

Hon Ian Hunter MP
Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation
GPO Box 645
ADELAIDE SA 5001

August 10th 2014

Dear Minister Hunter,

On behalf of the Presiding Members Forum (which consists of the Presiding Members of the 8 regional Natural Resources Management Boards (NRM Boards)), I thank you for the correspondence dated 1 August 2014 which describes 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. The Presiding Members Forum is not a formally established Board or committee as defined in the letter of instruction. However, the group meets formally 4 times per year, is resourced by your Department and provides an opportunity for the exchange of information and development of collective views on current issues and core business between the Presiding Members and their Regional Managers and also with you as Minister and with the senior executives of the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources. It also aims to ensure that statewide issues are solved together and that regional Boards are able to share innovative ways to address complex problems. More recently, the PM's have been meeting as a collective via teleconference on a monthly basis to address issues of concern in a timely manner.

In developing its response, the PM's Forum has considered the following aspects:

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

As a result of this review process, the PM's Forum has concluded that regional NRM Boards have 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 particularly from the Federal Government

The PM's Forum considers that it might be valuable to you in your deliberations on the future of the NRM Boards to have at your disposal the considered views of the 8 Presiding members. These views, defined at our meeting of Wednesday 6th of August are:

1: The Presiding Members see a valuable and strategic role for NRM Boards in assisting the government to deliver its business across South Australia; the management of our natural resources is critical for the ongoing wealth and economy of South Australia. It underpins agriculture, food production and tourism which are critical to our region's current and future economy. The Business of NRM is encapsulated in a number of the State's primary plans, notably;

A; 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 our Water Resources"* – and this is further underpinned by a range of goals and targets.

B; 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."

C; 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"

D; 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."*

Hence the functions described in the NRM Act 2004 and delivered by regional based Boards serve the State **as a whole** effectively by both enhancing NRM directly and by delivering the States most important plans.

2: The Presiding Members Forum also confirmed that the current priority functions of the 8 Regional Boards collectively supported the Government by providing strong regional community leadership and strategic direction on local natural resources management priorities and issues. Whilst each region is different, and each Board supports its community in a different manner, they all provide that vital connection between State priorities and

community welfare. The key priorities for all the Boards include remaining a visible community based regional body, accountable for expenditure of the NRM Levy and the harnessing of external funds to support the implementation of the Regional NRM Plans. As a statutory authority the Boards 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. It is our collective view that all Boards have achieved these roles, and through the process of "design, do, check" continually strive to improve their practice to deliver ever better outcomes.

3: The PM's Forum recognises and strongly endorses the importance of maintaining a regional identity. The PM's Forum recognises and supports the government's initiatives to be more active in connecting to community. The PM's Forum also recognises that this can only be achieved by facilitating regional collaboration and partnerships across the three tiers of government, industry and community. Hence the NRM Board model approach focuses 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. Regional NRM Boards have also proven their ability to activate and mobilise people, and have a reputation for excellence in engagement of regional communities. We lead the state in the use of the Government's "Better Together Framework" and connect with citizens in a wide variety of ways, including direct support of local community and industry groups, and using modern community involvement and decision-making tools (e.g. IAP2 philosophy) and social media (e.g. Facebook and Have Your Say websites). Through the application of the Board model, we believe South Australia now sets the benchmark for community involvement in NRM activities across the nation.

4: The PM's Forum identifies the vital need for an NRM structure to play 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. In particular the State NRM views need to be inculcated into the Federal sphere. Much of the funding and leveraged support is now and will be increasingly in the future, be supplied by the Commonwealth. A robust State view is required to support NRM priorities and enable individual regions to maintain high financial support for their activities.

5: The PM's Forum recognises that one of the very real strengths of all Boards is that they serve as an effective conduit of communication between the Government and the community and are accountable to the community and Government for the utilisation of the NRM levy, which as you are aware, is collected across each region with the exception of the Alinytjara Wilurara NRM Region. There is potential for a significant adverse reaction from the community if there was not a community based Board in place with a direct relationship to their region to set priorities and accept accountability for the wise use of the NRM levy.

However, the PM's Forum recognises that there are a range of options that could be considered when looking to increase the cost effectiveness of the NRM model.

These include:

- The sharing of resources by Boards across NRM regions;
- The rationalising of the groups and committees which support any particular NRM Board to focus on efficient and effective delivery;
- 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, to provide a more even level of support across the regions;
- Any change to the current arrangement must be capable of supporting strong regional action and local community involvement – concerns have been raised that a shift to less but larger, aggregated regional boards would lead to community dis-engagement in NRM at both a local and regional level;
- Consider expanding decision making powers to be devolved to individual regional NRM Boards around the management of local natural resources such as native vegetation and coastal management.

The PM's Forum considered the idea of abolishing all 8 Boards and establishing one multi-purpose regional Board to work across all government portfolios and provide connection to community and holistic strategic advice. Alternatively, all the NRM functions could be delivered through a government Department such as DEWNR or PIRSA. Whilst technically feasible, strong consideration would have been given to how such structures would maintain delivery of quality service in the regions and engagement with the community, Local Government and industry. In addition the delicate task of establishing and building trust within any and all local communities and the development of strong community connections would be much more difficult with either of these restructures.

In considering the Premier's review of boards and committees the PM's Forum urges you to support the retention of all 8 NRM Boards as an essential part of the system that improves the way the government receives its NRM advice and conducts business moving forward.

Yours Sincerely

Chris Daniels



Chair

For The South Australian Presiding Members Forum

Caroline Schaefer
Presiding Member
Northern and Yorke NRM Board


Frank Brennan
Presiding Member
South East NRM Board

Janet Brooks
Presiding Member,
SA Arid lands NRM Board

Heather Baldock
Presiding Member
Eyre Peninsula NRM Board

Parry Agius
Presiding Member
Alinytjara Wilurara NRM Board

 **Chris Daniels**
Presiding member
Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges NRM Board

 **Sharon Starick**
Presiding Member
Murray-Darling basin NRM Board

Richard Trethewey
Presiding Member
Kangaroo Island NRM Board

