

Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council Framework for future NRM Programmes: A critique from The Australian Landcare Management System Group (The ALMS Group)ⁱ

Introduction

On the 24th November 2006 the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council endorsed a Framework for future NRM programmes. It is important that this Framework is constructively examined by all stakeholders.

The Framework sensibly lists the principal understandings upon which it is based and it highlights the importance of natural resources and the roles played by private and public sector managers in managing these assets. ALMS supports these understandings and observations and believes they should be expanded particularly in relation to the involvement of land managers.

The Framework does not adequately acknowledge the need to strengthen the drivers for improved NRM.

The Framework identifies the need for land managers to incorporate NRM considerations into their management decisions and it refers to the need to improve institutional arrangements. However apart from positing three ‘supply’ side measures- a need to improve the managerial ability of land managers, a need to build community capacity and a need to support a regional approach- the Framework does not directly or by inference identify the primary constraints to improving the impact of land managers on natural resources. Consequently these primary constraints may not be addressed.

The ALMS experience, the history of Landcare and a substantial body of research point to there being a cohort of progressive land managers who wish to improve NRM but that they are constrained in doing so by the perception and/or the reality of a lack of tangible benefits. Given the importance of the decisions of land managers ALMS believes that the Framework needs to place much greater emphasis on the ‘demand’ side of the NRM equation, that is on how to strengthen existing drivers and to enable new drivers for improving environmental outcomes.

Demand side initiatives are particularly critical given the mixed public /private good nature of most environmental outcomes, externalities and the credence nature of environmental attributes. Furthermore it is widely accepted that if the drivers for improving NRM could be strengthened then an enhanced capability would quickly follow.

Drivers for improving NRM include improved self esteem/satisfaction, improved understanding of the benefits and costs of improving NRM (at least when that is a positive ratio), improved recognition and rewards from a wide array of potential market and non-market sources through to the mandated regulatory drivers. Activating and strengthening each of these drivers requires credible recognition of improved NRM and of regulatory compliance. Such a recognition system would

enable a wide range of drivers to strengthen the motivation of land managers to improve NRM.

Market-based-instruments (MBIs) can be seen as being one way to strengthen the drivers for improving NRM. However as they are currently designed and implemented MBIs are just another way---maybe a better way--- of allocating targeted public sector grants or natural resource access rights; that is when they operate well they enable improved allocation of subsidies/rights to improve NRM. In most instances however they are beset with substantial transaction costs, most landholders are ineligible/are not participants, they have high information requirements and they do not result in widely applicable, credible and sustained recognition of improved NRM.

Business management research and related policy analysis by the ALMS Group point to the need to implement a system or systems that credibly recognise improved NRM. Such a system or systems should apply across a wide range of land uses and be practical and cost effective. Although such systems are available industry organisations and some government representatives are concerned that they would not be effective or cost efficient. Such concerns are not supported by evidence based documentation.

The Framework does not reflect the fact that NRM is largely about managing the impacts of people on natural resources

The Framework recognises that it is (often) more cost-effective to prevent damage than to repair it. This observation supports an understanding that environmental management primarily is about the impacts of people on the natural resources. However the Framework rarely focuses on the need to support management processes/practices that give rise to better environmental outcomes or on the need to discourage management processes/practices that give rise to worse environmental outcomes. Rather we see in the Framework emphasis on, for instance, biodiversity decline, salinity, deteriorating water quality, erosion, acidification, decline of soil structure and vegetation loss. These are impacts of actions. Rather than focusing so exclusively on those impacts the Framework should have a stronger emphasis on the causes of those impacts, and others.

The Framework does not give sufficient attention to the need to involve individual land managers and groups of land managers in identifying what needs to be done, and how.

The Framework lists the national, State, regional and local investment scales but amazingly not the individual land manager scale, or even the group of land managers' scale. Additionally, whilst it is difficult to argue against the proposal that future natural resource investment portfolios should reflect the priorities placed on key assets and the threats to them, land managers need to be more effectively involved in identifying key assets on a property-by-property basis in a catchment context. In any event attention to protecting key assets needs to be balanced by attention to improve the environmental impacts of land managers generally.

The Framework does not reflect an understanding of environment management systems.

The Framework acknowledges that environment management systems (EMS) offer a high potential for achieving good environmental outcomes. However it then goes on to limit their potential application to private lands with the EMS operating in the narrow context of ‘good business management’; and with the need to incorporate adaptation to climate change into existing EMS approaches.

An EMS is a management tool to improve the environmental impacts of an organisation. Whilst individual organisations, whether they are in the public, private or community sectors, develop their EMS to reflect their activities and impacts, the general structure of an EMS can be applied irrespective of the nature of an organisation’s activities and hence, as a management tool, it is not restricted to the private sector or to a particular form or forms of land use.

The Framework does not acknowledge the potential of EMS to effectively integrate the delivery of public and private goods, to deal with externalities/spatial considerations, to efficiently combine and apply private and public sector resources, to assist in monitoring and evaluation and to help guide R&D. Most importantly an EMS based approach to recognising improved environmental outcomes is arguably the most ecologically, behaviourally and cost effective way of strengthening the drivers for improving NRM. It is for this reason that the ALMS Group advocates implementation of a voluntary Australian land management certification system.

ⁱ The ALMS Group is a not-for-profit organisation established by landholders to improve environmental outcomes and to assist land managers and their support organisations to receive appropriate recognition. Extensive documentation supporting the points raised in this paper can be found at www.alms.org.au or by contacting Tony Gleeson, Executive Director, the ALMS Group: phone: 074-6664112 email;syncons@bigpond.com (January 24th 2007).