

Ian Hunter MLC
Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation
GPO Box 1047
ADELAIDE SA 5001



**Conservation
Council SA**

Cc: Jay Weatherill MP, Premier
Allan Holmes, Chief Executive, DEWNR

18 August 2014

Re: Abolition of government boards and committees

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Dear Minister

We write to convey some thinking on the Premier's recently announced plan to abolish all government boards and committees unless they make a strong case for exemption.

As the peak body for conservation in South Australia, the Conservation Council SA represents not only our 50 member groups and their 90,000 members, but arguably any members of the South Australian community who want a healthy environment. A large part of our role is to advocate for government policies that support a healthy environment.

Your government has expressed its commitment to develop policies with the community in its Better Together principles and the State NRM Plan calls for 'communities at the centre' of natural resource management.

In Better Together the Premier stated 'I believe that people have a right to be involved in conversations about decisions that affect them – but I also fundamentally believe that decisions emerging from a process of consultation are better and more stable decisions.'

We agree with this statement and fully support this principle.

Boards and committees with community representation have been an important feature of successive governments' efforts to involve the community in policy-making.

We provide representatives and nominees for more than 20 boards and committees in the environment portfolio and naturally have a strong interest in knowing they continue to perform a useful purpose and are operating efficiently and effectively.

We have not received any communication from your government explaining the reasoning behind the decision to abolish boards and committees, or the process for how exemptions will be decided.

In spite of this, we recently convened a meeting with some of our representatives and nominees on boards and committees to capture their views on the proposed abolitions. Time did not allow us to explore the efficacy of individual boards/committees; however we were able to agree on the attached priorities and general principles.

We hope that as part of the government's commitment to genuine community engagement, you will provide an avenue for this thinking to be incorporated into the decision-making process.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Craig Wilkins', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Craig Wilkins
Chief Executive

Principles for reform of boards and committees

1. Given the government's laudable commitment to genuine community engagement, we believe that mechanisms facilitating such engagement - including boards and committees with community representation - should not be dismantled until effective replacements are identified and in place.
2. Boards and committees with community representation have been an important feature of successive governments' efforts to involve the community in policy-making. Given their history, the cost to dismantle and replace and the government's commitment to engage community in decision making, we query why the government has not invested to maximise their efficacy rather than simply abolish without review or justification.
3. To maximise the efficacy of boards and committees they need to be:
 - adequately supported and resourced by government to ensure advice is relevant and timely
 - presided by people with strong chairing skills and supported by executive staff to ensure they operate professionally
 - able to directly address decision makers such as Ministers or CEs
 - working to a clear purpose, terms of reference and at a meaningful scale to impact the issues of concern
 - valued for providing the unique perspectives, credibility, independence and collaborative problem solving that community boards/committees offer over internal departmental committees
 - clear on their mandate and supported to engage with the broader community on issues to deliver their advice
 - comprised of individual members with a strong, broad and relevant skill set.
4. We support facilitating opportunities for boards/committees with different but complementary functions to explore opportunities to collaborate and enhance their impact.
5. Some of our representatives have expressed serious doubt that a more cost effective consultation mechanism could be found to replace boards that bring together stakeholders with differing perspectives to build on synergies across sectors and work through conflicts to provide integrated advice to government. This applies particularly to boards with members who are formally nominated to represent the view of their sector while also providing relevant skills and experience.
6. We believe that boards/committees with statutory functions are critical to retain - in particular those that perform an independent regulatory function such as the EPA Board, NRM Boards, SA Pastoral Board and Native Vegetation Council.

