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IMFA 22

Growing Agriculture @ 41 Degrees South

Conference Sub-Theme: Environment and resources

Lundstrom G

**TOWARD A BETTER NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DELIVERY
MODEL WITH A GREATER EMPHASIS ON THE FARMING SECTOR
– THE TAMAR VALLEY EXPERIENCE**

2,459 words

Paper is applied (not academic)

Submitted: 16th November, 2018

Revised: 2nd January, 2019

TOWARD A BETTER NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DELIVERY MODEL WITH A GREATER EMPHASIS ON THE FARMING SECTOR – THE TAMAR VALLEY EXPERIENCE

Abstract

A belief that the current natural resource management (NRM) delivery model in Australia is failing to provide tangible on ground outcomes within the farming sector is proving to be a catalyst for the examination of alternative delivery models. However, there exist workable examples contributing to on-farm NRM and production outcomes that provide value for money investment, with the flexibility to cater to local needs at a sub-regional level. These community-based models owe their success by being truly community driven and more closely linked to producers and local government than the regional NRMs are. The Tamar Valley has such a community driven model, which demonstrates another way for NRM program and project delivery into the farming sector.

Keywords: Natural resource management, delivery model, Tamar, community

Introduction

Since the 1970's governments have sought to address the communities' environmental concerns on a range of land, water and air issues. The recognition that communities can make valuable contributions in a participatory governance setting was an early driver for delivery model development. A decade of Landcare concluded in 2001 and while Landcare and community-based groups continued to demonstrate their ability to foster broad-scale community participation by 2002 Australia was transitioning to a regional NRM delivery model with regional priorities (Love, C. 2011, p. 46, 53-54).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully examine the current state of NRM reform at an individual state or federal level but in South Australia the state government is moving to repeal the Natural Resources Management Act (2004) stating that “*Over time natural resources management has become too centralised, overly complex and has not been*

delivering for the people of this state" (SA Liberal Party, Media Release - July 2018). In Tasmania two of the three NRM bodies are yet to secure federal funding under the land partnerships agreement needed to continue operating the present NRM delivery model. Governments are searching for a new delivery model, and see the farm sector as an obvious catalyst for change.

There are many aspects of regional NRM delivery that should be maintained and others where the three tiers of government and communities could be working together in new ways, facilitated differently than is presently the case. Whether delivered at a regional scale or individual catchment scale, program activities need to contribute to an overall plan such as the regional NRM and Catchment Management Authority plans to be most effective. This is one area where the regional NRMs provide a valuable service by providing a blue print for works prioritisation.

A wicked funding problem leading to a "vegemite" management approach

Current funding opportunities at a federal level seek to deliver into on-ground farm focussed projects, making it difficult for NRM bodies to continue delivering the suite of programs that meet the outcomes expected of them under the relevant federal Act. This includes meeting the requirements of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999) which seeks to "*manage nationally and internationally important flora, fauna, ecological communities and heritage places defined in the Act as matters of national environmental significance*" (EPBC Act, 1999).

Spreading the available NRM funding across multiple program areas is leading to a "vegemite" approach to regional NRM management, where insufficient resources mean nothing gets done to the level that would build greater respect for regional NRM delivery. After administrative elements are covered there remains little to offer as devolved grants to those sub-regional groups, issues-based community groups and landholders willing to undertake on-ground action.

The idea of building the necessary community and project partners' acceptance of the current NRM delivery model at one end of the delivery spectrum and providing value for money accountability to funding bodies and government at the other end, is seemingly not meeting the expectations of either. Community perceptions of regional NRM delivery is becoming increasingly problematic, despite the fact that programs are qualitatively and quantitatively assessed against resource condition targets through well-established

accountability frameworks and on-line reporting tools including MERIT, the Regional Land Partnerships MERI framework and the NRM MERI framework (NRM MERI Framework, 2009).

What is clear is that since the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) Act of 1997, the substantial funding that followed, the subsequent Caring for our Country (CfoC) funding; through to the NLP phase 1 and 2, there has been a diminishing amount of money allocated to provide for NRM on-ground outcomes. This has limited the strategic and operational activities of regional NRM bodies and limited the on-ground action for community-based groups. Most recently, devolved grants on offer have been reduced and the federal government's NLP small environmental grants will have no further rounds under the NLP2 program. The Report on the Review of the National Landcare Program (Aust. Government Report 2017, p7) states that *"Many sub-programs were significantly oversubscribed, demonstrating a strong interest by the community in natural resource management"* highlighting that interest in community driven projects exists but is not being matched by available funding allocation. Getting more program delivery efficiencies at a regional level would mean more money on-ground. The federal government state they *"remain committed to on-ground natural resource management through projects targeting key national environment and sustainable agriculture priorities at the regional level"* (NLP / Price, M. & Littleproud, D., 2018). However, the current regional delivery model all but excludes those organisations that are not large enough to take on NRM programs at a large landscape scale. Economies of scale, while important, should not be at the expense of actual community engagement at a grass-roots level and the resultant capacity building it brings with it. Community-based groups are increasingly at risk, having to cobble together projects from the disparate and small funding opportunities that become available.

Some states are providing additional financial resources toward NRM, and there is an appetite for reform to a more cost-effective efficient delivery model that provides for greater on-ground outcomes.

A community-based model that works

An example of a northern Tasmanian NRM delivery model that has garnered wide farm sector support is being delivered by the not-for-profit organisation Tamar NRM (TNRM). Operating since 1998, this non-government NRM works at a sub-regional level across three council areas. The organisation's success lies in three key areas; its close relationship

with the three Tamar Valley Councils; its strong community driven project approach, building on what the rural and urban communities want of an NRM organisation; and taking a flexible approach to project delivery, dealing with local issues as they arise and not being constrained by federal or state priorities, as the regional NRM bodies are.

The TNRM model pre-dates the regional NRM arrangements and is in its twentieth year leveraging over 7 million dollars for projects, most of which are directly benefitting the farming sector or having on-farm components.

TNRM has a reference group of eighty persons and a management committee of eleven persons that are essential in maintaining its strong community driven project approach. They facilitate six sub-regional working groups with strong agricultural sector representation on the industry and issue specific technical reference groups of Sustainable Agriculture, Weeds Working Group, Feral Cat Eradication Group, George Town Coastal Management Group, Plastic Free Launceston and Sustainable Living Working Group.

Five key focus areas identified for the next three years for TNRM are Sustainable Living, Sustainable Farming, Biodiversity, Weeds, and Feral Cats, with alignment to local strategies and plans remaining central to project and program planning. (Tamar NRM Strategic Directions 2018-2021, 2018). The strategic directions aim to deliver through sectorial and stakeholder engagement with a strong emphasis on farm sector involvement.

A flexible approach to project delivery is part of the organisational cultural, where a solid history of delivering programs quite diverse in content means TNRM are open to community suggestions for projects. TNRM see dealing with local issues as they arise is the most prudent way of addressing them before they get out of hand. Being a non-government organisation they are not constrained by federal or state priorities, as the regional bodies are. This is a key difference from the regional delivery model and resonates well with the farming community in particular. TNRM does however, partner with regional NRM on projects to prevent duplication and works closely with state agencies on NRM compliance matters. Their multi-sector partnerships involve the necessary organisations who need to be at the table and often there is a need to scale a project upward taking in other council areas, to reflect a bioregion or the agricultural activity area. The TNRM model is flexible enough to allow this to occur.

The TNRM experience has shown that having the community and private sector involved in sub-regional program design and partnering, increases investment in projects.

Partnerships with the farm sector are central to outcomes, and as an example, a current industry funded pasture demonstration site project running on three farms has over \$30,000 of investment from the landholders involved. Providing not only on-farm benefits for the landholders concerned, but to the Tamar Valley Farmers that get to see the on-farm benefits and returns at field days and then applying those practices on their own farms.

Building a relationship with the farm sector over a 20 year period has yielded over 40 farm focussed projects that match the extension needs in the key farming enterprises of the Tamar Valley.

TNRM maintains close working relationships with three Tamar Valley councils of Launceston, West Tamar and George Town. Three neighbouring councils provides a spatially manageable sub-region where one or two NRM project officers can navigate around project sites meeting with stakeholders without being on the road a high proportion of the day. This is particularly important where field based activities are occurring such as revegetation and farming related projects. Local government plays an essential role in the identification and management of the region's environmental, social and economic needs. As stated by the Northern Tasmanian NRM: *"Local government's strategic direction of identifying and supporting natural resource management is necessary to realise multiple benefits from planning and policy decisions and to strive for sustainable outcomes."* (NRM North Strategy, 2015).

Local government in the Tamar Valley recognises the contribution the farming sector plays in their municipalities and seeks to support the farm sector in part by continuing to recognise the TNRM community driven approach as one with merit. In return, TNRM provides program updates to council, both in written report form and by presenting to councils twice yearly where alignment with council plans and strategies accompanies the presentations. The aldermen and councillors respond positively to the farm-focussed project delivery, such as weed management on private and council lands citing the TNRM annual ragwort raid and boneseed blitz. The value of these on-ground weed control work avoiding production losses of millions of dollars is so highly regarded that base funding and in-kind to TNRM from councils is now in its 20th year. The two way communication between TNRM and the three councils has remained healthy and collaborative, with advice provided to local government when requested.

Conclusion

On-farm outcomes maximise NRM outcomes as the farming sector holds the largest tracts of land and if engaged correctly can be provided with the necessary extension services to maximise sustainable farming outcomes. These services are best delivered as a mix of private sector services, involvement from the three tiers of government and NRM.

The regional NRM model in Australia will be subject to review and reform into the foreseeable future. Providing regional planning will remain important but their role and effectiveness in on-ground implementation is continually being questioned. Financially constrained budgets, funding being spread over too many complex program areas, diminishing support at the grass-roots and governments regularly tinkering with the regional delivery model are a big part of the problem. Future reforms will need to be achieving more on-ground outcomes and the communication of these results to the community in a much more meaningful way.

Sub-regional NRM and community-based groups continue to engage with their own communities in ways that regions and government engagement cannot. Sub-regional organisations service a spatially smaller area, and in so doing remain relevant to that community dealing with the issues that matter to them, with enough flexibility to be scaled up when necessary.

Not enough of the learnings on community and sector engagement coming from sub-regional NRM delivery is taken into account when reforming NRM delivery. On-ground delivery must meet the stated objectives of all levels of government where value for money is seen as paramount. Sub-Regional organisations should not be locked out of participatory decision making or access to funding streams because of their size. More devolved grants would provide them with the necessary financial resources to maintain their networks and build a healthier respect for natural resource management. Alignment with relevant regional plans and strategies happens as a part of the current funding application process, so all size organisations meeting this requirement should be seen as equals.

Supporting and resourcing the farming sector to deliver NRM outcomes at all scales remains essential and the utilisation of sub-regional NRM with strong links to local government can provide the necessary participatory approach in project/program development and implementation needed right now.

Presented here is a transferable model that will be of interest to delegates attending the International Farm Management Congress - Growing Agriculture @ 41 Degrees South. Applying what has been demonstrated here in Tasmania over a 20 year period, where the farming sector are engaged delivering NRM outcomes at a sub-regional level, is possible in other parts of the world. Identifying any areas of restraint inherent in their current delivery models, delivering NRM with support from local government and the farm sector and maintaining the flexibility that comes from NRM management at a sub-regional scale are all transferable concepts to be considered for NRM delivery in an Australian or global context.

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