

24 April 2002

Professor Newman
Director, Sustainability Policy Unit
Policy Office
Department of the Premier and Cabinet
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Dear Professor Newman

STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

Further to the Salinity Council Executive's letter after its 8 February 2002 meeting showing interest in the State Sustainability Strategy, the State Salinity Council has discussed the consultation paper and the sustainability concept generally and offers the following comments.

The State Salinity Council is supportive of the concept of sustainability and the State Government's attempts to promote it. Sustainability is what has been driving Council in its deliberations and operations – sustainability in the use of land and water, in natural diversity, in natural and built infrastructure and in people and communities. Council believes there needs to be the economic incentives present to promote voluntary change to land uses that prevent salinity, but it is a robust supporter of the triple bottom line – economic, social and environmental accountability. Many, if not all, of the member groups of Council would argue that they have been pursuing sustainability for many years. For example, the five regional natural resource management (NRM) groups of the Agricultural Area (Northern Agriculture Catchment Council (NACC), Avon Catchment Council (ACC), Swan Catchment Council (SCC), South West Catchments Council (SWCC), South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team (SCRIPT)) have been promoting and pursuing sustainability through their regional strategies and projects. The document "Western Australian Government framework to assist in achieving sustainable natural resource management in WA" encapsulates these sustainability concepts and the management framework used. Some form of legislative backing for these regional NRM groups would ensure certainty of existence and enable them to concentrate on sustainability issues.

The Council sees the State Salinity Strategy 2000 as a key State sustainability strategy endorsed by Cabinet at the time of publication and subsequently supported in the Taskforce Report on Salinity commissioned by the present Government. Similarly, the State Salinity Council is a key player in sustainability policy and actions, and therefore sees itself as a partner in the state promotion of sustainability. Additionally, member groups of Council promote sustainability in varying areas, and many will be making independent and specific comment to you. These range from State Government agencies to State Authorities (Environmental Protection Authority, Soil & Land Conservation Council) to non-government organisations (Conservation Council, Greening Australia) to farm organisations (Pastoralists & Graziers' Association, WA Farmers Federation, WA No

Tillage Farmers Association, Saltland Pastures Association, WA Lucerne Growers Association) to regional NRM groups, Indigenous representative, local government, industry, etc. Many of these groups, particularly the regional, conservation and production groups, have strong on-ground linkages and can rapidly influence the way things are done on the ground.

Council notes that the Premier's Science Council recently reported to Government on research in some sustainability areas. Western Australia has attracted substantial research dollars into the salinity area because of the proactive approach by all relevant groups and the advancements in addressing salinity in WA. The Cooperative Research Centre for the Plant Based Management of Salinity is based at the University of WA and has nodes in the key states affected by salinity. The CRC has attracted \$22m of Federal funds over 7 years, supported by around \$100m in cash and in-kind support from other parties. Furthermore, the coordinated activity of the Salinity Council's R&D Committee has seen above average leverage of other national research funds into the WA salinity and NRM area from sources such as the National Dryland Salinity Program, Land & Water Australia, Joint Venture Agroforestry Program, Grains R&D Corporation, several divisions of the CSIRO etc.

A further example of WA's sustainability credentials in the NRM area is the fact that we have been allocated five of the twenty one regions under the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality. The well advanced regional management structures, coordinated agencies and strong wider community support as evidenced by the State Salinity Council would have contributed to this outcome.

One of the biggest challenges for WA in achieving a sustainable future in NRM is to have definite yet consultative leadership, particularly at the political level, and management mechanisms in place that enable genuine, meaningful, accountable partnerships between community, Government and agencies from senior levels down (and up). A communication strategy needs to be part of these partnerships so all stakeholders are aware of developments.

The role of the rural and wider community in sustainability appears to be under-rated in the discussion document. The landcare movement and associated ethic has developed over the last ten to fifteen years and is strong in most areas. This is now evolving into a NRM framework and groups, and the sustainability ethic continues to grow. It is noted that box 3 at the back of the discussion document brings out many of the landcare, rivercare and bushcare issues.

The State Salinity Council allocated \$3m to projects under the Community Support Scheme 2000, and in doing so realised there should be a more strategic process for the allocation of funds. It initiated and developed the Salinity Investment Framework, and Cabinet recently endorsed it and funded a State and Avon Region ground-truthing project. These projects should commence in April or May 2002. The Investment Framework provides a new strategic approach that will guide public investment in salinity action into strategies, plans and projects that will deliver maximum public benefit. The Investment Framework operates by identifying assets, their public and private values, salinity-related threats and options for changes in land and water use. We understand that some case studies are to be developed under the Sustainability Strategy project and strongly recommend that the Avon Region and the application of the Salinity Investment Framework be one of these.

Members noted that the tone of the discussion paper appears to be pro development. There was considerable concern as to whether the State is addressing the biodiversity and social issues associated with development. Conservation members of Council have scientific evidence that the quality of the environment and our biodiversity is in decline. The trend of governments to promote economic development and maintain credit ratings may be futile if the environmental systems and processes on which we rely are decaying and not sustainable.

Managing the social aspects of natural resource management is difficult but necessary. Salinity Council identified several social issues during its consultative development of the Salinity Strategy 2000, but experts had difficulty developing and implementing suitable strategies, projects and actions. This aspect needs to be pursued in the Sustainability Strategy.

Our Indigenous people have survived in harmony with the land for thousands of years, and there will be lessons in sustainability to be learnt from their heritage. In current times, the Indigenous people could also be considered as a labour force in NRM. NRM regions have also indicated they look forward to the inclusion of Indigenous issues in their planning and action phases.

Members were also concerned about the Government's longer term commitment to sustainability; a strategy can be produced but the real proof of commitment comes with promoting and funding the works and actions necessary. With the land resource degrading from salinity, further research and development is necessary to prove up commercial, deep-rooted crops and farming systems that manage the groundwater.

In summary, the Salinity Council believes the Sustainability Policy Unit has underestimated the leadership and success of the NRM sustainability activity to date and that this could be promoted as a way forward in other areas.

The comments above are general but Salinity Council representatives would welcome the opportunity to have a meeting with the Sustainability Policy Unit to discuss relevant issues. Many of the issues raised in box 3 of the discussion document were addressed by Salinity Council in its submissions to the Salinity Taskforce or in the Salinity Strategy 2000, and these could be discussed with you.

Yours sincerely



Alex Campbell
CHAIRMAN