

EVALUATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT FUNDING PROGRAMS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA (2001- 2008)

Sarah Willmott, Sarah Lewis, Myles Graham
NRM Investment Unit, NRM Support Division,
Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation, South Australia

1. INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments jointly funded the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and Natural Heritage Trust Extension (NHT2) programs from 2001 to 2008. Over the life of the two programs, \$283 million was invested in 589 natural resources management (NRM) projects in South Australia.

The Department for Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation (DWLBC) administered these funds in South Australia and undertook to evaluate and report on the impact of seven years of investment. The result is the report and accompanying executive summary entitled '*Our Changing Environment: Outcomes and Lessons from Investment in South Australia's Natural Resources*'.

The key audiences for the report include the Australian and South Australian Governments, regional NRM boards, the South Australian NRM Council, the Local Government Association, the Conservation Council of South Australia, South Australian Farmers Federation and other peak bodies, non-government organisations and volunteer-based community groups involved in NAP and NHT2 project delivery.

A Steering Group with representatives from the Australian Government, DWLBC, the Department of Environment and Heritage, Primary Industries and Resources South Australia, the Local Government Association and the Conservation Council of South Australia provided advice on the scope of the report.

The Report is structured in three parts to reflect its main aims:

1. to provide accountability for these significant natural resources management investment streams
2. to document outcomes from a sample of individual projects
3. to record lessons from the implementation of the two programs, collected from regional, state and national perspectives.

Part One documents the history of the NAP and NHT2 programs in South Australia. It includes an overview of NRM institutional arrangements and the regional delivery model as the funding mechanism. It also presents financial information and describes

the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) requirements, frameworks and processes for the NAP and NHT2 programs.

Part Two features 43 of the 589 projects part or fully funded by NAP and NHT2 in South Australia and demonstrates how the investment contributed to improving asset condition and management practices. The projects featured in the report were selected to represent a cross section of the various types of activities that were undertaken. It includes some projects that were highly successful, as well as others that faced significant challenges.

Part Three provides a summary of key lessons from the implementation of the NAP and NHT2 programs to inform the planning, development and delivery of future NRM funding programs.

2. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

To assist the DWLBC project team in evaluating the impact of the NAP and NHT2 programs in South Australia, Dr Kate Roberts, Principal, Roberts Evaluation Pty Ltd was engaged to provide expertise and mentoring services.

An evaluation plan was developed in consultation with Dr Roberts and the Steering Group. The evaluation plan was a dynamic document, allowing for adaptive management as the project progressed. The direction the evaluation plan provided was critical to the success of the project.

2.1 Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan outlined primary and secondary evaluations, key evaluation questions, data collection methods and data sources, basing the evaluation methodology on the NRM program logic as described in the Australian Government NRM MERI Framework ¹. The NRM program logic includes the following four levels of outcomes:

1. *foundational outcomes* - activities that inform the development of natural resources management e.g. plans, research, monitoring, mapping, information systems, community consultation and partnerships
2. *immediate outcomes* - direct biophysical and non-biophysical project outputs e.g. on-ground works and awareness raising/ training events
3. *intermediate outcomes* - mid term changes that maintain or improve natural resource assets, or a change in people's attitudes or behaviour
4. *long-term outcomes* - established change at the landscape, organisational and institutional level over time.

The primary evaluation was to provide evidence of outcomes from a sample of NAP and NHT2 projects and collect lessons from implementing these funding programs. The secondary evaluation was to assess the usefulness of the report itself, as well as the usefulness of MERI lessons learnt by the project team for future programs.

Essentially a qualitative evaluation study was required to meet both the primary and secondary evaluation objectives. Collecting qualitative evidence of outcomes is supported by a 2008 Bureau of Rural Science research project based on four

¹ <http://www.nrm.gov.au/publications/frameworks/pubs/meri-framework-march09.pdf>

Performance Story Report trials conducted nationally². This research found that qualitative approaches to evaluation using anecdotal evidence are useful and appropriate for reporting intermediate outcomes.

2.2 Primary Evaluation - Project Outcomes

A summative evaluation of project outcomes was undertaken using multiple lines of evidence to assess the impact of a diverse range of NAP and NHT2 projects. A sample of 43 projects was presented under five themes: water, land, biodiversity, people and tools. These themes were groupings of the Australian Government's 'matters for target' (NRM priorities identified at a national level) and also reflected the State NRM Plan.

2.2.1 Project Selection Criteria

Projects were selected by the eight South Australian regional NRM boards and by state agency staff using the following criteria:

1. Projects representing each of the following four types of activities identified for NAP and NHT2 investment:
 - resource assessment
 - capacity building
 - planning
 - on-ground works
2. Projects representing a balance across matters for target:
 - Land salinity
 - Soil condition
 - Native vegetation
 - Significant invasive species
 - Significant native species
 - Rivers and wetlands
 - Estuarine, coastal and marine
 - Turbidity in aquatic environments
 - Nutrients in aquatic environments
 - Surface water salinity
 - Other supporting activities
3. Projects that can provide valuable learnings, not just 'good news stories'
4. Projects that were both large and small in scale (less than and greater than \$1 million)
5. A geographical spread across the eight NRM regions in South Australia, as well as state-wide projects
6. A range of delivery agents and partners including
 - state government
 - regional NRM boards
 - non-government organisations
 - industry groups
 - community groups
 - research organisations

Approximately 100 projects were nominated and analysed using a matrix of the above selection criteria. The final shortlist of projects was developed in consultation with the Steering Group.

² Carr A & Woodhams F, 2008, *Monitoring, Evaluating, Reporting and Improving (MERI) natural resource management: making MERI in Australia*

2.2.2 Initial Project Data Collection

To collect existing data for the 43 shortlisted projects, various information sources were accessed including:

- regional investment strategies/project applications
- annual output performance reports
- South Australian Government NAP/NHT2 project database
- websites, articles and publications
- project progress reports
- project evaluations
- state level NAP/NHT2 annual reports

This initial data collection process largely yielded qualitative and quantitative evidence of outcomes at the foundational and immediate outcome levels of the NRM program logic. During NAP and NHT2, there was a focus on collecting output data from the implementation of projects. Therefore, there were gaps in the available information relating to intermediate outcomes, requiring additional data collection.

The collection of evidence relating to long-term outcomes was not anticipated in the writing of the report, since the majority of projects that were evaluated only operated within the seven-year funding period.

In South Australia, four projects had been evaluated using the participatory Performance Story Report methodology. These reports provided valuable evidence of outcomes at various levels of the NRM program logic, and no further data collection was required for these projects.

2.2.3 Supplementary Data Collection

Structured interviews (telephone or face-to-face) were conducted with project managers to gather qualitative evidence of outcomes at all levels of the NRM program logic. Unexpected outcomes (both positive and negative) and project lessons were also captured. Most significant outcomes were gathered during the interview and were generally included as quotes within the report. The interview questions were structured around the key evaluation questions and sub-evaluation questions identified in the evaluation plan. Evidence recorded through interviews related to biophysical, economic, social and institutional outcomes. Photographs of project activities/ outcomes were collected where available.

Prior to conducting project interviews, all existing data was reviewed and sorted under the relevant interview questions in Microsoft Excel. This information was provided to the interviewee prior to the interview to ensure data quality. This initial research improved the interviewer's understanding of the project, identified information gaps and assisted in guiding the interview. Each interview was voice recorded (upon permission granted by the interviewee) and then written up in the spreadsheet.

The project managers displayed a high level of enthusiasm and honesty during the interview and editing process. Interviewees were eager to share their stories and reflect on past experiences. Some projects emerged as clear success stories whereas others reflected some level of failure but identified valuable lessons.

The projects were written up using a template which reflected the NRM program logic. Information from the various sources of quantitative and qualitative evidence

was used to populate the template and demonstrate the project's biophysical and non-biophysical impact.

As expected, projects did not necessarily demonstrate outcomes at all levels of the NRM program logic. Project outcomes were dependent on the type of activity being undertaken. For example, planning and resource assessment activities generally led to foundational outcomes, whereas capacity building activities and on-ground works led to immediate and intermediate outcomes. Where large projects undertook a spectrum of activities over time, these projects generally demonstrated outcomes at the foundational, immediate and intermediate levels.

2.3 Primary Evaluation – Lessons from NAP and NHT2

A formative evaluation was undertaken to collect and analyse lessons from the NAP and NHT2 programs, using multiple lines of evidence. These lessons will be used to inform the development and improvement of future NRM investment programs.

2.3.1 Meta-evaluation

A meta-evaluation of regional, state and national evaluations and reports from NAP and NHT2 was undertaken. This research involved almost 30 documents including several mid-term national evaluations on various aspects of NAP and NHT2, Performance Story Reports undertaken in South Australia, Auditor General Audit Reports and state and regional evaluations and reviews.

This information was synthesised into approximately 30 categories and four main areas:

1. Approaches to managing natural resources
2. Administration of funding programs
3. Project delivery
4. Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement.

2.3.2 Survey

A qualitative on-line survey (Attachment C) was designed based on the four areas identified above and sent to 150 key NRM stakeholders within Commonwealth, State and Local Governments, regional NRM boards, peak bodies and a range of NAP and NHT2 delivery agents. A return rate of 19% (29 respondents) was achieved for the survey with over 200 comments providing a wide range of lessons. The survey responses were collated in Excel and analysed with the existing information.

2.3.3 Project Interviews

Lessons that were gathered through interviews with project managers were also analysed using the existing categories, and common lessons were included in Part Three of the report. Many of the projects were used as evidence to support the broader lessons captured through the research and survey.

This triangulation of evidence strengthened interpretations from regional, state and national perspectives. The comprehensive synthesis of lessons from the NAP and NHT2 programs can be used to inform the planning and development of future policy and programs.

2.4 Secondary Evaluation - Usefulness of the Report

The draft report was distributed to approximately 180 stakeholders during a two week consultation period. A form was designed to gather comments on the content of the

report and to seek feedback on the evidence of lessons and outcomes provided, as well as the usefulness of the report.

However, despite two \$50 incentive vouchers being offered, there was a very low return rate. This may have been due to the timing of the consultation period (held over Easter). The low rate of return reinforced the importance of presenting the report findings to target audiences and seeking feedback in person.

The 43 projects in the report are well suited for promotional materials, media articles, websites and newsletters, and may be useful as case studies for other NRM evaluations e.g. evaluation of the State NRM Plan goals.

2.5 Secondary Evaluation - Lessons from Undertaking the Evaluation

A culture of learning was inherent in the evaluation and data collection process, particularly as the project team received evaluation advice and support from Dr Kate Roberts during the implementation of the project.

Lessons were documented during the development of the report to improve the evaluation and reporting of future funding programs at the state level. The internal lessons from undertaking this project, as well as those captured through the primary evaluation and documented in the report, will be used to inform the MERI strategy for the State NRM Program. These lessons will also be communicated across various MERI networks.

3. LESSONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAM EVALUATION AND REPORTING

The three main lessons drawn from the project team's experience in evaluating and reporting seven years of NRM investment from two national programs are discussed below.

3.1 MERI Strategies

The evaluation highlighted the importance of developing robust MERI strategies at the state level at the commencement of programs. The creation of future program reports will become more efficient as MERI systems and strategies continue to develop and improve.

A MERI strategy is critical for clearly defining the monitoring and data collection requirements at the commencement of a program for reporting foundational, immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. As a result, unexpected data gaps should not be an issue at the end of the program.

A MERI strategy needs to incorporate regular reviews on the implementation of the program as part of the improvement cycle. The timing of evaluations is important. Writing the report whilst the NAP and NHT2 programs were still operating was beneficial as stakeholders, particularly project managers, were still actively engaged with these funding programs.

Resource implications for the implementation of a MERI strategy need to be identified at the commencement of a program. For example, the project interview process was resource intensive, however, the evidence gleaned from this process enriched the evaluation and increased ownership by the interviewees. A stakeholder

who commented on the report confirmed the value of capturing anecdotal evidence through recording personal stories to inform the planning and implementation of future investment programs:

It looks into the stories behind the actual delivery and implementation of the project, including the issues experienced, the positive outcomes and the other flow on effects that these projects create. This is what I believe should drive the development of future NRM funding initiatives, based on the real needs that are identified from these more personal accounts.

3.2 Categorising Projects

Appropriate categorisation of individual projects e.g. types of activity, themes etc is extremely important in evaluating large funding programs and aggregating high volumes of data over multiple years. It is also critical that identification numbers and titles for projects that have been funded across financial years remain consistent for the life of the project.

The categorisation of NAP and NHT2 projects was used as the basis for evaluating and reporting a balanced selection of projects that reflected the emphasis of the two programs, and for presenting financial information to provide accountability of expenditure against the overall investment.

In order to evaluate NRM investment in South Australia over the long term, consistent project categories should be considered for future program reporting.

3.3 Data Storage

In order to be able to collate, sort and analyse project information accumulated over the life of large programs, effective record-keeping and appropriate data storage is vital. Robust reporting systems need to be able to allow for the 'collect once, report many times' principle.

Due to somewhat inconsistent electronic and hard copy filing, as well as staff turnover, project data was often not easy to locate. The task of collating project lessons from individual project reports over seven years for almost 600 projects using the existing reporting system was not possible. However, undertaking a supplementary survey meant that lessons encompassing natural resources management, MERI, program administration as well as project delivery lessons could be collected, which added value to the report.

Appropriate and cost effective data storage is critical for evaluating and reporting long term natural resources management outcomes over a period of 10, 15 or 20 years.

4. CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the NAP and NHT2 funding programs in South Australia clearly demonstrates valuable NRM outcomes at the local, catchment and landscape scales. The impact of these investment streams is captured in the report entitled '*Our Changing Environment: Outcomes and Lessons from Investment in South Australia's Natural Resources*' which provides evidence of social, economic, institutional and

environmental outcomes. However, the long term benefits from NAP and NHT2 may not be realised for another decade or more.

The lessons that have been captured through this evaluation will be incorporated into the design and improvement of future State NRM Programs. A targeted communications strategy will raise awareness of the lessons from NAP and NHT2 amongst NRM stakeholders.

For more information contact:

Sarah Willmott, Senior NRM Officer, Performance Reporting, DWLBC:
willmott.sarah@saugov.sa.gov.au or ph: (08) 8303 9644