Landcare

Policy Position

The NFF continues to support Landcare and its ethos of working together to achieve natural resource management goals. Government investment in Landcare and other natural resource management activities must have at its centre a majority focus on sustainable, productive agriculture, underpinned by a national sustainable agriculture strategy or policy.

The role of Landcare must be strategically defined to better support sustainable, productive agriculture, building on the strengths of the NRM regional framework and supports delivery of national agricultural priorities and enable farmers to participate in a rapidly evolving economy. This is an essential element to support climate change adaptation and mitigation activities which benefit agriculture and Australia more broadly.

This policy statement is complementary to the NFF policy positions on Climate Change and Natural Capital.

Background

National Landcare began formally in 1989 with a joint agreement between the National Farmers' Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation to improve the sustainability of farmland, public land and waterways. Since this time, the Australian Government has provided ongoing investment to natural resource management activities, including the Landcare movement. A core component of the Australian Government's investment is delivered through 54 regional NRM organisations, who have a role in natural resource management planning and in program and project delivery.

Issue

The National Landcare Program (NLP) Phase 2, the Australian Government's principal natural resource management investment vehicle, funds multiple programs including environmental protection, sustainable agriculture, and broader natural resource management, consistent with the *Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997* (NHT).

The current phase is broader than ‘Landcare’ and supports sustainable agriculture through the Regional Land Partnerships (RLP) program and the Smart Farms Program. Firstly, the naming of the NLP is misleading and misrepresents the diversity of programs that it funds. The NLP is commonly confused with ‘Landcare’, especially by those in rural and regional communities and within the agricultural sector from which Landcare is traditional and culturally associated with. ‘Landcare’ itself is a structurally separate entity. The ‘Landcare’ component of the NLP is captured under the RLP program which represents less than half the total funding allocated to the NLP2. The NLP2 also funds a range of programs including the Reef 2050 Plan and Indigenous Protected Areas.

More broadly, the NLP lacks clear purpose and direction, especially for sustainable agriculture. While the lack of well-defined scope lends itself to greater flexibility for the distribution of funds, it can also lead to inefficient allocation of resources that would be improved with clear strategic direction. The Government’s support for sustainable agriculture is better reflected under its various sub-programs, including the RLP program and Smart Farms Program. The NFF supports these programs as well as funding for the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions. However, there are significant improvements that can be made to better support sustainable, productive agriculture under the RLP program and other programs.

Significant trends and developments in recent years must be considered to ensure the NLP remains relevant and strategically aligned to support sustainable, productive agriculture in a changing climate. Firstly, industry has driven a significant body of research, including Meat & Livestock Australia’s ‘Carbon Neutral by 2030’ (CN30) and the ‘Climate Initiative’ led by Agricultural Innovation Australia. These research initiatives support the aspirations of the agriculture sector in the global economy as a low emissions agriculture by positioning industry to take advantage of the social, environmental and economic opportunities presented by a low emissions future.

Secondly, international forums continue to focus on agricultural sustainability, biodiversity, food security and economic livelihoods. The Aichi Biodiversity targets as well as the ‘post-2020 global biodiversity framework’ under the UN Convention of Biological Diversity recognises the complex interrelationship between agriculture, and social and economic livelihoods that must be considered in policy. The UN Convention to Combat Desertification is another treaty supported by Australian government that receives little attention under the NLP2.

Any future program should ensure agricultural priorities are appropriately embedded, especially where they align within industry and particularly the control of invasive species and nature-based solutions. In NFF’s view, the NLP needs ‘rebalancing’ to provide a renewed focus on sustainable agriculture – which is at the heart of the ethos of Landcare. NFF encourages the Government to invest in partnership with industry – so that sustainable agriculture efforts are integrated into our agricultural best management practice programs and industry wide extension efforts.

Thirdly, significant advancements have been made in natural capital markets. Globally and domestically, there has been a paradigm shift in the approach to

environmental management away from command-and-control to market-based approaches that recognise the importance of empowering and incentivising landholders to undertake environmental stewardship practices. There are new but nascent opportunities for farmers to participate, and be recognised for, their environmental stewardship. As the 'new economy' of natural capital markets (including carbon and biodiversity markets) mature, the NFF sees a role within the NLP to support farmers to build their knowledge and capacity to participate. Government is also supporting this work through the Agricultural Stewardship Package and the National Soils Strategy.

Finally, changes in consumer demand and expectations are driving industry to demonstrate their sustainability credentials, noting that all commodity groups in Australia have developed or are in the process of developing sustainability frameworks. The NFF is developing an Australian Agricultural Stewardship Framework (AASF) to provide a national translation framework for agricultural sustainability. The purpose of the AASF is to communicate the overall sustainability goals and the status of all Australian agriculture to the market and to the community. However, this presents a further challenge for the collection and storage of environmental data and farm data, as well as addressing concerns about privacy.

The NFF sees a clear role for the NLP or future NRM programs to be strategically aligned with and support industry priorities, particularly through the regional NRM delivery framework. The NFF supports the NRM delivery framework underpinned by NRM organisations that are well placed for coordinated, catchment level planning and, importantly, have established relationships to support on ground, local initiatives. Local active support is essential, and the delivery framework must provide sufficient flexibility to ensure local priorities are addressed, in an efficient manner, and maximising the use of both NLP and private resources. However, priorities under the regional NRM delivery framework should also ensure farmers have the capacity to engage in the 'new economy'.

Local Landcare (and similar) groups must play a strong role under the NLP, recognised as entities separate from Landcare Australia and NRM Regions. Funding towards the NLP must recognise the role of community-led action and should have the flexibility to support local Landcare groups. Currently, smaller groups compete against larger NRM organisations for funding, and are often under-resourced and disempowered from participating. The skills, engagement and local knowledge of Landcare groups should be recognised and supported through a separate funding stream.

There is a strong role for the NLP in supporting the delivery of extension services. As new technologies come online, new knowledge is developed, and markets mature, the social infrastructure must be in place to support the dissemination and sharing of knowledge and adoption of new practices to support sustainable, productive agriculture.

There is also a further role under the NLP to support strategic objectives of Australian agriculture. They include the establishment of a national environmental

accounts that can be integrated across the regional framework to support the evaluation of Australia's environmental condition at a national level; continued integration, coordination, reporting and alignment of industry priorities and NRM regional plans; and stronger agricultural priorities reflected under the NLP. To support Australian agriculture, Government must work with industry to develop a national sustainable agriculture strategy to provide strategic direction to funding priorities under the NLP.

The NFF emphasises that any intention by governments for farmers to support the delivery of national public good environmental priorities, for example monitoring, reporting and monetising environmental outcomes, must be supported by additional and proportionate levels of funding.

What the industry needs

To support our farmers in managing their natural resources, the NFF seeks that the Government:

- Recognise that over 50 per cent of the Australia's land mass is managed by farmers and they are best placed to be supported and encouraged to continue running a sustainable business and recognise the additional public benefits of environmental stewardship which farmers generate. This is critical given climate variability impacts as well as Government (and industry) commitments to minimise climate change impacts.

- Recognise that farmers must be acknowledged and rewarded for environmental stewardship, including past practices; any intention by governments for farmers to support the long-term management of natural assets must be supported by additional and proportionate levels of funding, initially facilitated by Government until a market matures.

- Rebalance its investment in the National Landcare Program to ensure that there is at least 50 per cent funding for agricultural priorities under future programs. Ensure that a substantial portion of this funding is directed to empower local, community-led Landcare groups in supporting the delivery of national agricultural and environmental priorities, which recognises the inherent local knowledge, skills and engagement provided by communities.

- Establish a national sustainable agriculture strategy or policy in consultation with industry to provide strategic direction in the funding for government NRM programs that demonstrates clear linkages with international standards and goals.

- Make sure that sustainable agriculture programs through NLP are well linked to "net zero emissions by 2050" and aligned with industry sustainability strategies, so all farmers are heading in a similar direction.

- Progress the development of a national set of environmental accounts and/or fund NRM regions to coordinate the development of these accounts to underpin data requirements across sectors and regions.

- Adequately resource collaboration, coordination and strategic alignment of industry priorities and NRM regional plans, as well as alignment with the National Soils Strategy.

- Explicitly recognise ‘sustainable, productive agriculture’ under the agricultural priorities in NRM programs.

- Establish and adequately resource a long-term national extension network to ensure farmers can readily access new knowledge, adopt new practices and engage in new and emerging natural capital markets to support long-term improvements in natural resource condition.

- Ensure that any future program can provide seed funding to sustainability initiatives or frameworks that will empower enable local, regional and industry to participate in delivering national environmental outcomes. Programs should encourage, leverage and recognise the significant in-kind work done by farmers to enhance program delivery.

- Establish a framework for data privacy, particularly for agricultural and environmental data, to provide confidence that the ownership of data remains with farmers.

- Ensure that government policy and regulations do not perversely disincentivise farmers, especially those already displaying best practice sustainable agriculture, from undertaking environmental stewardship practices that support national environmental priorities.

2021