

Caring for our Country

Australia's environment is under increasing pressure from a range of threats including the loss of biodiversity, threats to critical aquatic systems, declining water quality, and the climate change impacts to our productive agricultural lands. This has led to ongoing loss of species combined with fragmentation of native habitats and a reduced productive capacity.

Conserving, protecting and restoring this unique and valuable environment is an aim of the Australian Government. Caring for our Country is designed as an outcomes-based initiative with a single goal: to have an environment that is healthy, better protected, well-managed and resilient, and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate. The Australia Government has provided over \$2 billion in funding over the first five years of Caring for our Country to contribute to achieving this goal.

Caring for our Country aims to achieve this strategic goal by focusing on six national priority areas: a national reserve system; biodiversity and natural icons; coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats; sustainable farm practices; natural resource management in remote and northern Australia; and community skills, knowledge and engagement.

In mid 2008, a national set of ambitious but achievable outcomes for the first five years of Caring for our Country were articulated. These outcome statements are being used to assist in determining the priorities for investing Caring for our Country funds and to help us make decisions about the most efficient way of taking action.

A number of the outcomes identified relate directly to Queensland's natural resource management groups, local and state government, Indigenous groups, industry bodies, land managers, farmers, Landcare and Coastcare groups and communities. These outcomes include:

- reducing the discharge of dissolved nutrients and chemicals from agricultural lands to the Great Barrier Reef lagoon by 25 per cent;
- reducing the discharge of sediment and nutrients from agricultural lands to the Great Barrier Reef lagoon by 10 per cent;
- delivering actions that sustain the environmental values of priority sites in the Ramsar estate, particularly sites in northern and remote Australia and an additional 25 per cent of (non-Ramsar) priority coastal and inland high conservation value aquatic ecosystems;
- improving the water quality management in priority coastal hotspots;
- increasing the communities participation in protecting and rehabilitating coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats;
- increasing the area of native habitat and vegetation that is managed to reduce critical threats to biodiversity and enhance the condition, connectivity and resilience of habitats and landscapes;
- reducing the impacts of invasive species;
- increasing the number of farmers who adopt stewardship, covenanting and property management plans to improve the environment both on-farm and off-farm;

- increasing the engagement and participation rates of urban and regional communities in activities to manage natural resources and to help protect the environment; and
- engaging Indigenous communities to ensure the continued use of traditional ecological knowledge to underpin biodiversity conservation.

These outcomes help us to clearly focus investment on achieving national priorities and avoid spreading the funds so thinly that the improvements can not be measured or reported. The achievement of these outcomes in the first 5 years across the six national priority areas will be through a suite of short-term targets that are being progressively identified through the annual Caring for our Country business plans. These targets play a crucial role in guiding the investment by identifying the steps that need to be taken to achieve the Caring for our Country outcomes while providing greater detail about the actions and, in some cases, the places where the changes are being sought.

In November 2008, the inaugural Caring for our Country business plan was released. This Plan invited interested parties to submit investment proposals for projects that will contribute to the achievement of Caring for our Country targets across a variety of timeframes (one, two, three and four years) depending on the nature of the target. These targets and activities included the range of existing activities to which commitments were already in place including commitments with state governments such as management arrangements for the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area and a number of the 2007 election commitments including rescuing the Great Barrier Reef (\$200 million) and repairing our fragile coastal ecosystems (\$100 million).

To deliver the targets and commitments outlined in the 2009-10 Caring for our Country business plan, the Australian Government has identified the key stakeholders and groups that we expect to partner with to bring about change. The Australian Government recognises the need for many different groups to work together, and the importance of the diverse range of stakeholders working and volunteering in natural resource management across Australia. These stakeholders include regional natural resource management organisations, community groups, non-government organisations, state and local government, industry and the commercial sector and Indigenous organisations.

Some of these partnerships have already been established in the transition year (2008-09) of Caring for our Country through a range of initial investment processes including community coastcare grants, open grants, reef water quality grants and regional investments.

Community Coastcare projects contribute to Caring for our Country national priorities by protecting and rehabilitating coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats and enhancing community skills, knowledge and engagement with Indigenous Australians, volunteers and coastal communities. Eighty eight projects were funded in Queensland (2008-09) totaling \$5 340 870.

Caring for our Country Open Grants contributed to five of the six national priority areas, particularly those that would: protect, enhance or restore Australia's biodiversity and natural icons; improve water quality of our critical aquatic habitats; and achieve greater uptake of sustainable farm practices.

The Caring for our Country Reef Rescue package aims to build the resilience of the Great Barrier Reef to climate change by reducing the amount of fertilisers, chemicals and sediments entering waterways that drain to the reef lagoon. In its first year of operation, the Water Quality Grants component of Reef Rescue provided \$23 million to regional NRM bodies and industry groups to help farmers adopt land management practices that will improve water quality outcomes and support sustainable and efficient farming.

The Australian Government is committed to providing secure base-level funding to regional NRM organisations for the first five years of Caring for our Country. This funding will ensure that issues affecting the coastal environment are addressed through the coastal and aquatic targets outlined in the Caring for our Country business plan. Regional NRM bodies are expected to continue to partner with relevant NRM stakeholders to support the delivery of both landscape scale and local level projects.

Funding was provided to Queensland regional NRM organisations in the transition year (2008-09) to address key coastal issues such as sustainable coastal development, building community capacity and engagement in coastal management, improving water quality in coastal hotspot areas and improving the understanding, protection and management of estuarine and coastal fish habitats.

In addition to these investment processes a number of foundational activities have been initiated that are enabling the Australian Government to better identify future priorities and refine strategies for Caring for our Country. These activities include baseline studies, monitoring and evaluation and strategic infrastructures to support a sound foundation to assess progress towards targets, achievements and prioritise investments for future business plans.

In undertaking a business approach to Caring for our Country, the Australian Government is taking a strategic approach to measuring the achievements of Caring for our Country investments. The monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) strategy will provide a simple, efficient, reliable and cost-effective mechanisms for measuring and reporting on outcomes from Caring for our Country investment. Monitoring, evaluating and reporting on project performance will provide evidence about the appropriateness, impacts, effectiveness, efficiency and legacy of investment made at any point in time.

Monitoring and reporting on the state and trend of assets where the investment is made, and at a broader scale through defining baseline condition of assets, will provide us with confidence that our investment is appropriate and help in future investment choices. The Australian Government and the community will be kept informed of progress of the Caring for our Country initiative and the delivery of its five year outcomes through the release of an annual report card.