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Project Director
Land and Biodiversity White Paper Project Team
Department of Sustainability and Environment
PO Box 500
East Melbourne 3002

26 June 2007

Dear Project Director

Please find attached a submission from Castlemaine Landcare Group (CLG) in response to the issues paper *Land and biodiversity at a time of climate change*.

The issues paper has many high level questions which we as a group will leave to others to address. Our submission focuses on maintaining an appropriate role for the Landcare delivery end of those high level issues.

Currently the field has a number of players funding and directing Landcare, a situation which can be confusing to those on the ground. However, we recognise the value in diversity, as long as there are also ways of covering any major cracks which appear between agency programs. We have tried to identify some of those cracks.

In summary, CLG believes that Landcare, as both a movement and a process, needs to be supported with policies and programs that:

- Recognise the vision "from the ground up"
- Facilitate learning from experience - including mistakes
- Remain minimally bureaucratic for those involved
- Offer support with some base funding to allow groups to continue operating without the need always to go for grants or to reach into private pockets to pay for those aspects which funding rounds don't cover
- Have a funding cycle which allows a multi-year plan to be developed and delivered
- Provide volunteer workers with face to face opportunities to learn from others
- Are funded sufficiently to support Landcare groups with the best possible advice at the time, but assist them to be ready to respond to changing advice without recrimination or a sense of frustration or failure
- Resource local governance to provide a closer form of subsidiarity

We thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.

Yours sincerely

Christine Kilmartin
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Land and biodiversity at a time of climate change

Submission from Castlemaine Landcare Group

Landcare is local commitment

As a movement, Landcare is already respected for its enormous voluntary contribution, which requires ongoing support.

But Landcare is a process, as well as a movement.

As a process, Landcare generates an important aspect which requires support, namely, the mutual learning from experience and on-the-ground observation of nature's healing at a local scale.

The scale is important. Landcare groups take generalised knowledge and apply it to very local situations. Sometimes they are working pretty much on their own and depend upon the wealth of knowledge which members of the group have acquired. Sometimes they will get it a bit wrong and need room to learn and re-do. The small scale needs patience, energy, a long term vision and the right to be heard.

Of course, the CLG vision is for healthy ecosystems working in conjunction with healthy economic and social systems. Most Landcarers are part of all three at once. How best, then, do we retain the commitment of busy local people to this process?

The ongoing role for Landcare is with and learning to know the land

CLG recognises that places like Mount Alexander Shire have benefitted economically from previous historical disruptions to the natural environment, such as the gold-rush and farming. We also recognise that through these processes, some knowledge of previous ecosystems has been lost permanently, and that the re-vegetative work which groups such as ours do will in fact help develop ecosystems with new elements, some of them unknown. Landcare support needs constantly to acknowledge that ecosystems are complex and our knowledge is far from complete.

CLG recognises that some of its practices are necessarily interventionist. In battling with weeds and denuded soils, we are not simply "letting nature take its course". We are attempting to speed up restorative processes and slow down destructive ones.

As Landcarers we see ourselves having, and want to have, an ongoing role in managing the public land estate. We have appreciated the role ascribed to us and the cooperation of DSE, NCCMA and our own Local Government toward us.

Sometimes, we are perplexed by transgressing rules of which we are not aware, by the miscommunication which can occur between agencies, by the limited resourcing of our key agencies including local government, by the ever increasing bureaucracy imposed upon us and by the lack of clarity in issues such as our liability with which we have to grapple. We are concerned that, in order to do the things on the ground which we see as necessary, we are likely to be overwhelmed with the need to prove, justify, follow policies rather than having time to do, listen, watch and respond in our own local patch.

Agencies might have the big picture, but we also have the small picture. We know when we have cleared a hectare or two effectively of woody weeds. We know that our effort is miniscule in the face of the large challenges which policy makers must tackle, but we don't want to get lost in that big picture, nor simply to do the bidding of our policy masters if it does not seem to be suitable for our space and our time. We want mind room, and ownership of our directions.

We may not all be environmental experts, but we are energetic. We don't want that energy to be dissipated in rounds of grant applications and report writing. We would like some way of ensuring annual base funding sufficient to allow us to operate an executive, run several

meetings of members and with the Landcare network, and purchase sufficient products for us to keep tackling weeds. We would like our grant application energies to be for higher level restoration projects.

Sometimes, we have to make the choice between reading a high level policy document such as a Regional Catchment Strategy and working the ground. We often don't have time for both and as Landcarers we go for the practical option! Sometimes that means we make mistakes, but we would like to be supported to shorten that circuit. People-resourcing of regional agencies is one of the best ways to keep Landcare groups informed of the higher level priorities. Websites are also a good source of knowledge, but a fair way behind the personal touch.

We are thinking about climate change - and want to be doing

CLG recognises the need to start planting for climate change. So while we wish to reference good scale EVC knowledge, we also want to contribute to experimentation to build resilience in natural systems. Hence, for us, simply being given a list of existing or known EVC species and being requested to stick to these seems only a partially appropriate response to local soil, water and climate conditions.

We would very much like to be participants in testing new approaches. For this we would need to be ably supported, because we are volunteers, and subject to the vagaries of illness, family interruptions, workloads, creaking bones and general burnout, particularly when the major reward in the system appears to be more and more bureaucratic form filling. Of course for us, the reward is to see plant growth on poor soil with little water, galaxias in pools, rare butterflies or mycorrhiza appearing; or to hear the encouragement of a passer-by as we work. We see local, even if we are not always sure how well we fit into the bigger picture.

CLG have recently set up some key monitoring roles and believe that if good monitoring is supported and improved, those records will attain importance in recording climate change and the resilience of local systems to adapt. However, monitoring can be time consuming and expensive and CLG would appreciate additional support as part of the Government's initiative.

For instance, we would like to be able to put more emphasis on the pre-planting stage, particularly on soil preparation. Could we draw on a bank of people for soil testing and soil knowledge through something like Soil Watch?

Nature hasn't got the hang of annual funding (and neither have we)

Nature doesn't work in annual funding cycles.

We would like to be able to plan at least 3 years ahead and to know that a longer term plan is likely to be supported and funded throughout. Working systematically is very difficult when we have to apply for only parts of a process, or try squeezing a process into a shorter time frame to suit funding requirements.

Sometimes, it is only as we start to confront a particular stage in the process that we can think through exactly what is required. But then, we want to get on with it, not wait a couple of years until a successful grant application gives us the resources. Occasionally, for instance, we would like to be able to call in the occasional expert without dragging them from an already too-busy job, or thinking about how to pay them when we hadn't quite thought ahead two years previously in an annual grant application. A land and biodiversity strategy which supports ongoing links between those with key knowledge and those who want to act on that knowledge would be appreciated.

Help us talk with and learn from others doing the same things

We would like to be offered more opportunities to meet together with other Landcarers on a regular basis, to learn from one another and from the best science. Our labour is given freely, and we would like our learning to be freely available also. The Wimmera Catchment Management Authority, together with DSE and DPI, has been running an annual biodiversity seminar for the past decade, a highly educative initiative and it offers good networking. Other

such learning opportunities could be more widely encouraged and supported to enable Landcarers to balance formal and informal learning.

Landcare benefits considerably from the energies of those who are no longer in workforce, and some assisted funding might also be offered to volunteers who cannot afford to pay for themselves but wish to continue learning and networking.

Strengthen local governance

A good working relationship with and between all agencies is important to support local Landcare action. CLG would appreciate consideration of how subsidiarity might best work within our sphere, particularly including the role of Local Council officers, who should be our nearest and most responsive colleagues.

Local Government is a key player in the preservation and restoration of biodiversity, given its wide planning and delivery functions, but in our case, our Local Government environmental functions are, at best, stretched. Resourcing for those closest to the action will inevitably involve some enhanced roles within Local Government, which CLG would endorse as long as the key modus operandi of landcare which we have outlined are also preserved.

Keep the balance between the big and little pictures

Balancing these aspects of Landcare with big initiatives, such as moving us into a carbon economy, may be difficult, but we believe it is important to preserve the human side to restoration. Without our volunteer "land army", the huge task might be unaffordable, regardless of how cleverly we generate new sources of funding.