

Reform lost in red tape

Regional authorities are needed to coordinate and implement nationally accredited catchment management plans.

The reforms identified by the Wentworth Group build on those developed and implemented by Landcare, the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality. But the group says the work of these three important 'foundations for change' has stalled as a result of bureaucratic red tape, which is strangling on-ground action.

'Despite the rhetoric, integrated catchment management is not being adopted and communities continue to be consulted rather than engaged,' the group says.

'And despite the promises, most funding programs are not delivered at the regional level and are out of touch with regional needs.'

For example, the intention of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality was to invest greater powers in regional communities to work with scientists to develop tailored solutions, and to provide them with a capital base to implement their plans.

But nearly three years since COAG signed the agreement, not one regional

plan has been accredited. Only \$88 million of the \$1.4 billion allocated has been approved, and some of this may be cost-shifted. And the Government of Western Australia hasn't signed the implementation agreement, while the New South Wales government only signed in May 2002.

When Allen Consulting surveyed landholders to identify the factors preventing them from addressing environmental problems, more than 75% cited lack of funds, 67% cited low commercial benefits, 61% cited government policy constraints, 38% cited lack of options and demonstrated success, 25% cited lack of information and 18% cited leasehold conditions.

'There are two issues here,' WWF environmental policy specialist, Peter Cosier, says.

'At present, too much money is spent on peripheral reports that don't address the key issues. We need to get more money on to farms. We also need to give landholders better access to good science, so they can maximise their investment. At the moment they're getting neither.'

The Wentworth Group says a 'fourth foundation' for change is needed. This could take the form of a community-owned regional 'delivery mechanism', supported by a national natural resources management commission, which would coordinate other environmental institutions and provide a holistic approach to landscape conservation.

'Regional authorities could be established and given statutory powers, independent scientific expertise and financial resources to implement nationally accredited catchment management plans,' the group says.

'These authorities could be run by boards of community representatives,



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landholders and scientific experts and would have the power to devise methods or raise funds to support the work that needs to be done.'

The national commission, on the other hand, would be managed by an independent board of specialists in salinity, water quality, biodiversity and community capacity building.

The commission would have two key functions: to set national environmental standards, and, based on those standards, to accredit regional catchment management plans and ensure that the money invested will achieve the right outcomes.

'We need to move responsibility for catchment management away from the states and into the hands of people who know what the resource issues are for their region,' CSIRO economist, Dr Steve Hatfield-Dodds, says.

'But the states need to maintain a quality assurance role by approving plans and auditing the decisions of regional bodies.'



CSIRO Land and Water

Landholders need increased funding, better access to good science, and catchment-scale management in tune with regional needs to maximise their environmental investment.