

Strategies to Improve Regional Planning Arrangements: Perspectives from the Regional NRM Groups Collective

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Introduction

This document is a summary of perspectives and experiences offered by regional NRM body members of the Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective (“the Collective”) who participated in a workshop to improve regional planning arrangements in Queensland. With the purpose of making adaptive management *work*, several unresolved challenges—which were identified through benchmark evaluation process conducted by the *Healthy Savanna Planning Systems Project*—were explored by workshop participants through small group work and then checked back with the larger workshop as a whole. Collective members developed a number of strategies to address the challenges they felt were of particular importance. Strengths and limitations of each of those strategies were then identified and discussed from different regional perspectives. Regional body participants at the workshop were predominantly executive officers or chairs of those organisations.

The following strategies to tackle key unresolved challenges identified by the Regional NRM Bodies included:

Strategies to strengthen the involvement of local government

- S1 Local government membership on Regional Body boards
- S2 Supporting of sub-regional ‘clusters’ of local governments
- S3 Direct presentations to elected Council Members
- S4 Dollars on the ground
- S5 Focus on critical issues of common concern
- S6 Good working relationships at the policy level
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Strategies to work with state government agencies

- S1 Working directly with operational staff
- S2 Working through regional coordination groups
- S3 Contracting state agencies to provide technical or other services
- S4 Delegations to DGs and Ministers
- S5 Using the media
- S6 Joint project development

Strategies to engage industry groups

- S1 Building on one-on-one relationships
- S2 Targeting the Mining Industry
- S3 Targeting new landowners or managers
- S4 Assisting local industry representatives to engage on their own terms

Strategies to engage Traditional Owners and Indigenous communities

- S1 Engage consultants to undertake Indigenous aspects of NRM planning
- S2 Indigenous membership on regional NRM bodies / boards
- S3 Supporting Traditional Owner boards/reference groups to advise regional NRM bodies/ boards
- S4 Direct employment of Indigenous facilitator position

S5 Supporting training opportunities within the Indigenous community

A description, regional body experiences and appraisals of the effectiveness of these strategies are summarised below

Strategies to strengthen involvement of local government

S1 Local government membership on regional NRM boards

Description

Securing membership or involvement of mayors and / or councillors on regional NRM advisory committees or boards.

Strengths

In the Southern Gulf, mayors are regional body members and a director has been elected to represent local government on Board decisions. This has been a good mechanism for strengthening communication and education about the NRM process. No problem has yet been encountered with information about the regional NRM body and its activities getting back to the council meetings. Both Mayors and CEOs are well informed. As a spin off, there are regular meetings of Health and Environmental officers and with Pest Management officers and the regional body, which also includes increasing coordination of pest management activities and sharing of good contacts. Southern Gulf is also funding an officer on a part-time basis to do NRM work in each shire.

The Northern Gulf Resource Management Group has also used this strategy. One interesting outcome of this partnership has been that local governments in the Northern Gulf region have decided to **support the regional arrangement options** being canvassed in the recent Options Discussion Paper **that reflect the situation in the region** rather than following the preferred option of the Department of Local Government and Planning or the Local Government Association of Queensland.

Limitations

In some regions this approach resulted in decision-making processes on NRM boards becoming too 'top heavy'. The commitment of local government Board members is critical – the direct involvement of mayors / councillors does not always ensure effective communication or reporting back into the broader council. In the Southern Gulf, funding NRM officers to work in each shire has been complicated in DOGIT areas, which are currently in the process of becoming shires. It is difficult to establish formal relationships during this transitional period.

The Northern Gulf Resource Management Group has also used this strategy but found its effectiveness to be variable within the region. **NRM is low on the agenda for some local councils compared with other issues.** Regional NRM bodies need to be able to demonstrate benefits on involvement and be flexible and vary the extent of local government involvement. For example, Northern Gulf's strategies to engage Mareeba Council has had to recognise that this Council isn't solely dependent on grazing or broadacre industries and has current pressures to focus on health care and education.

S2 Supporting sub-regional 'clusters' of local governments

Description

Supporting representation of clusters of local councils on regional NRM boards through mechanisms such as advisory panels or through a coordinator position

Strengths

This strategy is being explored in the Burdekin Dry Tropics region and has involved a Health and Environmental Services Regional Organisation of Councils (HESROC) advisory panel to the Board. HESROC is a small local network of north Queensland councils that includes Townsville City, Charters Towers City, Thuringowa City, Burdekin Shire, Dalrymple Shire and Hinchinbrook Shire Councils. Burdekin Dry Tropics is still looking for the best way to engage and is interested in the idea of a memorandum of understanding between the regional body and all regional councils. The strategy is seen as a workable solution to the difficulties of having a Regional NRM Board dominated by local government members, while providing a mechanism for local government perspectives to be heard and partnerships negotiated.

The Burnett Mary NRM Group (BMRG) have supported the development of four local government '**clusters**' from the 27 local governments in their region. These clusters meet at least quarterly and have involvement of a mix of technical, planning and councillor members. The clusters are supported by a coordinator position jointly funded by the councils and BMRG. This position is located within the councils who provide in-kind support in hosting the position. This strategy **encourages local governments to think more regionally and collaboratively** with neighbouring councils / shires. It builds on 'natural' groupings of councils e.g. coastal / urban; rangelands shires within regions. Location of a coordinator within councils improves links to council technical staff and access to broader council business and operations. Other benefits include the clusters build on existing collaboration between councils, can overcome resource limitations of some councils to participate, and can provide a good point of contact for ICM groups in the region.

Limitations

The reality may be that one **coherent gathering of councils may not be possible**. Therefore forming clusters of similarly thinking councils may be the best solution. Even so, experience in the Burnett Mary region highlights that the communication required to agree on and establish the clusters is a very **resource-intensive and time-consuming** strategy.

S3 Direct presentations to elected Councils

Description

Talking through regional group messages directly to the councillors through a series of presentations through presentations across the region.

Strengths

This strategy was found to be particularly helpful in **raising local government awareness about the 'technical' contribution the regional NRM group** makes to resource management in the region. This approach also provides information to assist councils in their decisions about priority locations and issues for NRM investment.

Limitations

This strategy is **resource intensive and difficult where there is a large number of councils in the region**. Also, it does not necessarily promote a coordinated approach to local government engagement in regional NRM issues.

S4 Dollars on the Ground

Description

Financial support to assist local governments to communicate, liaise and support on-ground works.

Strengths

QMDC has tried a number of strategies to ensure strong local government representation on their Management Committee and found that local governments were only really committed and interested in regional NRM outcomes when dollars became available. In a way, the **dollars reduced local government concerns about the regional NRM process increasing their NRM responsibilities without being provided with additional resources**. The ability to put dollars on the ground also served to build credibility, by carrying out earlier promises of the possibilities of on-ground activities.

Limitations

Financial support for any partnership, including those made with local government requires **careful management to ensure expectations don't exceed the realities** of available funds.

S5 Focus on critical issues of common concern

Description

Focus partnerships with local governments on a resource management issue(s) that is directly linked to council responsibilities and is a high priority for that particular council (e.g. pest animal management or weeds).

Strengths

This strategy has **worked particularly well where the mayor or chief executive officer has acted as a key contact** for the issue and is also a landholder in the region.

Limitations

Funding rules and structures under NAPSWQ/the Trust **prevent regional bodies 'funding' local governments to address issues that are high on their agenda** such as the control of weeds and wild dogs. If there is to be joint investment in certain projects, sufficient time must be allowed for a line item to be included in a local government's budget. This lag period may make co-funding of projects addressing issues of common concern unworkable.

S6 Good working relationships at the policy level

Description

The development and maintenance of effective personal and 'working' relationships between organisations such as the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and the Regional Groups Collective.

Strengths

This approach helps **create and maintain open and frank discussion** of ideas and possible directions and provides the basis for developing shared policy approaches and problem solving for issues common to regional bodies and local government.

Limitations

The trust developed between individuals **doesn't always translate or reflect broader organisational attitudes or perspectives**. Some local government do not feel well represented by organisations such as LGAQ.

S7 Building relationships with those organisations local government look to for advice

Description

Develop and maintain effective relationships with representatives from professional organisations such as the Planning Institute of Australia that the local government planning officers look to for advice and/or technical support. Additionally, make contact with officers of the Department of Local Government and Planning.

Strengths

Building relationships with professional planning organisations and also the **knowledge and understanding of planning consultants** regarding regional NRM planning practice is likely to have a **positive influence on local government planners**.

Contact with officers of the Department of Local Government and Planning ensures regional bodies develop and maintain a sound understanding of the language and concepts used in local government planning schemes.

Limitations

Developing relationships with individuals does not necessarily translate to a wider organisational understanding or support for regional NRM planning.

Strategies to work with state government agencies

S1 Working directly with operational staff

Description

Focus partnerships with operational staff to achieve technical or practical outcomes

Strengths

Benefits included avoiding 'blockages' at manager level or head office level. Operational staff also have a better handle on the technical or practical aspects needed to get outcomes required. This can result in improved integration between actual agency business and regional body investment

Limitations

Some regional bodies experienced being 'slapped on the wrist' for not following government protocol of requesting access to agency staff via regional managers. Frustrations were compounded for relationships with some agencies who view partnerships with regional bodies as a threat. Furthermore it is often difficult to navigate the regional agency culture, which may be more or less supportive than protocols and perspectives held at head office.

S2 Working through regional coordination groups

Description

Utilise the regional coordination group to develop and maintain effective relationships with state agencies

Strengths

Several regional body participants, including those from Desert Channels and Mackay Whitsunday indicated that working with the state agency members through the regional coordination group forums had been a very successful strategy. It was noted that this strategy required **maintaining regular communication** between parties. It also hinges on **good interpersonal relationships** being developed with individual members of the RCG. The RCG has been a good forum for developing joint projects and getting state government input to project design. It does require regional bodies to occasionally remind state agency members of their roles and responsibilities as regional partners.

Limitations

Lack of agency resources sometimes prevents good involvement of RCG members. The dual role of RCG as both an assessor of and partner in the NRM planning process has caused problems. RCG members sometimes try and 'control' the decision-making process and some RCG members attempt to dominate proceedings. RCGs found to be less effective in regions such as North where they have to 'manage' many regions.

S3 Contracting state agencies to provide technical or other services

Description

An agreement with a state agency to help deliver a specific outcome or project

Strengths

This strategy has **worked well where the agencies can provide a specific service that can be tightly defined**. Some regional body participants noted that DPI is more business-minded in its goals and approach and easier to deal with.

Limitations

This strategy **does not work when contract terms are not tight and specific** – including the need to be specific on the actual government officer who will deliver the work. There was a general view that regulatory agencies such as NR&M and EPA are not ‘business-minded’ in their approach to NRM partnerships and tend not to fulfil the terms of the contract. There have been several examples where agencies had not met contractual milestones and deadlines.

S4 Delegations to bureaucrats and Ministers

Description

Target senior government officials and Ministers to communicate Regional Body aspirations and concerns.

Strengths

This strategy works well to relieve a ‘deadlock’ situation between state agency managers and regional bodies. To be effective it is **important to provide a good advanced briefing** to senior government officers so they in turn can brief the Director General or Minister. Following government protocols also helps generate respect between parties. It is also important to offer some clear directions or recommendations to progress the issue presented.

Limitations

The effectiveness of this approach can be limited when the Regional Body representative (e.g. the Chair) is adequately prepared or properly briefed to present the issue and manage the negotiations. This strategy was also described as sometimes being very ‘blokey’ in terms of who is involved in these negotiations and how decisions are made.

S5 Using the media

Description

Managing regional NRM outcomes and objectives through the media

Strengths

This strategy is **effective for promoting good news stories**, particularly when regional bodies have implemented NRM activities or obtained funding. Media style ‘updates’ are also a useful approach for keeping state government abreast of what is going on in the regions – particularly if this can link to existing or proposed government business or investment agendas (e.g. Water Use Efficiency). Tap into agencies corporate planning objectives and visions for better leverage.

Limitations

Results of this strategy are less positive when the media is used to publicly criticise government. Difficulties encountered using this approach include the ‘logistical’ **problems of getting timely media release approval** or develop a joint release with government.

S6 Joint project development

Description

A joint funded project between state government agency and the regional body that is focused on a particular issue. Examples noted include the Mackay-Whitsunday 'fishways' project and the grazing Land Management in Desert Channels.

Strengths

This strategy works best when a **clear and shared problem can be identified and agreed**. The more tightly defined the scope of the project the more effective the partnership with the state agency. Trading or negotiating 'staff time' with state agencies is often easier than negotiating or securing cash contributions. Blockages to state agency-regional group partnerships can sometimes be bypassed using subcontractors.

Limitations

This approach **relies heavily on the presence of a supportive agency culture**. This is not always present with agencies such as EPA who appear to have an 'aversion' to regional partnerships. Sometimes it seems that agencies only want to engage with regional body project on their terms or hold the view that joint proposals potentially threatening their turf.

Strategies to engage industry groups

S1 Building on one-on-one relationships

Description

Relies on personal relationships established by regional body members and focuses on discussing regional NRM issues with each industry person one-on-one.

Strengths

This is a strategy that **works particularly well in the north and west of Queensland**, but probably not in more populated areas of the south or coastal regions. In the north and west, this approach is also often accompanied by an invitation, for example to mining officers, to attend meetings if they're interested.

The tactic validates the credentials, establishes credibility and allows the NRM officer to pass the test of authenticity through taking the time and effort to personally connect with industry. At the same time it sends a message that industry is valued.

Limitations

This approach would probably not be possible in more populated areas. Burdekin DT also noted that this tactic of getting to know and use individuals in each industry, while very useful in the Plan development phase, might not translate well into the implementation phase. **Individual contacts in each industry may not result in industry groups being involved in implementation** and may require a shift from a one-on-one partnership to arrangements that incorporate subregional / cross-regional groupings. Southern Gulf's suggestion of creating a 'partnership panel' of industry representatives as an advisory panel to the Board is a potential approach to engaging industry groups without allowing the Board to be dominated by the variety of different industry representatives.

S2 Targeting the Mining Industry

Description

This approach involves targeting the mining industry specifically. Specific tactics involve engaging with the environmental officers of the company, with whom the regional body shares common NRM concerns, and engaging in direct negotiations with mining companies, in seeking funds for NRM activities.

Strengths

The mining industry can be a motivated and important partner when it has resources and responsibilities to deliver NRM outcomes

Limitations

This approach requires large industries, with sufficient resources to engage environmental officers.

S3 Targeting new land owners or managers, especially on extensive holdings

Description

A central feature of this strategy is being able to provide "tools and services" that the new landholder wants or needs.

Strengths

This strategy is particularly useful with owners or managers on extensive holdings, particularly in the Northern Gulf and Southern Gulf. It involves engaging with new grazing land managers, or new owners, who often bring along similar individuals from other properties.

Limitations

New landholders and managers may not have the same commitments to or aspirations for holdings as their predecessors. It is important to get clarity on what the new landholder wants or needs.

S4 Assisting local industry representatives to engage on their own terms

Description

Regional bodies sometimes find themselves placed in a position between local industry representatives and their peak industry body spokesperson on a range of issues. Often the messages of the peak body policy office or officer differ significantly from those of the local industry member, although the peak body claims to represent their members' opinions. One solution that the Northern Gulf has tried has been to commission or encourage independent social or economic research in order to have independent findings that can challenge peak body claims.

Strengths

Independent research is useful for supporting local industry differences of viewpoint from their peak bodies.

Limitations

Independent research **can be costly** and the onus is on the regional body or the local industry individual to publicise the independent research findings.

Strategies to engage Traditional Owners and Indigenous communities

S1 Engage consultants to undertake Indigenous aspects of NRM plan

Description

Engage consultants external to the regional body to facilitate the process of engagement and input from Traditional Owners and other Indigenous communities into the regional NRM plan's development.

Strengths

Consultants independent of Traditional Owner groups within the region **can be of benefit where conflict between groups exists**. Additionally, advice external to the region can be brought into the plan development through this process and employment to Indigenous communities provided.

Limitations

Limitations relate largely to limitations of contract management and consultancies in general. Like any other consultancy, those undertaking Indigenous aspects of the plan's development (and other regional body activities) **need a clear contract** outlining what is to be delivered and associated timeframes as well as steps to resolve any contractual disputes. In addition to an adequate contract to guide the consultancy, close contract management needs to be undertaken by the regional body to ensure outcomes are being delivered and remedial action if needed is taken promptly. Good communication between the consultant and regional body is critical.

S2 Indigenous membership on Regional Body boards

Description

Specific membership on the regional body board/committee is given to the Indigenous sector.

Strengths

This recognises the **importance of the Traditional Owners in** matters relating to natural resource and cultural heritage management within regions. It can facilitate the inclusion or more timely inclusion of Indigenous sectoral interests at the decision-making level of the regional body.

Limitations

Representation by one or two individuals for sometimes numbers of mobs/clan groups can be problematic because of a number of factors including:

- Traditional Owners not being able to speak on behalf of another's country;
- The cultural issues of dealing appropriately with men's and women's business if there is a single person representing the Indigenous sector; and
- Difficulties where conflict exists within the community regarding land claims and other cultural matters.

S3 Supporting separate Traditional Owner boards/reference groups to advise Regional Bodies / boards

Description

The regional body supports the establishment and operations of a separate reference group or organisation that deals with Traditional Owner and other Indigenous business. The role of this structure is determine priorities for the Indigenous sector and advise the regional body boards on matters relating to managing country and undertaking on-ground works.

Strengths

This strategy can overcome some of the limitations of S2 **Indigenous membership on Regional Bodies / boards** as representation can be more fully addressed and does not have to be limited to one or two board positions. There is greater opportunity for the Traditional Owners to run business their own way rather than only being able to address matters in the wider multi-sector forum. Giving back responsibility of managing country to the Elders especially in on-ground projects for protecting sites and important resources has shown to have very positive effects on all involved including non-Indigenous participants.

Opportunity also exists for 'black fella' business to be sorted through amongst themselves without the need to air concerns in more public/broader regional body board forum.

Limitations

Resources required to support the establishment and on-going operations may be limited or the future of funding uncertain. Some groups have also found there is uncertainty of the roles of these reference groups/boards in relation to statutory matters such as matters under the *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003* administered by the Department of Natural Resources and Mines.

S4 Direct employment of Indigenous coordinator positions

Description

A specific position within the regional body staff is appointed to support Indigenous initiatives and projects.

Strengths

By establishing a specific position for coordinating activities relevant to the Indigenous sector, a number of positive benefits have been noted including:

- Recognising the importance of Indigenous issues within the work of the regional body;
- Acknowledging the need for specialist advice within the regional body's staff regarding determining who is a Traditional Owner for country and other cultural matters;
- Facilitating through conflict within Indigenous communities regarding representation and nominations for specific initiatives; and
- Providing opportunities for employment of Indigenous community members.

Limitations

Without the support of other structures or mechanisms, a single position within the regional body can be isolated and isolating for an Indigenous person. Without strong support from the community, employment of a non-Indigenous person to this position has been problematic (an exception was noted by Burnett Mary).

Expectations from the Indigenous community members can be unrealistic and needs to be managed by the regional body generally and the coordinator to ensure the coordinator does not come under flack for non-delivery.

S5 Supporting training opportunities within the Indigenous community

Description

Regional bodies support the development and running of training programs for Indigenous communities within the region. Training can include issues relating to managing country as well as practice of culture.

Strengths

Training programs can be targeted to meet the aspirations of Traditional Owners and Indigenous community members.

Limitations

Aspirations for training may not at times line up with the program requirements of NAPSWQ and the Trust.