

Regional partnership agreements on prioritised investment strategies for the Burnett Mary Region

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for

Burnett Mary Regional Group for Natural Resource
Management Inc

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We have appreciated the opportunity to work in partnership with the Burnett Mary Regional Group for Natural Resource Management on some difficult issues that face most Regional Bodies as they establish their credentials with the many stakeholders with natural resource management interests within the region. These interests are diverse – ranging from intense resource use to passionate resource protection.

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Information was sought from interstate regional bodies regarding their approach to Agreement formation. This included discussions with managers and planning officers in six Catchment Management Authorities in Victoria. Thanks go to them for providing helpful information. Four regions in Queensland were approached for information, and provided valuable insights.

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Summary

This project, Regional Partnership Agreements on Prioritised Investment Strategies for the Burnett-Mary region, was one of several social research studies funded under Queensland's State Investment Priority funding to provide collaborative support for Regional Bodies in their fledgling stages of engaging communities in action plans for natural resource management. The study commenced in April 2004 as a scoping study with expansion in 2005. Objectives of the scoping stage were to (a) form a collaborative partnership, (b) clarify stakeholder perspectives on opportunities and constraints for contribution to regional plans, (c) identify methods of negotiating agreed contributions that are likely to suit different stakeholder groups, (d) identify the most prospective methods for trial in the following year's work, and (e) secure funding for continuation in 2005. The second year aims were to: continue interviews with stakeholders in other sectors; identify and pilot-test methods of negotiating agreements and formalising agreed contributions; and identify and test capacity building activities for the sectors studied in 2004. This report presents the findings for both research stages.

Information collection methods included observation of Board and stakeholder meetings, interviews with a sample of members from six sectors (catchment groups, landcare groups, conservation groups, local government, coastal management and secondary/tertiary industry), requests to other regional bodies for examples of their partnership-forming processes and visits to six Victorian Catchment Management Authorities. We also reviewed literature on partnership formation, covering partnership formation in the social and business domains as well as the natural resource management or environmental domain.

The University and the Burnett Mary Regional Group (BMRG) formed an effective working partnership. Perspectives on issues, opportunities and constraints to participation in natural resource management actions obtained by interview were aggregated into sector views. The interviews also identified readiness for organisations in these sectors to move towards formal partnership agreements with BMRG and among themselves. From the literature review, supported by interview perspectives, we developed a suggested process for negotiating partnerships (see chapter 3, section 3.12) and identified the types of circumstances in which different types of partnership agreement work best.

Readiness to enter into partnership agreements varied between the sectors studied. Landcare groups have moved on from the difficulties experienced when support dropped at the end of the NHT1 program and have formed an effective regional network. Catchment groups on the other hand, who originally challenged the new order, have struggled to establish their appropriate role under the regional structure. One problem for the catchment groups was the considerable difference in structure and capability between the groups – from a formal Integrated Catchment Management Catchment Coordinating Committee structure with broad sector representation to informal care groups. Thus what was true about management capability for one group could not be applied to another.

Some in local government initially considered that, with local government's major responsibility for natural resource management, they should have more funds and more say. Some believed they were in best position to act if provided sufficient funds. Others recognised the importance of coordinated catchment wide approaches for long-term solutions, resulting in agreement between BMRG and the 27 shires in the region to interact and plan in four clusters of shires.

Conservation groups have a range of orientations and are not cohesive as a sector. Although some groups welcomed a strong catchment-wide approach, few took up the offer to submit expressions of interest in working towards the Activities of the NRM Plan, and peak groups were reluctant to engage with BMRG, believing that resource users were dominant over resource protectors. The coastal sector was also fragmented in terms of organisation types and interests. Some useful partnerships with BMRG have been negotiated and an alliance has formed between several organisations from various sectors to monitor water quality in coastal and lower catchment environs. However coastal organisations face several divisive issues, which will require sensitive management before partnerships on points of common ground are in place.

What appeared to be a low level of trust of government funded programs in 2004 by primary industry (producers and rural industry organisations) has moved forward to a stage where rural industry organisations are actively working in partnership; there is positive outlook for incentive programs and rural industry organisations are likely to encourage landholder uptake of these within their farming systems management programs. Secondary and Tertiary industries contacted were those having some link back to natural resources. They appeared to know little about BMRG or the NRM Plan and often have not made the connection between their sustainable future and the sustainability of natural resources. A substantial awareness effort, tailored to specific industries, appears needed. On the other hand, some businesses, without knowledge of the NRM Plan, are delivering practices that could fit within or add to sustainability objectives of the Plan and this could probably be extended through a partnership approach.

Traditional Owners have shown readiness to form partnership links with BMRG in projects requiring support to achieve their NRM objectives. They have also undertaken a diligent, though slow, process through three fora to establish satisfactory modes of communication and decision making both with BMRG and among themselves in relation to natural resource management. The issues of working through representatives or delegates have not been easy here, as elsewhere, to resolve because customary Indigenous governance works in a different way.

The types of agreements between BMRG and sector organisations has varied from initial short term contracts, due to short-term fund availability, to later introduction of service level agreements in some instances covering several facets of Plan Activities. Memoranda of Understanding have been used to establish fundamental arrangements about roles and relationships. There is still need to review further documents used in relation to the partnership tenets of this study and comparative documents used in other regions. Interstate bodies making best progress appear to use a mix of relationship-based arrangements such as statements of joint intent for long-term multi-faceted partnership interactions with larger corporate bodies, and tight short-term contractual arrangements for smaller single-issue projects.

We attempted to try the proposed process for developing partnerships process under various sector and cross-sector situations, but often found it difficult to gain access to sector groups that were ready to work together on a partnership process, and also found that Plan implementation through expressions of interest and contractual agreements has run ahead of the rate at which the study could engage groups prior to action commencing. Nevertheless we have been able to recommend future partnership development for each sector and across sectors, and have provided alternative partnership models for consideration, based on first first-hand observations and discussions, the literature review, past experiences and studies in NRM, and discussions with people in other NRM Regions.