

Mr Ian Hunter MLC
Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation

Dear Mr Hunter

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your email re the review of the Upper South East NRM group.

Because of the timeline, I must say that there has been little opportunity to consult with members of the group and thus the initial content reflects mainly the views of myself as long time chair of an NRM group.

In the interests of brevity I have confined my remarks to the points highlighted in your letter viz.

- Efficiency
- Independence
- Value adding
- Abolition risks
- Possible and or recent changes which may improve function

Efficiency

The primary function of our group has been to act as a participatory conduit between the community and our Board. Because of the informal nature of our meetings the communication has been seen by the community to be effective and divorced from any bureaucratic structures. We have also been able to vary the meeting places to enable members of the public to attend more easily, for example we have recently had meetings in Keith, Bordertown, Padthaway and Kingston. All of the members are available to members of the community every day and all have been appointed with some connection to the management of Natural Resources. It is my strong belief that our Board and the community has received great benefit from this structure and that it should continue.

Independence

It has been my experience that there are times when it has been advantageous for community debate when people are able to make constructive contributions to Government policy through bodies like the NRM group.

The members have widely differing backgrounds, including farmers, graziers, ecologists, planners and have been able to bring comments and knowledge to the table from informal conversations with people from all sections of the community and in return let these persons know that their input has been

used. Members of the public are often not prepared to raise such issues in the structured situation of a formal Board meeting which are conducted far from their homes or work places. As mentioned above this is one of the main reasons why we move our meetings around the area with little or no change to our budget.

Value adding

Over the life of our group landholders and property owners alike have developed a sense of environmental stewardship of privately owned and crown lands. The group has been able to promote this in the community because of the wide range of interest that they bring to the meetings.

For a very low output in dollar terms the board receives the equivalent of consultancy advice many times throughout the year. This comes, not only from the members, but also from the various contacts that they have in the general community. In our 2014 /15 budget of \$45,000 there was an outlay of \$5,000 invested in an agronomy study with Landmark, through one of the members, where the firm will provide "in kind "returns to the equivalent of \$ 25,000 by conducting field trials on local properties which will benefit the community. This work is quite separate from any work done by NRM staff but, at the same time is in line with the aim of Natural Resources SE

We have also seeded money into a leadership programme for young farmers conducted by the McKillop farm management group where experienced landholders are mentoring the young leaders. This opportunity has only been possible because the group was aware of the circumstances

Informal and formal communication would be lost in many parts of the community if the groups were to be disbanded. Eg. contact with schools, environmental volunteers , farming groups, Local Action Planning groups, to name just a few, are all represented at least 6 times a year at group meetings. The level of information sharing with the community and with the board is much more relevant when it has the chance to be translated by members of the group to both parties. I believe that the structure and performance of the groups has played a major part in the effective introduction of many aspects of government policy on natural resource management in the Upper South East. It has also been my belief that members of staff have been able to utilise the skills of the group members to assist them in the introduction and implementation of many of their policies.

Risks of abolition

Landholders and property owners in the Upper South East already feel isolated from policy making.

They are too far from either Adelaide or Mount Gambier to feel connected with either and, even with the current reorganisation, there is the perception that much of the action is centred in the lower South East .

They do not enjoy high quality phone or broad band reception which limits their ability to communicate via the Web.

They believe they are responsible for major food production and are exposed to a very high level of risk from biosecurity.

This group has given great service to the implementation and management of many Board and Government policies over many years and I cannot believe they would not feel a sense of resentment should the group be abandoned. Input into Board and Government policies has been slowly developed to the point where people in the community, represented by the group, believe their points of view are valued and if the groups were to be disbanded your government would have to start all over again

Possible future changes

I draw your attention to the fact that we have just completed a major review and reduced the number of groups from three to two.

The whole of the South East is now represented By 14 persons reduced from the previous level of 21. In the long term this will mean a budget saving but places an increased level of responsibility on each member of the group.

This is a level of increased productivity already achieved

Without wishing to comment on the performance of another group I believe that with changes to the job and person specifications of our membership we could take over the role of the group responsible for advising the Board on the management of government and crown lands. There have been many occasions in the past where our agenda has dealt with issues regarding the management of these lands and how this management may affect the lives of landholders adjoining these areas. If these matters could be addressed at one table there would be an improved outcome in the community.

As mentioned above, if we move to an increase in the use of web based communication, the members in the Upper South East will be further disadvantaged because of poor internet services.

The perception in the community would be that in the formation of policy their community is being ignored.

This response has been circulated to all members of the group in its draft form. The responses have ranged from exasperation to shock. Members cannot understand why your government would even consider the possibility of ceasing to use their collective talents in this well-targeted, effective forum. They believe they have helped to improve the management of the Natural resources in this very productive area. All of this could be lost for your Government to gain a paltry \$45,000. This, to us, does not make good sense or good Government. As chair, I hope that you are able to see your way clear to put forward a case to maintain this forum within the Natural Resources community. I believe this group represents very good value for money.

In summary, I have attempted to give you opinions which will represent those of the group members without being able to consult with them in a manner which would make me feel that the letter totally represents all points of view. I wish to state that these views are politically impartial and are just presented from my position as a long serving group chair. I believe very strongly in the principle of active participation of community members in the formation and implementation of government policy on the management of Natural resources. The NRM groups have played a valuable part of this development in the past and I suggest that it would be catastrophic to consider their abolition in the future.

Yours sincerely

James Ferguson OAM

Chair

Upper South East NRM group