



Natural  
Resources  
Commission



## Natural Resource Management Roundtable Summary of discussion

## Foreword

It is 10 years since the NSW Government established a model of regional planning and delivery for natural resource management. In that time Catchment Management Authorities have matured as organisations and achieved considerable improvements in community capacity and overall landscape health. Catchment Management Authorities have worked in partnership with landholders, community groups, industry and agencies to promote regional and local participation in the management of natural resources.

From 2014, Local Land Services will be responsible for regional natural resource management, together with biosecurity and agricultural extension. To reflect on the achievements of the last 10 years and identify any lessons learned that could inform natural resource management delivery in future, the Natural Resources Commission convened a *Natural Resource Management Roundtable* in June.

The Roundtable brought together individuals with significant leadership experience in catchment management, industry, agriculture, community groups and academia. I was also very pleased to welcome the Hon Troy Grant MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Natural Resources to the event.

The Roundtable stimulated an innovative discussion, and highlighted the significant progress made in promoting regional decision-making, delivering on-ground outcomes and improving accountability for investment in natural resource management. The Roundtable also provided some early insights into applying best practice approaches to the integrated Local Land Services model.

I would like to sincerely thank all participants for bringing their rich knowledge and experience to the *Natural Resource Management Roundtable*, and for promoting ongoing improvement to natural resource management in NSW.

**Dr John Keniry AM**  
Commissioner  
Natural Resources Commission

## Attendance List

Natural Resource Management Roundtable	
Sam Archer	Non-Executive Director of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
Tim Beshara	Director Policy and Communications, Landcare NSW Inc
Jim Booth	Private consultant. Former Director of NRM, Department of Primary Industries/Office of Environment and Heritage
Bruce Brown	General Manager, Namoi Catchment Management Authority
Peter Cosier	Director, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists
Jason Cummings	Chief Executive Officer, Greening Australia Capital Region
David Eyre	General Manager, Research and Development, NSW Farmers
Russell Ford	Manager, Rice Research Australia Pty Ltd
Troy Grant MP	Parliamentary Secretary for Natural Resources
Pam Green	Chair, Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority
Rod Griffith	Principal, Rod Griffith and Associates
Paul Hutchings	General Manager, Border Rivers Gwydir Catchment Management Authority
John Keniry (Chair)	Commissioner, Natural Resources Commission
Mick Keogh	Executive Director, Australian Farm Institute
Peter-John Layton	Team Leader NRM Strategic Catchment Planning Support, Department of Primary Industries
Neville Merritt	Chair, Aboriginal Reference Group, Central West Catchment Management Authority
David Mitchell	Founding Chair, Monaro Farming Systems
Mick Murphy	Chair, Victorian Catchment Management Council
Paul Ryan	Principal, Interface NRM
Cr Kevin Schreiber	Deputy Mayor, Sutherland Shire Council
Greg Summerell	Director, Ecosystem Management Science Branch, Office of Environment and Heritage
Jane Trindall	Manager - NRM, Cotton Research and Development Corporation
Bryce Wilde	Executive Director, Natural Resources Commission
Michael Williams	Independent Facilitator, Principal Michael Williams & Associates Pty Ltd - Sydney
Sonia Williams	General Manager, Landcare NSW Inc
Charlie Zammit	Environment and sustainability consultant. Recently retired from position as Assistant Secretary Biodiversity Conservation Branch, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

# 1 Executive summary

The Local Land Services (LLS) reform in New South Wales will create a stronger link between natural resource management and agricultural production within an integrated service delivery model. It will present new opportunities for how governments, landholders and communities invest in and manage New South Wales landscapes.<sup>1</sup>

The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) convened a *Natural Resource Management Roundtable* on Friday 7 June 2013. The Roundtable brought together individuals with leadership experience in Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), agriculture, industry, community groups and academia to discuss:

- progress and insights gained in 10 years of implementing regional natural resource management in NSW
- opportunities for LLS to capitalise on best practice approaches
- potential risks that may impact LLS natural resource management programs.

Key themes raised in discussion were:

- **Governance and leadership** – Natural resource management has become much more professional, and the model of standards, targets and the NRC’s independent performance audit has driven continuous improvement. Future governance will need to maintain the opportunities for regional innovation, while ensuring effective leadership and consistent quality across NSW.
- **Stakeholder engagement** – Experience has shown the importance of building trust with communities and supporting communities and local groups to influence priorities and make their own decisions. However, while natural resource management has become more professional, some communities and groups have been left out of the loop.
- **Strategic planning** – The upgraded catchment action plans have effectively used resilience thinking, best available information and spatial analysis to improve prioritisation. Future frameworks for state and local strategic planning will need to ensure consistent quality, while encouraging locally-relevant approaches, innovation and community buy-in.
- **Integrating natural resource management with farm-scale economics** – Natural resource management is becoming more mainstream, and integrated into production. Future programs will need to recognise the diversity of agricultural production and provide confidence that natural resource management will deliver value to farm businesses.
- **Service delivery** – Natural resource management needs to focus on people, and influencing landscape scale functioning from the farm scale up. There will be a tension between equitable service delivery and strategic regional prioritisation. However, there is an opportunity to more effectively integrate land and water management with production systems and for LLS to partner with and leverage off the skills of local organisations for efficient service-delivery.
- **Developing knowledge and evaluating outcomes** – The upgraded catchment action plans provide an excellent basis for prioritising evaluation and monitoring effort around the most important factors in the landscape. However, the challenge remains in demonstrating successes and multiple benefits from investment in natural resource management to other landholders, land managers and government investors.

The remainder of this paper expands on these points, reflecting the diverse views of participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Media Release, Minister for Primary Industries, Minister for Small Business, “Local Land Services to transform service delivery to NSW farmers and landowners”, 4 October 2012.

## 2 Key achievements, future opportunities and challenges

The NRC has summarised Roundtable participant comments under the main themes that emerged in discussion. This summary is intended to record the diversity of individual views and opinions expressed. It does not necessarily reflect an agreed view amongst participants and does not represent the views or opinions of the NRC or any other organisation.

### 2.1 Governance and leadership

#### Achievements

- There has been strong governance and collegiate leadership at the CMA Board level.
- Leaders at all scales have driven positive changes in natural resource management by building on local skills and on scientific, local and practical new knowledge.
- The NSW Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management (the Standard), targets, CAPs, regional governance frameworks, and independent audit and review have set the standard for integrated natural resource management and have increased Government confidence in the performance of regional bodies. The whole-of-Government and community approach in NSW is highly regarded in other Australian jurisdictions.
- Some CMAs have adopted collaborative governance models with partner organisations.
- Decision-making has moved to the regional scale, and the role and value of CMA Chairs has been acknowledged by central funding bodies.
- The NRC has driven continuous improvement and professionalism, and used both local knowledge and scientific evidence.
- CMAs such as Central West CMA have integrated cultural knowledge into their decision-making.

#### Lessons

- Strong governance and leadership need to be maintained in the transition to the new LLS model to ensure successes are not lost.

#### Opportunities and challenges

- Regional boards are not local; programs will need to bridge the gap between regional-level managers and landholders through community groups.
- The Standard should include a governance component and apply to LLS agriculture and biosecurity functions as well as natural resource management.
- A performance-based culture is needed in the LLS.

## 2.2 Stakeholder engagement

### Achievements

- CMAs that emphasised local decision-making, local knowledge and long term partnerships succeeded in promoting community ownership.
- Some industries are large land custodians and have consciously tried to improve management practices and be leaders in environmental management.
- Engagement among scientists, policy-makers and practitioners has significantly improved and been successful.

### Lessons

- A “people first” approach in CMAs built resilience in the whole system. Without community ownership the system is very fragile.
- Community groups play an important role to bring community along. When this role was ignored considerable community capacity, land manager engagement and impetus for locally funded natural resource management activities were lost.
- Programs need to be planned and delivered with, and not for, landholders. Landholders are the primary land managers.
- Collaboration among farming groups, Research and Development Corporations, and State and Federal Government increases farm productivity and promotes an integrated landscape approach.
- While natural resource management over the past decade has become more professional, community groups such as Landcare have sometimes been left out of the loop. Community groups need to be supported in the long term.
- Stakeholder engagement should take a landscape view but develop relationships at a personal level via groups. It can take three years to build trust in relationships.
- Industries operate at their own scale and have their own industry-based social groups. Need to link this scale of interest with natural resource management planning.
- Structured programs of investment and monitoring are needed to mobilise people.

### Opportunities and challenges

- Continuity of relationships and trust are essential for LLS stakeholder engagement.
- Landholders need to be empowered to determine and deliver natural resource outcomes. Community passion and commitment to natural resource management needs to be nurtured and maintained.
- Natural resource management programs should actively engage Aboriginal communities and promote employment opportunities. Aboriginal programs will not be able to continue without adequate resourcing.
- More profitable farmers, community groups, and the private sector need to be more heavily involved as partners.
- Many regional communities are experiencing “change fatigue”.

## 2.3 Strategic planning

### Achievements

- CMAs have made significant progress in using resilience thinking, best available information and strategic planning to identify regional priorities, document underlying assumptions, and identify future research priorities.
- Murray CMA built community capacity and rebuilt trust by devolving strategic planning to its community.
- Upgraded CAPs are knowledge rich.
- Spatial CAPs backed up by quality decision support tools are supporting landholder decision-making.

### Lessons

- Triple bottom line outcomes must be a key goal in natural resource management planning and delivery.
- Resilience thinking and regional planning have been effective ways to engage communities.
- Local strategic plans need to incorporate diversity and avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach, which stifles innovation, community buy-in and resilience.
- Planning with communities and industries needs to be more consistent across the State. Groups need to be allowed to self-organise and have a real say in decision-making.
- All stakeholders need to be at the planning table, and not seen merely as implementers of the plans of others.

### Opportunities and challenges

- The LLS State Strategic Plan needs to be very high level and non-prescriptive to allow regional Boards to get it right at the local level.
- New strategic plans should be developed in the first year and should link investment at the local scale with broader strategic outcomes.
- Strategies for change should be developed rather than static strategic plans.
- Resilience thinking and state and transition models should continue to inform plans.
- The approaches to prioritising investment should be reviewed.
- The *South East Queensland Natural Resource Management Plan 2009-2031* and draft *Port Phillip and Western Port Catchment Strategy* (Victoria) are examples in other States of progressive approaches to natural resource management planning.
- LLS’s relationship with Local Government and Aboriginal communities will need to be clarified.
- The poor alignment between natural resource management and statutory land use planning, conservation efforts across public/private land managers, and the exclusion of water and mining from natural resource management continue to be challenges to an integrated approach.
- If planning requirements for LLS Boards are overly prescriptive there may be a loss of innovation and local ownership.

## 2.4 Integrating natural resource management with farm-scale economics

### Achievements

- Natural resource management is becoming more mainstream and integrated into production, which is providing economic, social and environmental benefits. Many CMAs have adopted a triple bottom line approach.
- Landholders have always needed to balance climate, economic and production risks and have become more aware of balancing natural resource management risks.
- There is a lot of natural resource management capacity at the farm-scale.

### Lessons

- Natural resource management needs to recognise:
  - the economic factors that influence farm operations
  - the diversity of agricultural production systems – one size does not fit all.
- Many landholders have adopted practices for improved natural resource management. Natural resource management is now at the innovation stage; the system should support innovation and risk-taking.

### Opportunities and challenges

- Natural resource management is often equated with conservation despite many natural resource management projects focusing on sustainable agriculture. There is an opportunity to reposition natural resource management to focus more on production systems and leverage greater landholder participation.
- Natural resource management programs rely heavily on landholder volunteers; projects that may involve high costs or compromises to production are a challenge.
- Farmers need confidence that their participation in natural resource management will deliver value to their farm businesses. More work is needed to convert natural resource benefits to a financial measure if farmer confidence is to be gained.
- Expanding collection of rates [other than Livestock Health and Pest Authority rates] could potentially leverage more community interest and engagement in LLS programs.
- Peer to peer learning is important and can be supported via supported community farmer based-groups.
- Investment is needed in new demonstration projects to show how natural resource management can improve performance of production systems.
- There is a need to ensure market based programs (such as carbon farming) which focus on individual landholders are consistent with the delivery of broader regional strategies and goals.
- Farming often operates on small profit margins which can be eroded with changes in government policy. Mechanisms are needed to buffer slight profit margins and give farmers more capacity to participate in natural resource management programs.
- Historically CMAs have attracted significant Commonwealth investment which was based on achieving large-scale public good outcomes. A refocus on farm-scale economics may pose risks to this investment.



## 2.5 Service delivery

### Achievements

- There has been a shift to better integration of production and conservation.
- The capacity to experiment and innovate is an advantage of the existing regional approach to natural resource management, and has fostered local ownership and community resilience.
- Incorporating social science information into extension programs has improved landholder uptake of practice change.

### Lessons

- There is a greater acknowledgement that natural resource management is a people business. Operating from the farm-scale up is the best way to influence big-picture landscape function.
- Local industries need a reason to be involved, and need support to be successful and sustainable. Programs need to find the space for the win/win, at the right institutional and landscape scale.
- Competition between groups for natural resource management funding is unproductive and needs to be avoided. Programs need to focus on the outcome, not who is the service delivery agent.
- Demonstrated on-ground success, extension, peer group learning and external shocks such as drought and flood are all drivers of practice change.
- Knowledge-based funding programs are more valuable than public works projects. This approach needs to continue and will build capacity for others to change their behaviour.
- Ratepayers are program partners and need to have the same access to knowledge as Government partners.
- Risks such as fire can wipe out on-ground investment and need to be understood.

### Opportunities and challenges

- There is an opportunity for LLS to work with and leverage the existing skills and experience of community groups such as Landcare, farming system groups and Greening Australia, and to become a connector across communities, landscapes, industries, governments and scientists.
- LLS has a role to build capacity of community groups and industry.
- Government needs to invest in environmental, social and human capital.
- Program design and service delivery need to focus on innovation. Specific funds for innovation should be reserved and safe spaces to fail should be identified.
- A client relationship management system can be customised to track and improve client service delivery.
- Service delivery and community partnerships need to be more consistent across the State.
- Extension services should be remodelled and an understanding of the dynamics of behavioural change applied across all LLS services.
- There is a tension between perceptions of equitable service delivery and the need for strategic prioritisation at the regional scale.

- Native vegetation regulation has been a major barrier to engagement and eroded landholder trust in some areas of NSW. Integrating natural resource management investment with extension services would be more effective in achieving practice change.
- Government funding and professional capacity for natural resource management is uncertain in the long term. New funding models and sources need to be explored.
- If funding decreases then LLS will need to innovate and be more externally focused.
- A State-wide directory of specialists is needed to provide expert advice across LLS regional borders.
- Innovation, strong partnerships, local level approaches and planning are essential for natural resource management.

## 2.6 Developing knowledge and evaluating outcomes

### Achievements

- The upgraded CAPs have been a significant achievement as they clearly define management questions and identify underlying evidence and assumptions. The CAPs provide a strong basis for focusing monitoring effort on the most important regional issues.
- The natural resource management sector, particularly in relation to knowledge and information, has matured and become more professional.
- Access to scientific data has become significantly more open and the links between scientific data and practical experience have improved. There has been a shift away from getting the science perfect and focusing on reporting, to turning data into knowledge that decision-makers need to answer their questions and make better decisions.
- Investment in monitoring, evaluation and reporting has justified future work to address knowledge gaps.

### Lessons

- While evidence-based decision making is essential, it is difficult to quantify multiple benefits of natural resource management investment. The “back end” of planning is critical to demonstrate success.
- Benefits need to be demonstrated at the paddock scale.
- Decision-makers need to be clear on the knowledge questions to be answered.
- There are no agreed indicators to measure landholder practice change.
- Most of the knowledge we need to turn the tide of landscape degradation is available and should be used.

### Opportunities and challenges

- Knowledge systems need to be better aligned so data can be readily shared and transferred across boundaries, Government, industry and community partners. Spatial input and output models for catchment planning should be developed and shared.
- Knowledge systems need to be built into strategic plans and data needs to be openly accessible.
- Monitoring should not only achieve accountability; if feedback loops are tighter it can drive innovation more quickly through the system.
- Investment is needed to improve monitoring information and evaluation systems.

- There needs to be a shift away from focusing on reporting, to the timely informing of decision-making and adaptive management.
- Resource condition change and management data need to be integrated with economic information to better demonstrate economic value/return on natural resource investment.
- Given the long-term, institutional difficulties in monitoring change in resource condition and the outcomes of natural resource management investment, Governments will need to consider whether different monitoring questions would be more appropriate.
- The national trial of Regional Environmental Accounts, indicators in the *South East Queensland Natural Resource Management Plan 2009-2031* and the Victorian Experimental Ecosystem Accounts are examples of leading work on developing indicators for resource condition change.
- Government will need to consider engaging program partners in natural resource management audits. Future audits need to more comprehensively audit LLS community engagement and collaborative delivery with program partners. Spot audits should be carried out more frequently.
- State and transition models could be used as a report card for local landscapes.
- Local communities should be included as active participants in the reporting process.
- The documentation of assumptions and knowledge gaps in upgraded CAPs provides an opportunity to coordinate natural resource management research and development priorities.