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

Dear Minister Hunter

I refer to your letter dated 1 August 2014 in which you request the Adelaide & Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board (the board) to consider its functions and whether it should be retained following the State Government's review of boards and committees.

I am pleased to provide the following information on behalf of the board to assist with deliberations regarding whether the board should continue and therefore be exempt from the policy to abolish all State boards and committees.

In developing its response, the board has considered the following aspects:

- Efficiency: it is cost effective to undertake the board's functions in another way;
- Independence: the functions of the board require a level of separation from government to ensure objectivity;
- Value add: the board value adds or provides benefits for government
- Risks and/or adverse impacts: the abolition of the board would pose risks or result in adverse impacts; and
- Alternative approach: the functions of the board could be carried out in a different way (e.g. merged with another board or committee, or another organisation absorbing its functions).

As a result of this review process, the board has concluded that it has an essential purpose that cannot be met through other means. In particular, this essential purpose relates to:

- Community at the centre
- Transparency and accountability
- Independence from government
- Ability to leverage substantial funding

These aspects are discussed in more detail below.



## **Community at the centre**

Since its inception in 2004 the board and its operations have had community at the centre, engaging the community in the business of natural resources management (NRM) and providing local communities with a voice in NRM decisions that affect them. This model of engagement has been foundational to the way the board functions and is consistent with the way in which the government intends to conduct business in the future.

Community at the centre is an approach reflected in the composition and operation of the board itself which is comprised of nine community members and six agency representatives.

Each community board member brings local knowledge and local experience to the table, ensuring that the board's business is grounded in the issues local to the region. This direct relationship of board members with the region provides credibility when bringing together stakeholders who may have divergent views on complex and contested issues such as water allocation planning or land management practices in riparian zones.

Board members have comprehensive knowledge and skills including natural resources management, conservation, agriculture, local government, public and/or business administration, regional and economic development and natural and social science (refer Figure 1). This diverse skill set and independence brings a broad perspective and robust debate on natural resources management issues.

The range of skills, experience and knowledge of board members reflects excellent value for money. In 2012/13, the board managed a total expenditure of nearly \$30 million in addition to leveraging \$47.3 million in other revenue, cash and in-kind contributions. To undertake this work, the board was remunerated \$90,000 in sitting fees.

The nine community board members work collaboratively with six agency representatives from Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure; Local Government Association; SA Water; Environment Protection Authority and Department of Primary Industries and Regions SA. This combination of community and agency representation has proven successful and is an excellent example of "joined up government" in action. Community representation on the board also delivers benefits beyond the boardroom, building the capacity of individuals as regional leaders beyond their NRM role.

The board is proactive in seeking innovative and cost effective ways to engage community in NRM, consistent with the state government's desire to provide a broader range of organisations and individuals with more direct access to government advisory and decision-making processes. Community Connect was initiated by the board in early 2014 and is developing a new way of engaging the community in delivering the regional NRM Plan. Community Connect involves co-designing new ways to connect the community to the board and work together to deliver the regional NRM Plan. Another example is the 90 day change project Safeguarding our Landscapes completed earlier this year in collaboration with DEWNR outcomes, many of which are now being implemented. This project involved using co-design methods to engage with the community and develop the project.

These types of initiatives are reflective of the board's history of continually striving to find new ways to engage with community and improve access to decision making which is one of the great strengths of the regional NRM planning system. This model provides a platform from which the government is now reframing its approach to engagement and involving community in decision making, an approach which has been the modus operandi for the board for a decade.

**Figure 1:** Community board member skills and expertise

	Community affairs at the regional level	Primary production or pastoral land management	Soil conservation and land management	Conservation and biodiversity management	Water resources management	Business administration	Local government or local government administration	Urban or regional planning	Aboriginal interest in the land and water, and	Pest animal and plant control	Natural and social science	Coast, estuarine & marine management, fisheries or aquaculture
Chris Daniels	✓			✓				✓		✓	✓	
Lynette Chamberlain					✓		✓					
Rob Lewis					✓	✓					✓	✓
Alexi Kentish	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	
Russell Johnstone		✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	
Debra Just				✓	✓		✓	✓				
Rachael Siddall	✓				✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Mark Searle							✓					
Karl Telfer									✓			

### Transparency and accountability

The way in which the board operates is one of its key strengths. All board meetings are open to the public (with meetings publicly advertised 2 weeks prior) and all minutes are made publicly available. This is in contrast to other private sector, not for profit organisations and statutory authorities (e.g. Motor Accident Commission, Migrant Resource Centre) whereby board meetings are closed to the public and minutes kept in confidence.

This openness and transparency of board business is reflected more broadly in its operations. For example, the NRM Act establishes the model of "plan, do, check". That is, the board develops a plan in consultation with the community, the board implements the plan, and the board checks back with the community and evaluates the implementation of the plan. The board then reports back to government. This accountability is an important feature of the board.

In addition to this accountability of the board to government, each board member is accountable to their own stakeholders and communities. Again this is a strength of the composition of the board, with each board member having their own networks and links with their sectors. This is an aspect that is unlikely to be able to be replicated by a government department.

### Independence

Given the diverse and often divergent views the community has on natural resources management issues the independence of the board from government is important.

This independence means that the board can facilitate robust discussion and debate with stakeholders which can relate to contested public policy issues such as water allocation planning. At these times, the value of the board's independence is particularly evident as its credibility and the networks its members have into various stakeholders/sectors.

The board's independence from government is also important in administering the NRM levy. The transparency and accountability of the board in managing and spending the levy is one of its key strengths. The community support the board experiences in managing the levy is unlikely to be achieved if the levy was to be managed by local or state government. There is a risk that the community would perceive the removal of the board as a way for government to obtain the NRM levy for general revenue.

### **Leveraging of funding**

Being a community based board enables the leveraging of significant additional funding and in-kind support from local, state and federal government, industry, community organisations and individuals. In 2012/13, for every one dollar the board raised via the NRM levy, it leveraged an additional two dollars (in terms of revenue, cash and in-kind support) from alternative funding sources. This leveraging of additional funding, which supports important natural resources management activities, would not be possible by a government department. In particular, accessing commonwealth funding would not occur given the common practice to fund regional bodies. Significant funding to regional bodies flows to South Australia from the commonwealth.

For example, in 2014/15 the board received \$2.1 million from the former Caring for our Country funding now part of the National Landcare programme, with a further \$1.7 million allocated for 2015/16. This funding is used by the board for investment in industry grants (e.g. to primary producers to undertake research, trials, education of members), to work with private landholders to deliver environmental outcomes, sustainable agriculture and funding the regional Landcare facilitator.

The National Landcare program has \$454 million over 4 years nationally for allocation to NRM/catchment management authorities. The board is one of eight natural resources management boards in South Australia and 56 across Australia that are eligible for this funding. If the board was to be abolished, this source of funding would also be removed.

The board also leverages significant contribution from volunteers. In 2012/13 approximately \$5.4 million in volunteer time was directed towards delivering the Regional NRM Plan.

### **Partnerships**

The board has a range of formalised partnerships, including memorandums of understanding and formal agreements, with a range of organisations. These include Memoranda of Understanding with specific Councils (e.g. City of Onkaparinga and City of Unley) and with environmental non-government organisations (e.g. Conservation Council, Greening Australia, Wilderness Society and Trees for Life). The board also partners with local government relating to particular projects or schemes such as stormwater harvesting (e.g. Oaklands Park Wetlands – City of Marion, and Waterproofing the West – City of Charles Sturt) and with the Federal government for major landscape restoration.

These partnerships with the board play an important role, contributing to the achievement of key state government goals such as Water for Good, No Species Loss and the 30 Year Plan for Greater Adelaide. It is unlikely that a government department could replicate this level of partnering and a risk of removing the board is that these existing partnerships and the NRM projects/action they generate will cease.

### **Alternative methods to deliver the board's functions**

Under the NRM Act the board has statutory responsibilities to conserve, protect and sustainably manage the natural resources of the region. This is achieved through the development and review of

the regional NRM plan, the regulation of some activities (e.g. water affecting activities), identification of regional priorities for investment and the delivery of programs. The board also supports public awareness and education activities, increases the capacity of people to implement programs and assist in the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources.

The board has considered alternative models for delivering the board’s functions and has identified and assessed six alternatives.

The alternatives comprise the assumption of the board’s role and responsibilities by:

- Local government;
- State government department;
- A newly established regional statutory authority (e.g. combined local government, regional development and NRM functions);
- Utilising the Community Landcare model
- A new “super board” which merges all NRM boards across the state; or
- A new entity which merges the board with other environmental entities e.g. Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary, Native Vegetation Council).

Figure 2 summarises the board’s assessment of these alternatives. In undertaking the assessment the board considered key criteria which relate to discussion of the board’s merits in preceding sections.

**Table 2:** Assessment of alternative models

	Engagement	Efficiency	Independence	Value for money	Skills and experience	Effectiveness	Leveraging
<b>Continuation of current Board</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Local Government</b>	✓	✓					
<b>State government department</b>					✓		
<b>Regional Statutory Authority (NRM, LGA, RDA)</b>	?	?	✓	?	?	?	?
<b>Community Landcare model</b>	✓		?				✓
<b>Merging of all NRM boards into one board</b>			✓	✓	✓		✓
<b>Merge board with other environment entities</b>	?	✓	✓	?	?	?	

Based on this assessment, the board maintains that the existing model is the most effective in delivering its functions. Although there are a range of unknowns there may be merit in exploring the board merging with or taking on additional functions such as those of the Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary, Native Vegetation Council and Coast Protection Board.


## Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information about the valuable contribution the board makes to natural resources management in the Adelaide & Mount Lofty Ranges region and the state. The board is operating effectively and efficiently and has an essential purpose that cannot be met through other means. In particular, the board's skills, knowledge, connections to community and independence from government are its particular strengths. It is not considered that these aspects could be replicated by a Government department (or other model) as effectively, efficiently or credibly as by the board.

Most importantly, the ability of the board to leverage significant funding for the region to manage natural resources is its greatest strength as are its established partnerships with a range of other organisations. Without the board significant funding particularly from the commonwealth government would be unable to be accessed and the level of existing partnering would diminish or perhaps cease. Given the resource constrained environment we work in, the abolition of the board would be to the detriment of investment in natural resources in the region and to their ongoing integrity.

On behalf of the board I urge you to retain the board to ensure that we can continue to invest in and manage natural resources and achieve the productive and balanced use and conservation of the region's natural resources.

Yours sincerely

  
**Professor Chris Daniels**  
**PRESIDING MEMBER**

