

## **2. RECENT CHANGES IN THE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT**

Both the State and Federal governments have introduced a number of significant natural resource management (NRM) initiatives, particularly relating to dryland salinity, in the second half of 2000. This reflects an increasing awareness amongst policy makers and the community about the urgent need for action to prevent further irreversible degradation of the national resource base.

The following sections provide an update for Section 1.3 in the Stage 1 report on the Planning Framework for catchment planning.

### **2.1. National Initiatives**

#### **2.1.1. Commonwealth Government**

The national discussion paper "*Managing Natural Resources in Rural Australia for a Sustainable Future*", released for comment in December 1999, proposed a new national policy framework to build on the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and the Decade of Landcare.

The key outcomes sort were:

- Healthy ecosystems;
- Innovative and competitive industries; and
- Self-sustaining and pro-active regional communities.

It was proposed that these outcomes could be achieved by:

- Increasing cooperation by working effectively with all stakeholders, through partnerships and cost sharing;
- Devolving authority and empowering regions to make decisions and deliver programs at a regional level;
- Investing strategically at the regional scale to achieve integrated NRM;
- Facilitating change through incentives, innovation, and improved linkages between production and environmental outcomes;
- Building on Landcare through continued commitment and promotion;
- "Building capacity" by enhancing skills of individuals and regional communities; and
- Creating knowledge by improving access to and use of information and research.

The *National Action Plan (NAP) for Salinity and Water Quality*, announced by the Prime Minister in November 2000, has built on this proposal, as well as the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) initiatives (outlined below in 2.1.2), the NHT and State strategies. It outlines a \$700 million package from the Federal government, (to be met equally by the States), to provide funds for:

- Research;
- Mapping;
- Regional planning; and
- Actions.

The funding aims to improve water quality/water use and limit the impacts of dryland salinity across twenty-one catchments in Australia. The Macquarie-Castlereagh catchment in the NSW Central West is one of the nominated catchments.

The key elements of the National Action Plan are:

- Setting targets for natural resource management - especially salinity, water quality and flow, and biodiversity;
- Accredited Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) plans, developed by the community in the nominated catchments;
- Capacity building for communities to help develop and deliver integrated plans, and provision of technical and scientific support;
- Improve the governance framework, including implementation of water property rights and pricing policies to achieve the Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) water reforms, vegetation clearing restrictions, and market based incentive systems to encourage change;
- Accountability to ensure satisfactory returns on government investment;
- Well defined roles and responsibilities for State and Commonwealth government and the community (the role and responsibility of local government was not mentioned); and
- Public communication program.

This is a far-reaching statement with a ten-year timeframe. However, it is worth noting that Federal and State government agencies are still working out exactly how it will be implemented, including devolution to regions, plan accreditation and the scientific validation of targets. While the Little River catchment plan has aimed to cover all the anticipated requirements, unforeseen areas may need to be addressed at a later stage.

The requirements for accredited plans (as outlined in the document "*Our Vital Resources - A National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality in Australia*") are provided below:

- **Targets and Outcomes** - to ensure that integrated catchment/region management plans contribute to the achievement of nationally agreed outcomes, catchment/region specific targets for salt, nutrients, water flow regimes, water quality, stream and terrestrial biodiversity will be required.
- **Accreditation** - the Commonwealth and States/Territories will jointly accredit individual plans in order to be confident that they will deliver the agreed outcomes. This will involve assessment of their quality including: timetables, performance measures, accountability and reporting arrangements.
- **Funding** - communities will be supported to implement accredited plans through block funding. This will be provided by the Commonwealth and the States/Territories on a 50:50 basis for the publicly funded element of the plan.
- **Plan Content** - the emphasis will vary from catchment to catchment (or from region to region), but to address water quality, salinity and associated biodiversity issues, plans are likely to include specific actions to:
  - Map salinity hazard using "ultrasound" technology and assess catchment/region condition and issues;
  - Maintain and improve the condition of existing native vegetation;
  - Establish multiple purpose perennial vegetation (focussed on agriculture, forests, biodiversity and carbon credits) in targeted areas, identified through salinity, vegetation and hydrology mapping, and groundwater modelling;
  - Protect and rehabilitate priority waterways, floodplains and wetlands;

- Improve environmental flows, where this is beneficial;
- Improve stream water quality using engineering works in critical areas (eg. salt interception devices and groundwater pumping, removal of weirs and redundant structures, fish ladders, artificial wetlands);
- Install drainage in catchments/regions where agreed by affected land managers, the downstream impacts are positive, and the overall benefits of the scheme provide substantial long-term results over other approaches;
- Address the harder adjustment and property amalgamation issues; and
- Address rural / urban infrastructure (buildings, roads, etc.) degradation issues.

It has been announced that there will be a follow-up program to the NHT. Funding for NHT II will be in addition to the NAP.

### **2.1.2. Murray Darling Basin Commission**

In September 2000, the MDBC released a draft strategy on Dryland Salinity and another on Integrated Catchment Management.

The Draft *Integrated Catchment Management in the Murray-Darling Basin 2001-2010*, outlines the commitment of the MDBC Ministerial Council and its Community Advisory Committee (CAC) to manage the resources of the basin in an ecologically sustainable manner to achieve - healthy rivers, healthy ecosystems and catchments, innovative and competitive industries, and healthy regional communities. This will be achieved through integrated catchment management.

The proposed process to achieve this is through:

- Setting targets for catchment health for water quality, water sharing, river ecosystem health and terrestrial biodiversity;
- Strengthen links between land use planning and catchment planning;
- Support and strengthen catchment management arrangements;
- Define responsibilities and accountabilities;
- Ensure all partners have the capacity to "play their part";
- Commit adequate resources to implement integrated plans and achieve the goals; and
- Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting.

Innovative mechanisms will be adopted to assist in achieving the targets set by the MDBC and the catchment communities. These include institutional reforms, regulation, marketing mechanisms, direct investment, increased knowledge, support of the community and accreditation of land use plans, strategies and actions.

The *Basin Salinity Management Strategy 2001-2015* is the latest in a series of strategies (Drainage, Blue Green Algae) to be developed by the MDBC to improve the health of the Basin's resources, by providing a framework for other planning initiatives. However, it is the first to include specific targets - in this case; the level of salinity of the river water at the end

of each tributary valley. These targets will have to be met if the ultimate objective of drinkable water at the end of the river system is to be achieved.

A program of both landscape change and engineering works is proposed, depending on the severity of salinity in the catchment. The MDBC now believes that "living with salt" is inevitable in many catchments and that engineering options such as drainage, salt interception and groundwater pumping will need to be implemented, as well as salt harvesting and saltland agronomy.

The Salinity Strategy is consistent with all the objectives and processes outlined in the ICM Strategy. The States are responsible for offsetting salinity impacts for developments as of January 2000, including the recording of salinity debits and credits on a salinity register.

## **2.2. State Initiatives**

### **2.2.1. NSW Salinity Strategy**

The *NSW State Salinity Strategy* was released in August 2000, following the Salinity Summit held in Dubbo in March 2000. It aims to slow the rate of salinisation through better catchment management, particularly of our vegetation and water resources.

The strategy has set interim "end of valley" targets for in-stream salinity levels. These targets are consistent with the MDBC "end of valley" targets. The Central West Catchment Management Board (CWCMB) will review these targets and make final recommendations to State Government in August 2001. The State Strategy also proposes market-based incentives, strategic investment, and plans to establish an Environmental Services Investment Fund to encourage managers to manage their properties for a specific environmental outcome. Several of these programs will be trialed in the Central West (see 2.3.2.).

### **2.2.2. Native Vegetation Management Plans**

The Native Vegetation Conservation Act, introduced in 1997, continues to have a major impact on the way the remaining native vegetation is managed. The "Narcoolah" Regional Vegetation Management Committee has been established to the north, covering the Coolah, Narrabri and Coonabarabran shires. The Regional Vegetation Management Plan for the Mid-Lachlan (neighbouring catchment to the south west) has recently been approved, following community consultation in early 2000. There has been no planning committee established in the area covered by the Little River catchment plan.

### **2.2.3. Catchment Management Boards**

Catchment Management in NSW was restructured in 2000, and new boards announced with different memberships and a very focussed set of tasks to be completed within twelve months. The Water Reform Committees (Regulated Rivers, Unregulated Rivers and Groundwater) and Regional Vegetation Committees are considered to be the "operational arms" of the Catchment Boards, while the boards set targets and strategies to achieve State objectives and fulfil their requirements to implementing Murray Darling Basin initiatives.

#### **2.2.4. PlanFirst**

In February, 2001, the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning released the White Paper - *PlanFirst - a review of plan making in NSW*, which seeks to modernise plan making, and achieve a balance between sustainable environmental development, economic development and job growth, and quality of life.

The report proposes a three tiered system based on Local Government Areas, based on:

- A single local plan for each council area, which implements the regional plan at local level;
- A single regional strategy for each region in NSW, to give a common direction for local plans, and to bring together all the other planning processes occurring across the region eg. water management plans, catchment management board targets, and vegetation management plans; and
- State planning policies in a single document to improve accessibility and inform regional planning.

There are eleven proposed regions, in addition to the Sydney metropolitan area. The proposed regions affecting the area of this catchment plan are: the Central West Region, which includes the Cabonne Shire, and the Orana Region, which includes Wellington and Dubbo Shires.

### **2.3. Local Initiatives**

#### **2.3.1. Central West Catchment Management Board (CWCMB)**

The Central West Catchment Management Board (CWCMB), formed in July 2000, replaced the former Central West Catchment Management Committee (CWCMC). The Board is required to develop natural resource management targets for the Macquarie, Castlereagh, and Bogan River catchments by August 2001. Preliminary targets have been proposed at this time, and once finalised, these targets will be binding when they have been approved by the State Government. These targets will also be the process by which the MDBC Salinity Strategy will be implemented at the local catchment scale. Catchment targets will set the framework for activities and targets in the subcatchments within the area.

#### **2.3.2. Central West "TARGET" project**

The TARGET project is a collaborative effort involving NSW State Government (Salinity Strategy funding) and the Murray Darling Basin Commission, in co-operation with local community groups, to implement on-ground works.

The project aims to make large-scale land use change in specific areas in the Macquarie, Lachlan and Castlereagh catchments, including the Little River subcatchment. Seventy (70)% of the funds will be directed towards on-ground works and training, with the remaining 30% going toward research consultancies into economic impediments, social implications and ecological outcomes of the changes, establishing monitoring sites, and developing incentive packages to hasten the rate of change in farm management practice.

Approximately \$340 000 has been allocated to the Little River Catchment, and staff from the Salinity Team, located with DLWC, will be working closely with the LRLG to allocate and manage this funding. It is anticipated that "TARGET" funding priorities will be consistent with this plan.

However, the Little River catchment plan will make further recommendations about priorities and implementation processes over a longer timeframe and broader range of issues. It will also seek resources from a range of organisations with a role or responsibility to invest in the management of our natural resources.

NSW Agriculture also has funds from the State Salinity Strategy to investigate sustainable farming systems. One of these sites is expected to be in the Central West, and it is anticipated that intercropping, crop rotations, and water balance issues will be investigated.

### **2.3.3. Mid Macquarie Regional Plan**

The Mid Macquarie Landcare Inc. (MML) (formerly known as the Wellington Dubbo Land Management) group are developing a regional resource management plan simultaneously. Close collaboration is being maintained between the project teams and steering committees, and the Little River catchment plan has established many of the key approaches for planning within the region, ensuring that the needs of this community will be met by consistent planning at both scales.

The DLWC appears to perceive the LRLG as being a constituent of the MML group. For example, funds allocated to the Little River catchment from the TARGET project will be administered by MML group, rather than by LRLG. As part of Stage 3, and prior to implementation of this catchment plan, the LRLG needs to decide what institutional and administrative arrangements are most suitable for its purposes and to achieve successful implementation, and enact whatever steps are necessary to achieve this.