WA develop and implement a carefully planned and multi-pronged campaign targeting senior State and Federal public servants, relevant State and Federal Ministers and Shadow Ministers, and State and National organisations similarly concerned about declining NRM funding and resourcing.*

The main aim of the campaign would be to communicate the need for the increased funding and resourcing of NRM by both the State and Federal Governments to support community based NRM projects, and not be used to substitute for Consolidated Revenue to fund activities that are a core responsibility of State Government agencies.

4. Coordinating Implementation

4.1 At a State Level

In the face of the declining funding and resources discussed above, the South West Group believes that there is a clear need to improve coordination and collaboration between those State agencies involved in NRM planning, management and regulation in order to deliver improved environmental outcomes. These key agencies include, but are not limited to, the Departments of:

- Planning
- Water
- Agriculture and Food
- Parks and Wildlife
- Environmental Regulation
- Fisheries

There is strong evidence that the State's NRM agencies operate as separate "silos" and engage in limited collaboration in joint activities that would support positive community based NRM and environmental outcomes.

It is understood that significant opportunities are being missed due to a lack of active engagement and joint coordination of strategic and operational NRM priorities. For example, WA does not have a State NRM Strategy and existing collaborative structures put in place to coordinate NRM activities across agencies meet irregularly and with limited communication of their activities, aims and priorities.

These structures include:

- the WA NRM Ministerial Council
- the Council of Natural Resource Agencies Chief Executives (CONRACE), and
- the Natural Resource Management Senior Officers Group (NRM-SOG)

Although established to provide a mechanism for regular communication and cooperation, these forums currently meet infrequently and do not appear to facilitate the alignment of the NRM agencies goals and objectives or play an active role in engaging with NRM Region Groups and strategic community based NRM projects.

An opportunity exists to facilitate the full operation of these structures for the benefit of NRM across WA and enhanced engagement with Federally funded NRM partnership projects through the Regional NRM Groups.

Recommendation 4: That the WA NRM Ministerial Council, the Council of Natural Resource Agencies Chief Executives (CONRACE), and the Natural Resource Management Senior Officers Group (NRM-SOG) meet regularly with the purpose of:

- (i) developing a State NRM Strategy
- (ii) actively engaging with NRM WA and NRM Regions on productive and effective ways of working together for mutual benefit
- (iii) identifying collaborative strategic NRM projects that would benefit from local government and community involvement

4.2 At the Swan Region Level

Given the large number and diverse nature of stakeholders involved in NRM in the Swan Region, effective, open and regular communication between these stakeholders will be essential to ensure cooperative, coordinated implementation of the Strategy.

In the absence of a more suitable, formally recognised or Government appointed forum in the Perth Region, the independent Swan NRM Committee convened to guide the development of the Strategy may be best placed to transition into the role of overseeing the implementation of the Swan Region NRM Strategy.

The membership of the Committee may need to be reviewed to effectively undertake this role during the implementation phase. Agencies and organisations that currently form the Swan NRM Committee should appoint representatives that have the capacity, authority and commitment to actively represent their agency or organisation, rather than appointments that undertake passive observer roles.

Recommendation 5: That the Swan NRM Committee review its terms of reference, membership and representation to ensure that it maximises its capacity to support the collaborative and coordinated implementation of the Swan Region NRM Strategy.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

It is understood that whilst Federal and State Government funding was allocated to implement activities and programs within the 2004 Swan Region NRM Strategy, little or no funding was allocated to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of these activities and programs. As a result, there is a little objective data available to determine whether those activities implemented through the 2004 Strategy led to positive and sustained environmental outcomes.

The expectation, in terms of outcomes for the implementation of the 2014 Swan Region NRM Strategy, would need to ensure the following:

- all projects implemented under the Strategy have a well-developed monitoring and evaluation plan and accompanying budget for data collection and analysis,
- the data, knowledge and experience generated by all projects implemented under the Strategy are comprehensively collated and made publically available, preferably through an easily accessible centralised database, and
- Perth Region NRM is adequately funded to implement the Monitoring, Evaluation, Review and Improvement (MERI) Plan that is being prepared and will accompany the 2014 Strategy.

Recommendation 6: That all projects implemented under the Strategy have a well-developed Monitoring and Evaluation plan and accompanying budget for data collection and analysis.

Recommendation 7: That Perth Region NRM and/or the Swan NRM Committee leverage all stakeholders implementing projects under the Strategy to cooperatively share the resultant data, knowledge and experience, preferably via an easily accessible, centralised database.

Recommendation 8: That to enable the future assessment of the Strategy's achievement against its stated goals, Perth Region NRM actively lobbies the Federal and WA State Governments to adequately fund the Strategy's MERI Plan.

I trust that you will consider the comments and recommendations contained in this submission.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact Mick McCarthy, Director South West Group, on Email: director@southwestgroup.com.au, Ph: (08) 9364 0631 or Mob: 0478 325 469.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim O'Neill', written in a cursive style.

Mayor Jim O'Neill
Chair South West Group

cc: Kathleen Broderick – CEO NRM WA, c/o PO Box 650 Fremantle WA 6959