

# Victorian Landcare Council

## Policy Briefing Note 24



The Senate Inquiry into Landcare and the Australian Government's new National Landcare Program handed down its report in March. The VLC submitted a written response to the Inquiry and appeared before a sitting of the Inquiry Committee in Melbourne. In this Briefing Note, we set out the major findings.

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### Why was the Senate Inquiry held?

The first budget of the current Federal Coalition government radically reduced funding available to Landcare and regional natural resource management bodies by \$471 million over four years (roughly half the previous budget), and allocated \$535 million for the Green Army Programme and \$50 million for 20 Million Trees over four years.

Partly in response to the concerns raised by the NRM sector, on 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2014, the Senate referred nine matters related to NRM programs to the Environment and Communications References Committee (the committee), made up of 2 Coalition Senators, 3 ALP Senators and one Greens Senator. The committee received 73 written submissions and held three public hearings. Landcare advocacy groups were well represented. Many individual Landcare groups and networks made submissions, and some were invited to speak at the public hearings.

The Inquiry report, published March 2015, provides a concise history of Australian Government support for Landcare and a thorough review of the current state of Landcare in the NRM system. It is written simply and is comprehensive in its review of matters affecting Landcare. See the full report, [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment\\_and\\_Communications/landcare/~media/Committees/ec\\_ctte/landcare/report.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/landcare/~media/Committees/ec_ctte/landcare/report.pdf)

### What did the Inquiry conclude?

The committee acknowledged "the importance of using local groups and landholders, employing local knowledge and taking local action to achieve results." It found that

not only does Landcare contribute to improved landscapes through sustainable agricultural and environmental practices; its contribution to individual and community wellbeing is immense. (p 125)

Based on the evidence presented, the committee supported "the continued strengthening of networks and involvement of local groups in regional decision making and planning to achieve enduring outcomes on the ground." It found that the other programs (The Green Army and 20 Million Trees) now funded in the portfolio have a limited relationship to Landcare activities. It concluded that the funding cuts to Landcare and to regional NRM bodies:

have the potential to undermine the Government's stated aim of placing Landcare back at the centre of land management programs. It has the potential to undermine the gains in environmental improvement over the past 25 years and moves to secure increased agricultural productivity into the future. As well, efforts to reengage communities and volunteers, who are so vital to the long-term health of the Landcare movement, may be hindered. (p 127)

On the Green Army, the committee was:

unconvinced that the investment in the Green Army Programme can be seen as a direct substitute for Landcare. The committee considers that the Green Army Programme lacks most of the essential features of Landcare that contribute so significantly to environmental improvement. (p 128)

The Government Senators, in a separate set of comments, asserted that "The Australian Government's Green Army Programme is complimentary to but not replacing Landcare funding" and that:

young people involved in the programme will not only gain valuable skills and training to prepare them for the workforce in this initiative, but the environment will benefit significantly. (p 136)

Of the 20 Million Trees program, the committee noted that Landcare groups already plant many millions of trees annually: "it would have been more efficient, and additional administration costs would have been avoided, had the funding for 20 Million Trees been rolled into Landcare funding." (p 128)

Of the new National Landcare Programme and its commitment to "local, simple and long-term", the committee found the refocus on 'local' appropriate, but had concerns that this might undermine long-term strategic landscape scale planning and action. With NRM funding reduced and access to small grants removed, and with reduction of funding for regional staff supporting local groups and networks, it was concerned about the impact on community and landholder engagement and participation:

Community participation in NRM is crucial to its success and the committee does not consider that lack of funding should undermine genuine community collaboration and engagement by regional NRM bodies. (p 131)

The Government Senators said that the report failed to acknowledge that the requirement that a minimum 20% of regional body funding directed to Landcare and other community groups would provide "access to small project funding", and that the new National Landcare Programme Advisory Committee would provide a way for the government to consult with the sector on how well the principles of local, simple and long-term were being implemented.

In relation to project reporting, the committee recommended that:

reporting be proportionate to the size of a project or grant. Notwithstanding that accountability and good governance is expected at all levels, there should be flexibility in reporting so that the requirements for small-scale projects are commensurate with the size of the project. (p 131)

Along with development of a more effective environmental accounting system, it recommended that reporting requirements "decrease the focus of reporting on outputs and increase reporting of outcomes", and "establish a system of reporting the social outcomes of investment in natural resource management so that the full benefits of that investment are identified." (p 132)

## **What will come of the Inquiry?**

The Federal Coalition government is holding firmly to reduced funding to regional NRM bodies and the Green Army, which remains a pool of funds to be tapped by Landcare and regional NRMs. Just how well the minimum 20% of regional funding supports what Landcare and other community groups want to do remains to be seen. Landcare groups and networks should be take the opportunity to understand the funding allocation process in their region and express their opinion on whether it strengthens community participation in NRM, and how it could do that better.