



11 August 2014

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Hon Ian Hunter MP
Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation
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Dear Minister

The South East NRM Board (the Board) thanks you for the correspondence dated 1 August 2014 and notes the Premier's decision to reform South Australian government boards and committees and to abolish those boards and committees no longer considered necessary.

We note the Premier's letter dated 8 July 2014 inviting boards and committees to have input into his review and particularly in providing ideas of new and innovative ways the government receives advice and conducts business.

I am pleased to advise that the Board at its meeting held on 25 July 2014 formally considered the Premier's review of boards and committees with the view of making a submission to you as part of the review process.

It is fair to say from the outset the Board does recognise and support the intent of the Premier's Review and in following the Board's deliberations I am able to advise you that the Board does see a valuable and strategic role for NRM Boards in assisting the government deliver its business across South Australia and within the South East region; however the Board does offer other suggestions in relation to the delivery of NRM and other government business in the regions.

Strategic Linkages to Agencies; Industry & Community

This primary position of the Board is underpinned firstly by the *South Australian Strategic Plan* and in particular one of the three priority foundations for our society is – *Our Environment* – and its supporting visions are – “*We look after our Natural Environment*” and “*We value and protect of Water Resources*” – and this is further underpinned by a range of goals and targets.

Secondly the *Our Place Our Future: State NRM Plan 201-2017* provides that –

“The Act also establishes regional NRM Boards to give ownership of and responsibility for NRM to regional communities. These responsibilities include restorative and rehabilitative projects, pest control and driving educational initiatives to increase the capacity of our communities to be involved in NRM. At the centre of the NRM system is the State NRM Plan which provides the strategic blueprint for NRM boards and agencies to develop their own specific plans.”

Thirdly the Department for Environment Water & Natural Resources (DEWNR) Corporate Plan that states –

“In South Australia we have a unique system of natural resources management boards that work in partnership with us to fulfil our roles and deliver services across eight natural resource management regions. They are community boards made up of people with local knowledge, expertise and networks - people who understand their community's needs. Through the boards, we develop meaningful relationships with the community and increase our shared knowledge and understanding about natural resources. We encourage debate and share the decision-making and accountability for choices made.”

The valuable and strategic role of NRM Boards in the management of our natural resources is further enhanced by the linkages between the agricultural sector and NRM that is provided in the direct links between the *State NRM Plan* goals –

“People taking responsibility for natural resources and making informed decisions; Sustainable management and productive use of land, water, air and sea and Improved condition and resilience of natural systems”

and the *Premium Food and Wine from our Clean Environment Action Plan* that states –

“Our clean environment is our air, water and land, combined with our high standards of sustainability, food safety and natural resources management.” that will – “Ensure a competitive business environment”; and “Encourage clean production through efficient practices.”

Regional Community Leadership & Accountability

I further advise that the Board confirmed its current priority functions as supporting the Government by providing strong regional community leadership and strategic direction on natural resources management priorities and issues. Additionally, other key priorities for the Board include remaining a visible community based regional body, accountable for expenditure of the NRM Levy and the harnessing of external funds e.g. Commonwealth funding, to support the implementation of the Regional NRM Plan.

The Board recognises the need to build on its connections with the community by facilitating regional collaboration and partnerships across the three tiers of government, industry and community. This will focus on understanding the values of our regions citizens in order to bring more balance into discussions where there are competing economic, environmental and social factors. An emerging need has also been identified, which would see the Board transition into an advocacy role in order to provide a regional unified voice on matters of strategic natural resources management importance, on the local, state and national stage.

The use of the Board in leading the engagement of our regions community on the issue of developing funding models for the on-going maintenance and operation of the South East Drainage Network through a citizens jury model and on the implementation of the South East Flows Restoration Project are recent examples that demonstrates the value and strategic role the Board can provide to the way the government receives its advice and does business in a regional context.

The investment in establishing and building the NRM model should not be abandoned but should be used as a major pillar for the development of an improved model from where the community influence into the advice government receives and delivers its business. The harnessing of community involvement has been integral to the NRM model and this provides a stable based from where regional engagement and service delivery can be refocused.

Improving the NRM Model

In promoting a future and continued role for NRM Boards, the Board acknowledges that there are a range of improvements which could be made to the current NRM model, both in our region and at a statewide level to improve consistency and efficiency. These include –

- Resetting the current relationship and support arrangements between DEWNR and NRM Boards to streamline systems and processes.
- DEWNR to invest in building its capacity and culture to further empower and support NRM Boards to lead and deliver.
- Government agencies across the NRM portfolio working in a more integrated way to avoid duplication and conflicting approaches. All relevant agencies need to invest time and resources in understanding the NRM model in order to work more effectively with communities on NRM issues and opportunities.

There are a range of options that should be considered when looking to increase the cost effectiveness of the NRM model. The Board is in favour of the following options –

- The sharing of resources by Boards across NRM Board regions
- Rationalising the groups and committees which support the NRM Board to an absolute minimum – in this regard the Board has in the past 18 months rationalised its NRM Groups from 3 to 2.
- The retention of the Board's Finance and Audit Committee, the Upper and Lower South East NRM Groups and the Box Flat Dingo committee.
- The role and functions of NRM Council could be conducted by a revamped NRM Presiding Member's forum which is considered as a suitable alternative entity
- A review of current funding (not levy funds) to NRM Boards, providing for a competitive funding model for NRM Board's across the state, which could provide increased autonomy and greater flexibility to respond to emerging issues.

Expanded Role for Regional Decision Making

In the background of the State budget and more particularly the DEWNR budget, there could also be an opportunity for decision making powers to be devolved to NRM Boards around the management of native vegetation and coastal protection management.

The Board was of the view that if NRM Boards were to be abolished that consideration being given to the establishment of one multi-purpose regional Board to work across all government portfolios and provide connection to community and holistic strategic advice.

Alternative Models

There has been commentary around the option of local government arrogating responsibility for some of the functions and/or roles of NRM Boards and while worthy of noting it is not thought that local government has an adequately developed regional model that would allow for the necessary level of regional objectivity and impartiality. Indeed local government could be utilised in a contractual arrangement to deliver some on-ground work on behalf of Boards such as proclaimed animal & plant control with the Boards maintaining its role in planning and integration at landscape scale.

Independence from Government

As a statutory authority the Board is of the view that the functions of the NRM Board require a level of independence or separation from government to ensure it is seen to and operates with a high level of objectivity and impartiality. This provides a level of confidence to the community in the operation and decisions of the Board who largely have a perceived distrust of government generally and the perceived inability of the public service to provide 'frank and fearless' advice in a highly politicised and reactive operating environment.

Summary

Our Board is committed to improving the efficiency and efficacy of the NRM model through increasing the profile of our Board, deepening our engagement with our regional community and actively leading a more collaborative approach with our region. This is central to the Board's firm belief that they provide an essential mechanism to the government which supports and improves the way the government receives advice and conducts business.

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On behalf of the SE NRM Board I advise that the Board recognises the need for, and are committed to a philosophy of continual improvement and look forward to continuing to work with Government to improve the NRM model, for the benefit of our State's citizens and the natural resources they rely upon.

In considering the Premier's review of boards and committees I urge you to support the retention of NRM Boards as an essential part of the system that improves the way the government receives advice and conducts business moving forward.

Yours Sincerely



Frank Brennan
Presiding Member
South East Natural Resources Management Board

