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Hon Ian Hunter MLC
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Dear Minister

Re: Reform of South Australian Government Boards and Committees

I refer to the recent letter from the Premier dated 8th July 2014, regarding the reform of South Australian Government Boards and Committees. Thank you for your subsequent letter of 1 August 2014 requesting that our Board provides a direct response to you on this matter.

The South Australian Arid Lands Natural Resource Management Board (SAAL NRM Board) considered the Premiers correspondence at an 'out of session' meeting held on 31 July 2014. The Board resolved that I write to you expressing concern that our Board, along with its six established District NRM Groups has the potential to be abolished.

Board Role

The SAAL NRM Board provides leadership in the sustainable management of natural resources over the vast arid lands region, covering 52% of South Australia. Land managers are principally engaged in the pastoral industry as cattle and / or sheep producers. Other key land managers include those engaged in petroleum / gas exploration and mining, the management of Aboriginal lands and those managing public and private lands for conservation purposes.

The principle role of the SAAL NRM Board in the region is that of a facilitator, encouraging and supporting the establishment of partnerships and relationships which lead to investment in landscape scale natural resource management. The Board also maintains a strong focus on supporting regional economic growth, engaging Aboriginal communities in NRM, and supporting the health and wellbeing of our arid lands community. The Boards statutory responsibilities under the NRM Act include those associated with the development a regional NRM Plan, managing the regions natural assets such as water, and in controlling pest plants and animals.

The SAAL NRM Board is very much a community based Board with membership that is representative of the diversity of our community. Members include leading pastoralists, senior mining / petroleum industry representatives, those with scientific expertise in the management of rangelands environments, a senior Aboriginal Traditional Owner and representatives of Government agencies including PIRSA, the Outback Communities Authority, and the Department for State Development. The community based membership of the Board provides a direct community connection that cannot be achieved through a government department.

This arrangement allows the community to have input into the way in which NRM is managed. Having various relevant government department representatives on the board ensures the Board functions as a unique 'union' of community and government.

The SAAL NRM Board is ably supported by its six District NRM Groups, a model which creates efficiencies and has proven to be successful in our vast and remote region. The District NRM Groups provide structure through which the SAAL NRM Board can further engage directly with the local community, while ensuring that landholders and local communities have a mechanism for promoting local priorities for consideration by the SAAL NRM Board – something that is necessary in a region as large as the SAAL Region.

Board Achievements

The SAAL NRM Board's relationship with the Commonwealth is significant for the State Government, where in 2014/15 we have secured \$3.2m in Commonwealth funds to deliver high priority natural resource management projects across the region. The Commonwealth has confirmed its commitment through the National Landcare Program to channel investment through the 56 established National NRM organisations, and I understand over \$30m will be committed to those 8 NRM Boards established in South Australia.

The SAAL NRM Board has representation through membership on a range of National bodies, including the Lake Eyre Basin Community Advisory Committee, and the Great Artesian Basin Coordinating Committee. This presence allows us to represent with authority, South Australia's interests in the sustainable management of these iconic natural systems and resources.

During 2014/15, the Board is leading and investing in a range of high profile programs including:

- Investment to manage wild dog impacts on the sheep and cattle industry in the SA Arid Lands. The SAAL NRM Board delivers the successful '*Biteback*' program south of the dog fence. The Board provides leadership in policy, planning and operational investment in wild dog management, and in doing so has worked to establish a strong alliance with Livestock SA, PIRSA, Biosecurity SA and the South Australian Wild Dog Advisory Group.
- Through partnership with PIRSA and Livestock SA, investment in the Far North Water Infrastructure Grant Program, providing funds to support pastoralists affected by the ongoing drying conditions in the far north and north east of the State.
- The development of a new Regional NRM Plan, where the Board is currently investing significantly in community consultation. Using the strategy '*It's your place – tell us what matters to you*', the Board is speaking broadly with the arid lands community about wide ranging environmental, economic, social, and cultural issues which are relevant to those who live, work or invest in the arid lands. This values mapping effort will provide vital information required to support the development of the new Regional NRM Plan, ensuring the Plan serves as a 'prospectus' for partnership and investment within the region.

- Implementation of the Boards recently released Aboriginal Partnerships Strategy, engaging a number of Aboriginal community groups in sustainable NRM projects. This investment delivers on State NRM Plan Goals around increasing the level of Aboriginal engagement in NRM, and supports economic development and community wellbeing through partnerships with Aboriginal communities in the arid lands region.
- The delivery of a region wide volunteer program, actively engaging school groups, progress associations, and community volunteer groups in NRM activity in the region. During 2013/14, 277 volunteers contributed 16,140 hours to activities across the region including flora and fauna surveys, pest animal and plant control, boardwalk construction, fencing and tree planting.

Efficiencies and Amalgamation

The Premier's letter seeks advice regarding efficiencies that may be created through adopting a different approach to community engagement, including making better use of online communication tools such as 'Govchat' and 'YourSay' services. While our arid lands community is certainly not 'disconnected' when it comes to use of online services, the vast majority of our rural landholders and community members have a strong belief that relationships are built over time through 'face to face' communication. A commitment to this face to face collaboration has built respect and trust within the community for the role of the NRM Board and its District NRM Groups. Our current NRM model provides the best opportunity yet for the community to have input into our own future within the region.

The Government should consider that some years ago, regional communities were engaged in NRM through independent catchment, soil and animal & plant control Boards. When the NRM model was introduced and these Boards were amalgamated, many members of the community saw this as Government withdrawing its commitment to engaging regional communities in meaningful debate around natural resource management. To abolish NRM Boards would only serve to further enhance this community view.

The total operating cost for our SAAL NRM Board and six District Groups is around \$180K annually. For this investment, the Board and its NRM Groups meet a combined 30 times annually, thereby maintaining a constant community connection across our vast and remote arid lands community. The costs of supporting the current NRM model in the Arid Lands Region is minimal when you consider the benefits provided to the community, which are strongly enhanced through the many hundreds of hours our Board and District NRM Group members give voluntarily.

Consistent with the Premier's objectives to create efficiencies through reduction in the number of Boards and Committees, the SAAL NRM Board abolished three of its advisory committees (water, biodiversity and pest management) earlier this year. The Board determined that it could gain advice on these matters where required through DEWNR and other agency partners, or by establishing temporary community based advisory groups on a needs basis, without the need for permanent advisory committees that were paid sitting fees and had ongoing administration costs. The Board does wish however, to retain its Governance and Finance Committee. This committee provides a higher level of scrutiny of Board governance and finance matters, and makes recommendations to the Board which create significant efficiencies as the Board can spend more

time at its regular meetings focusing on strategic matters surrounding investment in sustainable NRM within the community.

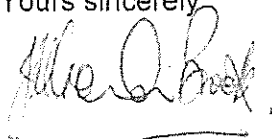
The Premiers letter also seeks advice relating to efficiencies that may be gained through amalgamation of existing Boards and Committees. The SAAL NRM Board is of the view that the duties of the Pastoral Board, which administers the *Pastoral Land Management and Conservation Act, 1989*, may be able to be absorbed by the SAAL NRM Board. The Pastoral Board supports the sustainable management of land condition across the States pastoral leasehold land. The Board is comprised of membership with similar credentials to that of the SAAL NRM Board, and with the SAAL NRM Board maintaining a holistic focus on sustainable management of natural resources, support for economic development and community wellbeing, it could with appropriate resource support, also coordinate the provision of advice to you as Minister in relation to the administration of the *Pastoral Land Management and Conservation Act, 1989*.

Independence

As already stated, the membership on the SAAL Board is diverse and representative of the activities in the SAAL NRM Region. Independence from government is gained through this diversity. The perspective of the community is gained by utilising the skills and practical experience of its members, providing a unique perspective that is not possible from within a government department. Our members are not only connected closely to their local communities, but also to the wider interstate community.

I trust that the information provided above will be of value to you in preparing the case to retain our current South Australian NRM model, including our SAAL NRM Board which plays a key regional leadership role on behalf of the South Australian Government in supporting sustainable management and use of natural resources.

Yours sincerely



Janet Brook

PRESIDING MEMBER

SA ARID LANDS NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT BOARD

cc John Schutz, Group Executive Director, Partnerships and Stewardship
cc Allan Holmes, Chief Executive