



Native Vegetation Inquiry  
Productivity Commission  
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Dear Sirs,

RE: IMPACTS OF NATIVE VEGETATION AND BIODIVERSITY REGULATIONS ON WETLAND REPAIR ACTIVITIES

In relation to the enquiry into the impacts of native vegetation and biodiversity regulations, Wetland Care Australia would like to raise the issues listed below for your consideration. These concerns arise from our context of a non-government organisation aiming to achieve on-ground wetland repair funded by grants, sponsorship and donations, primarily through Natural Heritage Trust funding. While the regulations do not have a significant direct impact on our operations, the context of sustainable natural resource management policy, legislation and enforcement has many indirect impacts on our work.

### **1 Wetland fall between the cracks**

Wetlands do not have specific legislative protection in their own right, but tend to be covered as inclusions or examples under legislation protecting water resources, water quality and catchments. Therefore, there are not strong portfolio or administrative champions for wetlands at either federal or state levels. The focus for wetland activity tends to be on international agreements with obligations for the federal government, translating into development of cooperative federal and state wetland policies without legislative enforcement. There is little direct protection for wetlands in the supporting legislative regulations. Wetland (aquatic) vegetation is not included in the vegetation types listed for protective action. Wetlands are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of changes to their hydrological regime, resulting in too little or too much water, at the wrong season, often with significant changes in quality.

### **2 Multiple legislative coverage creates confusion about messages**

In the multiple legislative coverage of water-related issues, wetlands are not protected against the side-effects of actions to address salinity problems, water delivery, changes to local hydrology (surface and groundwater) and water trading. There are instances where wetlands have been drained to solve dryland salinity impacts on agricultural land, funded by NHT1 grants. Opportunities to gain wetland benefits while solving other problems, such as acid sulfate drainage, can be missed by single-focus programs driven from the economic perspective of sustaining farming, leading to engineered solutions resulting in wetland losses instead of the potential dual benefit of repairing the wetlands and reducing acid drainage.

### **3 Constant changes in funding rules prevents effective action**

The changes in priorities for funding bids and the annual changes to mechanisms for obtaining funding prevent any long term strategic approach to on-ground actions, making it difficult to deliver sustainable natural resource management of wetlands. The removal of the National Wetlands Program from NHT2 means that there is no allocated funding for wetland projects, and this key ecosystem type must compete with the well-established landcare, bushcare and coastcare movements for scarce funding. There is insufficient momentum or funding to ensure that wetlands are being included systematically and

strategically across the 62 regions of Australia. There is also no over-arching mechanism to assess how effective the coverage of wetland issues will be across those regions. The loss of the National Wetlands Program and reduction in funding to the federal agency for wetlands programs means that any national overview cannot be effective in covering 62 regions nationally.

#### **4 Opportunities for engaging the community**

Many opportunities are being missed to engage the community in cooperative partnerships. For the outlay of very minor funding to encourage good land stewardship, landholders and community groups could bring value-adding factors of more than ten times the investment for sustainable land management on the local scale. Incentives schemes and small devolved grants are much more effective than penalties, which are expensive to enforce effectively. The community will follow the lead of a local champion by demonstration much more effectively than responding to direction and restriction through regulations.

#### **5 Stop-start funding prevents development of community ownership of projects**

The impact of frequent changes in funding for biodiversity programs has meant that there is a very high turnover of support and extension officers, leaving communities frustrated with incomplete projects or with no continuity of projects. One community in south-western Victoria overcame this problem by job-sharing the project officer role among local community members. More stable funding will allow the development of trusted extension officers who can provide essential support services to implement the intent of regulations designed to produce sustainable natural resource management.

#### **Summary comments**

Effective sustainable resource management requires a long time frame, which must be supported through stable funding arrangements and community support services. A stable base of strategic sustainable management is required in order for regulations to be effective. The regulations which are being reviewed will operate better if there are clear political messages, backed up by coordinated legislation, regulations and extension services, which support and engage communities to deliver their own sustainable management outcomes. Support and encouragement works much more effectively at the landholder and community level than duress and enforcement.

These points were discussed with Dr Neil Byron, Mr Vince Manion and Mr Alex Maevsky during their visit to our Adelaide office on 3 June. I would be happy to expand on any of the points raised if required.

Yours sincerely

Anne Jensen  
WETLAND DIRECTOR