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## **Landcare: Its Origins, Accomplishments and Lessons Learned**

Address by Ms Fran Freeman, Minister Counsellor- Agriculture  
Australian Embassy, Washington, DC

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation to talk about Australia's experience with landcare.

In the two decades since Landcare's beginning, it has become many things to many people, but this diversity should not obscure the key themes that were identified at its outset, and which still guide its development today. I'll talk about these, and how they have enabled Landcare to maintain and improve its effectiveness as it has evolved.

I should first provide some background.

### **Landuse in Australia**

Only about 10 per cent of Australia is considered to be arable, and many arable areas are characterised by variable rainfall and very old soils of low fertility and poor physical characteristics. Some 75 per cent is classified as rangelands.

This has not prevented the development of Australia, and of the Australian farm sector. The country supports 20 million people enjoying a high standard of living, and the farm sector has become a major land user and a major industry. In 2001-02, it had a Gross Value of Production of A\$39 billion, and exports worth A\$31 billion- a quarter of Australia's total exports.

Today some 60 per cent of Australia's land area is managed by farmers, and 70 per cent of water resources are diverted for productive use. Clearly, to achieve improvements in natural resource management, it is essential to involve farmers.

European settlement of Australia began a little over 200 years ago and brought major changes to landuse in the country. The landuse practices of the Aboriginal people were replaced by European farming methods which were not always appropriate to Australian conditions.

Some of the consequences of this mismatch between farming systems and resource base have included:

- soil loss through erosion, and loss of soil fertility;
- loss of biodiversity;
- rising watertables due to vegetation removal and inappropriate irrigation practices, (which have resulted in productive land being affected by waterlogging and soil salinity). Salinity affects 5 per cent of cultivated land, and is growing at a rate of 3-5 per cent annually;
- poor water quality; and

- introduced pests and weeds.

These forms of degradation are not, of course, limited to Australia. Overall, land and water degradation is estimated to cost up to A\$3.5 billion annually.

The other point of background I need to mention is that Australia has a Federal system and it is the State Governments, not the Commonwealth (ie the Australian) Government, which have Constitutional responsibility for land, water and environmental management. Nevertheless the Australian Government has some relevant direct responsibilities, for example, in quarantine, in the management of Commonwealth-controlled land and marine areas. It also seeks to take the lead in influencing and coordinating policy in what is clearly a vital area of national interest by investing strategically to identify key issues and overcome major obstacles to implementing best practices.

## **ORIGINS**

### **The Origins of Landcare in Australia - A Partnership Approach**

The concept of landcare did not come from Government - it came originally from farming communities. So it originated as a voluntary community-based movement.

A limited number of community groups had been working at the local level to tackle natural resource management and farming problems for a number of years. But the concept of landcare only formally came into being in the mid 1980's with a focus on land degradation and soil conservation matters.

Landcare Groups have been effective in providing a mechanism for local communities to identify resource management problems and using outside technical assistance to devise solutions which address causes rather than symptoms. There are now over 4000 groups across Australia, with membership that includes some 40 per cent of farmers.

Cooperation between all stakeholders including Commonwealth, State and local governments, industry and the community is essential to achieving effective results. In the final event decisions regarding land management should primarily be the responsibility of the land managers themselves, because of their links with the land and because of the need for their long term commitment to sustainable use of their natural resources.

The meaning of the term "landcare" is now generally accepted to encompass not only land degradation issues but also water and related vegetation conservation and management. In other words it involves an integrated approach to managing natural resources sustainably. It also implies the local ownership of land management issues, and their solutions. It is inextricably linked to productive farming systems.

While landcare does involve an element of managing degradation problems (particularly where cost effective) it also encourages recognition of the importance of addressing causes of problems rather than just their symptoms.

This broadens the scope of landcare activities to cover not only land management both on and off the farm, but also the range of socio-economic issues that affect decisions relating to land and natural resource management.

The formation of landcare groups has also often been the impetus for strengthened social cohesion in Australian rural communities which have been under severe strain from low prices and drought.

### **Government Involvement with Landcare**

The Landcare idea originated in a recognition that Government directed programs to control land degradation were not always effective. At the same time Governments in Australia started to recognise the potential within communities for taking charge of their own resource management problems.

This recognition was given impetus by a remarkable coalition of interest of two national non Government organisations normally considered to be on different sides of the development/environment spectrum. In 1989 the National Farmer's Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation proposed to the Australian Government that the 1990's should be the Decade of Landcare. They argued that government should commit additional resources to provide new momentum in addressing land degradation and that there should be a focus on community involvement and self help as the most effective means of promoting change.

This approach was accepted and the Decade of Landcare was launched with broad agreement between governments and the community on a vision, goals and a set of actions for the future.

I should mention three institutions that were established in the early stages that have contributed significantly to the success of Landcare. The first of these is the Australian Landcare Council, a peak advisory body comprising mostly community landcare representatives, which provides policy advice to Australian Government Ministers. In other words, it has high-level access to Government to provide advice and feedback.

There is also Landcare Australia Limited, a separate non-government entity that handles corporate sponsorship, marketing, and publicity- tasks that are more appropriately carried out by a commercial organisation than by government. The corporate sponsorship offered by Landcare Australia gives companies opportunities to associate themselves with the highly recognised and respected Landcare name and logo.

Lastly, there is the National Landcare Facilitator, a person appointed to provide direct linkage between landcare groups and the Australian Government, and a focal point for the networks of coordinators and facilitators working at regional and local level.

### **Government Support for Landcare**

Landcare operates as a partnership between governments and the community. Neither are seen as having the sole responsibility for sustainable resource management and both are expected to contribute to its achievement.

Recognising that community involvement is a crucial element of Landcare, the Australian Government provides funding and support for activities for the sustainable management of land, water and vegetation and the maintenance of biodiversity.

A key focus of Government support has been the provision of coordinators to get landcare groups going and facilitators to help with planning, demonstrations, trials, the development of skills, exchange of information and monitoring.

Funding may also be provided to regional bodies and state agencies for a range of land and water management activities, many of which facilitate and support community action.

Government funding is normally conditional on a matching community contribution in cash and/or kind. This ensures that those undertaking the work have a stake in the success of the activities. Farmers and other land managers are also increasingly directing their own resources to sustainable practices and there are landcare groups which don't seek government support at all.

As you can see, Landcare today has no single formal structure. This provides the adaptability to local requirements and resources that is one of its greatest strengths. This adaptability at the local level is supported by informal networks at the state level. It is also supported by the official organisational structures provided by state soil and land boards, within which groups can operate.

The Australian Government seeks to focus its support on activities which provide a wider public benefit and not to subsidise activities which farmers and other land managers should undertake in their own right.

Australian Government support has come through a number of channels. At the outset of the Decade of Landcare, support was provided through the National Landcare Program, with annual funding of around \$50 million.

In 1996, Australian Government support for natural resource management and environmental activity was dramatically increased and broadened through the establishment of the Natural Heritage Trust.

Based on funds generated by the sale of public assets, the first phase of the Trust represented a commitment of A\$1.5 billion over the six years from 1997 to 2002. The National Landcare Program received funding from this source, as well as its own Decade of Landcare funding.

Building on the lessons learned from its first phase, the Natural Heritage Trust has been extended for a further five years, from 2002-to 2007, with funding of A\$1 billion, with a focus on regional delivery. In addition, in 2001, the Australian Government and the States agreed to initiate a National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, with funding of \$1.4 billion over seven years, focused on 21 seriously affected regions across Australia.

These are significant amounts of money. The fact that they are being applied through arrangements that have evolved from small-scale action by local communities is a strong testimony to the soundness of the basic premises of landcare.

## **ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

### **What has been achieved in the Decade of Landcare?**

Like any investor, the Australian Government has been keen to find out how effective its investment in landcare has been, and whether it should continue to use landcare to achieve its natural resource management objectives. Monitoring and evaluation has been an integral part

of the Government's support for landcare, and has enabled us to track the movement as it has grown and evolved.

There has been a remarkable increase in community awareness of landcare and sustainable resource management. Surveys indicate that the percentage of Australians awareness and recognition of landcare has risen from 22 per cent in 1991 to 85 per cent today. The Landcare 'caring hands' logo has a level of recognition in both city and country that many corporate brands might envy.

The rate of formation of community landcare groups has also exceeded all expectations. From some 200 groups in 1990, the number of groups had grown to over 2,200 by 1994. This was already 1200 more than the initial target for the whole Decade. Today, it is estimated that there are over 4000 landcare groups across Australia.

You will recall that at the beginning of this talk I noted that because some 60 per cent of Australia is managed by farmers, it is essential to improve their management practices in order to achieve significant overall improvement in the condition of Australia's natural resources. Achieving this has been a major accomplishment of Landcare.

Amongst broadacre cropping and livestock farmers membership of landcare groups is now around 40 per cent. Some 60 per cent of these farmers have learned about the causes of land degradation from their landcare involvement. 70 per cent of these farmers have learned how to treat or avoid degradation from landcare, and 64 per cent have learned the benefits of good management of natural resources.

In addition to those directly involved, recent surveys indicate that as many as 75% of farmers and land managers are exposed to landcare activities, or benefit from knowledge acquired through the landcare movement.

We've also found that landcare members have a higher uptake of sustainable practices. They are twice as likely to have developed a farm plan, and are more likely to engage in on-farm works to improve the management of natural resources on their own land.

Such practices are also being taken up more widely in the farming sector. The campaign to promote whole farm planning has been very effective in introducing farmers, whether members of landcare groups or not, to sustainable practices and demonstrating strong links between sustainability and farm profitability.

Another benefit is that farmers engaged in landcare are more aware of the range of programs that are available to promote sustainable use of resources- not just those that provide funds for landcare-related activities, but programs that are not specifically natural resource management –related, such as business management, and environment programs.

The Decade of Landcare has awoken us all to the fact that any degradation of the natural resource base represents a loss of productive capacity and is therefore an impediment to economic and ecological sustainability. Landcare creates the link between environmental stewardship and profitable farming.

More widely, these results reflect the growth in information exchange and mutual learning. The networks that have developed, from the local level to regional and national level, have

allowed ideas and information to be exchanged on an unprecedented scale. They have enhanced the capacity of individuals and groups, giving them the skills and confidence to organise at a range of levels, and tackle larger or more complex issues than would otherwise be feasible.

They have also facilitated greater coordination between individuals and groups. This has enabled local groups to take action on a larger scale, opening the way to address issues at catchment and regional scale. Co-incidentally, the availability of email and internet services in rural areas arrived at the right time to accelerate this process.

The increasing level of corporate support and the greater collaboration between community members, advisers, researchers, resource managers and regulators and policy makers is further evidence of more Australians working together in partnership for sustainable natural resource management.

The way that information gathering, and research and development are undertaken in Australia has changed significantly to focus on the sustainable management of natural resources. Early experience with Landcare showed up the need for much better information on natural resources- for information that was up to date, consistently formatted, and capable of being used to track degradation and our efforts to combat it.

An important part of the first phase of the Natural Heritage Trust was the establishment of a process to provide a snapshot of Australia's natural resources. The National Land and Water Resources Audit was established in 1997, and released its final report in 2002, in a report summarising the condition and management opportunities for Australia's soil, water, rivers, estuaries and biodiversity.

The Audit provides a comprehensive catalogue of the latest information and data on Australia's land, water and vegetation resources- invaluable in ensuring that natural resource management decisions are based on sound scientific data. It is being continued under the second phase of the Natural Heritage Trust.

The Decade of Landcare has also influenced the way we approach research and development. It has been estimated that about half of Australia's farm productivity growth over the last 25 years has come from our investment in research and development. In Australia, industry plays a strong role in setting directions and priorities through joint industry and government research and development corporations.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **Partnerships, capacity building and community engagement**

The value of partnerships became apparent very early in the Decade of Landcare. Partnerships now exist at all levels, between diverse elements of the community- farmers, local, regional, State and national government, researchers, environmentalists and industry.

They provide the basis for assembling the skills, capacities, and resources of the various stakeholders into an agreed plan for tackling a problem, whether it be a local revegetation project, major catchment works, or nationwide capacity building.

The new natural resource management programs emphasise capacity building to empower regional communities.

Capacity building includes awareness, skills, knowledge, motivation, governance, commitment and confidence. In addition to regional bodies, targets for capacity building may include individuals, landcare groups, indigenous communities, industry sectors and all levels of government.

Capacity building for natural resource management goes beyond the traditional, top-down approach of enhancing skills and knowledge through training and provision of technical advice. It focuses on enhancing genuine community engagement in all aspects of natural resource management, from planning to on-ground actions.

### **Regional scale focus**

On its own, the traditional grass-roots landcare approach is unlikely to be able to deliver changes on the scale required to reduce the costs of degradation. However, one mechanism that has arisen from community-driven landcare is a regional approach to management of natural resources.

In the same way that landcare groups have combined to form larger units to tackle larger problems, the regional approach allows managers to make more strategic resource decisions, including trade-offs, without closing the avenues for community consultation and input to planning.

This rationale has underpinned the delivery of national programs. Community-based regional bodies have been established in each of the 58 natural resource management regions covering Australia. Governments are supporting the regions by providing policy direction, technical assistance, skills training, national frameworks, information and data.

There can be a risk that in emphasising regional-scale action, some local groups may feel left out or usurped- no longer able to take their own decisions, and subject to the requirements of an imposed regional plan. To minimise such difficulties, on-going and effective community engagement is essential.

### **Integrated Approaches to Natural Resource Planning**

At the farm or property level, planning on a whole farm basis is essential for sustainable management. Whole farm plans need to be consistent with the next level of planning, namely regional and catchment plans. These identify the most important local issues, determine which issues need to be addressed and decide on the most appropriate actions to be taken. With the advent of the second phase of the Natural Heritage Trust, planning at this level is now standard practice.

Economic and social factors, including structural adjustment and the development of alternative industries, must also be taken into account in land management decisions. These issues need to be tackled in an integrated way, by communities and regions as a whole.

This involves coordination of policies and programs across a wide spectrum of government, including agriculture, land, environment, industry and employment. Landcare is often integral to this process, since land and water degradation can constitute an important constraint to sustainable development and viability in a region.



### **Community Engagement**

Landcare is based on volunteer participation and effort. We need to promote the successes of landcare, and recognise the considerable contribution of volunteers. Landcare Australia Limited stages a major awards ceremony, the National Landcare Awards every two years. It receives national attention, and the Prime Minister usually participates.

These awards serve to recognise and promote the successes of landcare participants to the wider community. State Landcare organisations stage similar events, often in conjunction with Conferences.

### **What still needs to be done?**

I don't want to leave you with the impression that we have solved all our natural resource management problems in Australia or that we think landcare provides all the answers.

If we are to demonstrate a real and lasting change in attitudes and management practices, then we will need substantially more than forty per cent of land managers taking on the concepts of landcare, even if they are not formally members of landcare groups.

We have some big landcare policy issues to address and we are going to need a range of solutions. The key issue remains how to encourage the incorporation of sustainable practices into normal resource management activities without managers becoming dependent on government support, and without resort to direct regulation except where absolutely necessary.

To be truly sustainable enterprises must be profitable enough to pay for on-farm works themselves. Government support is directed towards strategic change by enabling managers to develop solutions, and by helping to create the infrastructure so that managers are able to implement the most appropriate actions.

Government support is also appropriate where there are public benefits, such as in the case of ecosystem services, or where there are off-site impacts.

These issues are the subject of a healthy continuing debate in Australia on the future of landcare.

### **CONCLUSION**

From this brief introduction it will be apparent that landcare in Australia will continue to evolve. Nevertheless, the principles which underlay the success of landcare have not changed. These principles can be summarised as follows:

- partnership- at all levels
- local ownership of problems and solutions
- an integrated approach to the management of land, water and vegetation
- land managers are responsible for their land
- Government funding is a catalyst.

To develop an integrated approach to planning governments must enable and stimulate rather than regulate, and leave room for solutions at the local or regional level.

The acceptance of the landcare model is a function of the unique social, economic and cultural background of those Australians who manage our land. Nevertheless, some of its attributes have been of interest to other countries considering a similar land management model, and have already seen practical application beyond Australia.

Finally, it has been said that achieving sustainability is like riding a surfboard on a wave which never gets to the beach. The important thing is to keep riding. We must continue to develop policies and programs for sustainable natural resource management on the basis of new information and continuing experience.

Ends