

AN EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL NATURAL RESOURCE
MANAGEMENT FACILITATOR NETWORK:

OVERARCHING REPORT

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Natural Heritage Trust

Helping Communities Helping Australia

An Australian Government Initiative

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1. INTRODUCTION

The following overarching report is a synthesis of findings from the 4 National Natural Resource Management (NRM) Facilitator Network Evaluations that were commissioned to independently identify and report on:

1. the extent that the NRM Facilitator Network is achieving its 3-year strategic objectives;
2. the identification of key issues that may need to be addressed in improving the National NRM Facilitator Network and the achievement of its core objectives; and
3. the quality, accuracy, reliability and value of the NRM facilitator network self-reporting process.

The following overarching report provides a broad overview only of the four evaluations. For more detailed information refer to the reports themselves. They are:

- a. An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Australian Government NRM Facilitators¹;
- b. An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Indigenous Land Management Facilitators²;
- c. An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Local Government Facilitators³;
- d. An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Regional NRM Facilitators⁴.

¹ M Fenton, An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Australian Government NRM Facilitators, September 2006.

² M Fenton, An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Indigenous Land Management Facilitators, September 2006.

³ M Fenton, An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Local Government Facilitators, September 2006.

⁴ M Fenton, An Evaluation of the National Natural Resource Management Facilitator network: Regional NRM Facilitators, September 2006.

2. BACKGROUND

The Australian Government funds a National NRM Facilitator Network of 120 facilitators to support the delivery of natural resource management under the Natural Heritage Trust Extension (NHT) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAPSWQ).

The Network was established in October 2003 in recognition that direct on-ground support was required to enable many of the important changes in NRM to occur and that support was also needed in facilitating regional delivery of NRM and the flow of information between regional communities, NRM bodies and Government. The National NRM Facilitator Network is funded through the NHT. The Network comprises of 34 Australian Government NRM Facilitators; 65 Regional NRM Facilitators⁵; 13 Indigenous Land Management Facilitators (ILMFs) and 8 Local Government NRM Facilitators.

Australian Government NRM Facilitators

Australian Government NRM Facilitators are funded and directly employed by the Australian Government and operate at the State or Territory scale. The core function of Australian Government NRM Facilitators is to support and communicate Australian Government NRM policies, programs and priorities, particularly in relation to the NAPSWQ and the NHT. Australian Government NRM Facilitators also engage and consult with a broad range of stakeholders in relation to four core themes, which include (i) coastal and marine, (ii) biodiversity conservation, (iii) water and (iv) sustainable resource use.

Regional NRM Facilitators

Regional NRM Facilitators are jointly funded by the Australian Government and States or Territories and employed directly by regional NRM bodies. Unlike Australian Government NRM Facilitators, Regional NRM Facilitators work at the regional NRM scale to support community and other stakeholder involvement in NRM; communicate Government policies and initiatives and provide opportunities for direct community feedback on NRM issues to Government.

Indigenous Land Management Facilitators (ILMFs)

Indigenous Land Management Facilitators are funded by the Australian Government and located in host agencies in each State and Territory. The core function of Indigenous Land Management Facilitators is to assist Indigenous Australians to address their land management aspirations and requirements.

Local Government NRM Facilitators

Local Government NRM Facilitators are jointly funded by the Australian Government and the Local Government Association in each State and Territory. They are directly employed by Local Government Associations and operate at a State or Territory scale. The core functions of Local Government NRM Facilitators is to engage Local Government in NRM at the regional scale; promote and disseminate information about Australian Government NRM policies and programs; and assist Local Government with the development of NRM policies.

⁵Regional NRM facilitators are also referred to as Strategic Regional NRM facilitators.

3. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to undertake the evaluation was prescribed in the Monitoring and Evaluation Plans (M&E plans) for each of the four types of facilitators. This methodology was also used to identify key issues in improving the National NRM Facilitator Network and assessing the network self-reporting process. The methodology for the evaluations is described in full detail in each of the 4 individual reports.

3.1 Evaluating Progress Towards the Achievement of Strategic Objectives

M&E plans had been developed to evaluate the extent to which the National NRM Facilitator Network was achieving its 3-year strategic objectives. Within each of the M&E plans there were four 3-year strategic objectives which were common to each of the four types of facilitators. These are described in Chapter 4.

In summary, these objectives were assessed by :

1. Analysing the Facilitator six monthly reports. All facilitators were asked to complete six monthly reports for the period January to June 2005 and July to December 2005. The six monthly reports were designed to enable the collection of both quantitative and qualitative information.
2. Undertaking Qualitative Interviews
 - Individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken and recorded with a sample of 118 facilitators, regional bodies and stakeholders.
 - Facilitators and regional bodies were randomly selected from the total population of facilitators and regional bodies. Interviews were undertaken with 38 facilitators and 14 regional bodies.
 - Two methods were used to select stakeholders⁶, which attempted to avoid bias in the selection and identification of stakeholders solely by facilitators.
3. Undertaking Quantitative Survey Research.
 - Structured telephone interviews were undertaken with facilitators, regional bodies and stakeholders.
 - Ninety structured telephone interviews were undertaken with facilitators, which represented 90% of all facilitators currently employed in the Network.

⁶ *In the context of the evaluation of the network and as used in this report, the term stakeholder has been interpreted broadly to include all individuals, groups and organisations the facilitators may have interacted with and who may have an interest in NRM. The use of this broader definition includes individuals from Government agencies and departments in addition to those who may be more traditionally regarded as stakeholders.*

4. ACHIEVEMENT OF THREE YEAR STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

All four of the evaluations had as their basis in four 3-year strategic outcomes for the National NRM Facilitator Network and these are:

1. Government NRM policy and information being communicated effectively to targeted stakeholder groups;
2. NRM issues and achievements amongst stakeholders being effectively communicated to Government;
3. Improved engagement of stakeholders in planning, implementing and monitoring NRM programs and projects; and
4. Facilitators being part of an effectively functioning national network of NRM facilitators.

It needs to be remembered that the 3-year strategic outcomes were based on M&E plans developed over three years ago and at a time when the National NRM Facilitator Network was in the early stages of development. During the last three years there have been significant changes in the understanding of the Network, the role of facilitators in NRM and the outcomes that are expected from the Network. For instance, the existing M&E plans and the strategic outcomes identified in these plans, tend to emphasise a ‘provider model’ of the Network, where the role of the facilitator is to essentially ‘provide’ information to stakeholders and Government. In the provider model, stakeholders tend to be conceptualised as a special subset of individuals and organisations that the facilitator interacts with and who are generally more directly involved in the implementation of on-ground NRM activities. In this model the focus is on the facilitator ‘providing’ information to these stakeholders and ‘providing’ stakeholder information to Government.

Through the four evaluations and based on discussions with facilitators, organisations and individuals involved in NRM, there now appears to be a greater emphasis on a ‘facilitator model’ in terms of the workings of the Network. In this model the term stakeholder is interpreted broadly to include all individuals, groups and organisations the facilitator may interact with and who may have an interest in NRM. In a ‘facilitator model’ defining individuals and organisations as stakeholders is somewhat redundant, as it includes anyone the facilitator interacts with, including individuals from Government agencies and departments, regional bodies, other facilitators and those who may be more traditionally regarded as stakeholders. The facilitators’ role is no longer narrowly defined in terms of providing information; the role is also about interpreting, translating, filtering and developing stakeholder understanding and knowledge in relation to NRM activities, programs and policies.

As the four evaluations were based on the existing M&E plans and the strategic outcomes identified in these plans, they essentially evaluated a ‘provider model’ of the Network. However, it was recognised that a ‘facilitator model’ was perhaps a more appropriate framework through which to evaluate the Network and where possible this framework has been integrated into the evaluations.

In any discussion which focuses on the achievement of strategic outcomes, it is important to also remember, as many facilitators have indicated, that because their role is to facilitate processes amongst stakeholders, they are not always aware or knowledgeable of outcomes. For instance, while many facilitators provided information to stakeholders and assisted in funding applications,

they would not necessarily be aware of whether the information or assistance they provided led to the implementation of a successful project or a successful funding application. This is a critical issue which arose repeatedly during the course of the evaluation and suggests that given the key role of ‘facilitation’ amongst ‘facilitators’, the evaluation of procedural issues needs to be given at least equal weight when compared to the evaluation of ‘outcomes’.

4.1 Overall Stakeholder View

The evaluation of the National NRM Facilitator Network indicates that the Network as a whole is making significant progress towards the achievement of the 3-year strategic outcomes as identified in the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) plans developed for the Network. Furthermore, over 90% of stakeholders who interacted with facilitators indicated that facilitators had made a significant contribution to the delivery of NRM (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of stakeholders who indicate that facilitators had made significant contribution to the delivery of natural resource management

| | Australian Government NRM Facilitators | | Regional NRM Facilitators | | Indigenous Land Management Facilitators | | Local Government NRM Facilitators | |
|-------------------|---|---------|------------------------------|---------|--|---------|--------------------------------------|---------|
| | Count | Percent | Count | Percent | Count | Percent | Count | Percent |
| Total agree | 88 | 90.7 | 64 | 94.1 | 14 | 100.0 | 12 | 100.0 |
| Total disagree | 9 | 9.3 | 4 | 5.9 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total respondents | 97 | 100.0 | 68 | 100.0 | 14 | 100.0 | 12 | 100.0 |

Source: EBC (2006).

The evaluation indicated that the Network is achieving its defined strategic outcomes but there are a number of key issues that need to be addressed if the network is to continue to provide valuable support to NRM in Australia. These are outlined in Chapter 5. It needs to be recognised that while the network has provided great support to the NRM community it needs to evolve in order to continue to meet the needs of a maturing regional NRM process and community. While the roles undertaken during the initial phase of the regional delivery model were appropriate for that stage, evolution of roles will ensure relevance into the next and future phases of the process. The following report outlines the broad findings of the four evaluations, including outcomes against the original objectives, strengths, key issues and areas for improvement.

4.2 Communicating Government NRM Policies and Programs

Overall, an assessment of specific progress measures associated with this strategic outcome indicated that Australian Government NRM Facilitators, Regional NRM Facilitators, Indigenous Land Management Facilitators and Local Government NRM Facilitators had all made significant progress towards the achievement of this outcome

This strategic outcome focused on ensuring stakeholders were aware of and understood the relevance of NRM policies and programs and that they were knowledgeable of NRM funding sources and understood the procedures for accessing NRM funds. Table 2 summarises the survey findings undertaken with stakeholders and regional bodies which addresses this strategic outcome.

Table 2. Survey Findings: Communicating Government NRM policies and programs

| Belief statement | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|---|----------------------|------|------|------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| Stakeholders | | | | |
| Increased awareness of Government NRM policies and programs | 80.2 | 83.1 | 92.3 | 58.3 |
| Increased awareness of NRM tools and resources | 74.3 | 83.1 | 76.9 | 91.7 |
| Increased understanding of how to access NRM funding sources | 73.3 | 83.1 | 84.6 | 41.7 |
| Regional Bodies | | | | |
| Increased awareness and of Government NRM policies and programs | 54.6 | 86.0 | - | - |
| Increased awareness and use of information about NRM | 58.2 | 80.0 | - | - |
| Increased understanding of how to access NRM funding sources | 56.4 | 87.5 | - | - |

Note: AGF: Australian Government NRM facilitator; RF: Regional NRM facilitators; ILMF: Indigenous Land Management facilitators; LGF: Local Government NRM facilitators

Indigenous stakeholders responded in relation to ILMFs and Local Government responded in relation to LGF

Source: EBC (2006).

In summary and as shown in Table 2, stakeholders and regional bodies believed that facilitators had increased their awareness and understanding of Government policies, programs, tools, resources and funding sources. Percentages were relatively lower for Local Government NRM facilitators, which was not due to the activities of these facilitators, but a consequence of Local Government stakeholders indicating they already had access to and were aware of this information.

Table 2 also shows that regional bodies indicated that Australian Government NRM facilitators relative to Regional NRM facilitators contributed less to increasing their awareness and understanding of NRM information. For regional bodies, this discrepancy is most likely due to some confusion and lack of understanding of the roles of the two types of facilitators. Even amongst Australian Government NRM facilitators there were differences in opinion as to whether it was their role to provide NRM information to regional bodies or whether this was fundamentally the role of Regional NRM facilitators.

In terms of simply informing stakeholders of NRM policies, programs and funding sources, facilitators implemented and utilised a wide range of communication methods which were suited to the regional and institutional contexts in which they were working. Many of the methods commonly used by facilitators were reasonably traditional and included individual stakeholder consultations, newsletters, workshops and presentations. However, there were also numerous instances where facilitators utilised more innovative communication methods which were in many instances not only effective at presenting information, but also developed greater interest in the material and information being presented. These additional methods included the use of GIS tools; web based presentations; e-newsletters and demonstrations of NRM tools.

While facilitators were clearly able to develop and utilise a wide range of traditional and innovative methods in communicating with stakeholders, an issue raised consistently by Australian Government NRM facilitators and to a lesser extent Regional NRM facilitators, was the difficulty they experienced in obtaining information from Government. Some facilitators indicated they were not provided with information; they did not have access to information; that the information they were provided with was not up-to-date information or that they were not consulted in relation to the delivery of regional NRM programs.

In other words, while the facilitators were able to develop and implement appropriate communication methods, they experienced difficulty in obtaining the information to populate these methods. Facilitators commonly referred to difficulties in accessing information from 'policy areas' within the Australian Government. This may be due to some in the 'policy areas' not fully understanding the role of facilitators and it may also be due to some facilitators not understanding who to consult with in the policy areas or what questions they need to be asking.

On a related issue, some Australian Government NRM facilitators and to a lesser extent Regional NRM facilitators indicated they occasionally experienced difficulties in accessing information from State and Territory agencies and departments. This appeared to be an issue related to understanding the role of facilitators and there is some indication that this is improving as the States and Territories become more familiar with the regional delivery model and the roles of the different facilitators.

It is also important to recognise that the process of communicating with stakeholders was not one in which information was simply presented to stakeholders; with stakeholders themselves often advocating a 'facilitator' rather than a 'provider' model in relation to the dissemination of information. For instance, many stakeholders indicated that facilitators often spent time 'translating' Government policies and programs into a language they could understand and which was relevant to their own context. The process of 'translating' or assisting stakeholders to better understand NRM information is linked explicitly to the core role of a facilitator. As an example, it was also one of the more important activities undertaken by Indigenous Land Management facilitators, where 'natural resource management' had to be 'translated' into the more culturally relevant concept of 'caring for country'.

Many stakeholders and regional bodies also indicated that given the volume of NRM information available, facilitators performed a useful role in filtering information, so that they were informed of only the most relevant and useful information. In addition, several facilitators indicated that as many stakeholders could themselves readily access NRM information, their role as a facilitator also included monitoring the information stakeholders were utilising. Of course the capacity of facilitators to filter and monitor information is dependent upon the knowledge facilitators have of stakeholders and their activities. However, it is these facilitation activities which enable effective communication of NRM policies and programs to stakeholders and it is these facilitation activities that are becoming increasingly important as the volume of NRM information available to stakeholders increases.

Going beyond the simple presentation of NRM information to stakeholders was also important in the context of informing stakeholders about NRM funding and the submission of NRM funding applications. Here facilitators not only 'translated' funding guidelines and criteria for stakeholders, but also often directly assisted stakeholders in coordinating and submitting NRM funding applications.

One of the most important factors identified by facilitators which influenced the extent to which they could achieve this outcome was the number and geographic distribution of stakeholders they were required to interact with. While this was an issue for all facilitators, it was particularly acute for Indigenous Land Management facilitators and Local Government NRM facilitators, where the number of facilitators in each State and Territory were not able to adequately meet the demands for information from stakeholders.

4.3 Communicating Stakeholder Issues and Achievements to Government

Overall an assessment of specific progress measures associated with this strategic outcome indicated that Australian Government NRM Facilitators, Regional NRM Facilitators and Local Government NRM Facilitators had all made significant progress towards the achievement of this outcome. However, for Indigenous Land Management Facilitators the existing institutional arrangements, including management and reporting arrangements, to some extent impeded the achievement of this objective.

While the previous strategic outcome focussed on communicating information from Government to stakeholders, this objective focussed on communicating information from stakeholders to Government. An assessment was made of how well stakeholders' believed their issues were being communicated to Government and the extent to which the Australian Government and Joint NRM teams were aware of stakeholder issues and activities.

Table 3. Survey Findings: Communicating stakeholder issues and achievements to Government

| Belief statement | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|--|----------------------|------|-------|-------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| Stakeholders | | | | |
| Helped communicate issues to Government | 69.3 | 72.3 | 92.3 | 83.3 |
| Facilitators | | | | |
| Needs to be an improvement in interaction with joint teams | 88.0 | 85.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Note: AGF: Australian Government NRM facilitator; RF: Regional NRM facilitators; ILMF: Indigenous Land Management facilitators; LGF: Local Government NRM facilitators

Indigenous stakeholders responded in relation to ILMFs and Local Government responded in relation to LGF

Source: EBC (2006).

As shown in Table 3, over 70% of stakeholders believed that facilitators had helped communicate their issues to Government. However and in contrast, the communication of this information between facilitators and Government was not always as effective, with many Regional NRM facilitators in particular indicating they were unsure of the process through which to inform the Australian Government of stakeholder issues. This was of most concern to Regional NRM facilitators and of least concern to Australian Government NRM facilitators, suggesting that the issue may be related more to the level of understanding of Australian Government structures and processes.

In communicating stakeholder issues to Government, it should be remembered that this process is facilitated by the actions of the facilitator. In this context there is the process of stakeholder communication with the facilitator and then facilitator communication with Government.

Furthermore, a specific paradox in the communication of stakeholder information to Government was that while Directors of the Joint Teams generally believed facilitators were effectively communicating issues to them, over 85% of facilitators indicated a need to improve the level and quality of the interaction with the Joint Teams. There are a number of issues which may account for this finding including management styles and the beliefs of Joint Team Directors and facilitators about what constitutes an effective communications process. For instance, several Joint Team Directors often requested regional and State information from facilitators and they may well be responding to the effectiveness of these 'information requests'. Equally, many facilitators may have an expectation that there should be individuals on the Joint Teams who are there to absorb information provided by facilitators. Whatever the underlying reasoning behind the paradox, there is undoubtedly a need to clarify the roles and expectations of facilitators and members of Joint

Teams in relation to the communication of information.

A key issue in relation to Indigenous Land Management Facilitators communicating to the Australian Government was that these facilitators reported to their hosting organisation and to the Indigenous Protected Unit within Parks Australia. As a consequence there appeared to be little integration with the activities of the Joint Teams. Under current management arrangements several State Team Directors indicated they had limited knowledge of the activities of these facilitators as there was no formal reporting to the Joint Teams. Of course while specific communications with the Joint Teams may not always have been effective, many indigenous stakeholders indicated that Indigenous Land Management facilitators had communicated their issues to Government.

Local Government NRM Facilitators were seen as critically important by State Team Directors in providing information to the Australian Government on Local Government issues. However there were two important issues associated with their communication with the Australian Government. Firstly, these facilitators report directly to their host organisations and to the Capacity Building team and do not formally report to the State Team Directors. As such the interaction with State Team Directors was often informal and issue specific.

Secondly, many Local Government NRM facilitators indicated that within the State, Territory and Australian Governments there was often limited understanding of Local Governments' role in NRM, which made communication about Local Government issues difficult for many facilitators. While this may partly be due to a lack of understanding of the role of these facilitators, facilitators themselves indicated the issue was more about understanding the role of Local Government in NRM.

4.4 Engaging Stakeholders in NRM Programs and Projects

An assessment of specific progress measures associated with this strategic outcome indicated that Regional NRM Facilitators, Indigenous Land Management Facilitators and Local Government NRM Facilitators had all made significant progress towards the achievement of this outcome. Given that there was some confusion amongst stakeholders, regional bodies and facilitators about the role of Australian Government NRM Facilitators in relation to this outcome the evaluation indicated that Australian Government NRM Facilitators had not made the same progress as other facilitators towards the achievement of this objective.

This strategic objective included facilitators providing regional NRM bodies with guidance, support and information on effective approaches towards engagement of stakeholders; and improving stakeholders' awareness and participation in NRM processes and activities.

Table 4: Survey Findings: Engaging stakeholders in NRM programs and projects

| Belief statement | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|--|----------------------|------|------|------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| Stakeholders | | | | |
| Increased awareness of how the organisation may participate in NRM | 66.3 | 83.1 | 84.6 | 83.3 |
| Increased participation of the organisation in NRM planning processes | 49.5 | 67.7 | 69.2 | 75.0 |
| Regional Bodies | | | | |
| Facilitators made a difference the way the regional body engages the community | 29.0 | 64.8 | 53.9 | 51.0 |

Note: AGF: Australian Government NRM facilitator; RF: Regional NRM facilitators; ILMF: Indigenous Land Management facilitators; LGF: Local Government NRM facilitators

Indigenous stakeholders responded in relation to ILMFs and Local Government responded in relation to LGF

Source: EBC (2006).

Table 4 shows that amongst stakeholders and regional bodies there was a belief that Australian Government NRM facilitators were less likely than other facilitators to have increased their awareness or participation in NRM activities or to have changed the way the regional body engaged with the community. As indicated previously this suggests some confusion about the role of Australian Government NRM facilitators amongst stakeholders, regional bodies and facilitators.

As occurred in relation to the achievement of other strategic objectives, a common theme reported by facilitators and regional bodies focussed on the role of the facilitator in supporting community engagement by the regional body. In this context there was clearly some confusion as to the appropriate roles of Australian Government NRM facilitators and Regional NRM facilitators.

Many regional bodies and facilitators believed that it was not the role of Australian Government NRM facilitators to support community engagement by regional bodies and that this was the role of Regional NRM facilitators (see Table 4). In several instances what did occur was the Australian Government NRM facilitators provided more strategic advice in relation to community engagement or supported community engagement within the regional body when no Regional NRM facilitators was available. Regional NRM facilitators on the other hand, tended to focus more on the development and implementation of community engagement strategies within the regional body. However, Regional NRM facilitators themselves were not immune from the issue of role confusion, with several regional bodies indicating community engagement was the role of other staff within the regional body and not the Regional NRM facilitator.

Many regional bodies believed Local Government NRM facilitators and Indigenous Land Management facilitators had been effective in supporting the engagement of Local Government

and indigenous stakeholders by the regional body. However, it was also the case that many regional bodies believed they were effectively consulting with Local Government, often through Board membership of the regional body, and that they therefore did not require the support of Local Government NRM facilitators. Furthermore, several Indigenous Land Management facilitators indicated that some regional bodies did not consult with them about engaging indigenous communities and that some regional bodies were still developing their own capacity to engage indigenous people in NRM.

For both Local Government NRM facilitators and Indigenous Land Management facilitators the number and geographic distribution of Local Government organisations, indigenous stakeholders and regional bodies certainly overwhelmed the capacity of the few facilitators that were available in each State and Territory. This certainly was one factor which influenced the extent to which facilitators could effectively achieve this outcome.

While all facilitators may have offered their assistance to regional bodies, it was also the case that some regional bodies did not necessarily readily accept or require facilitator support. There were three core reasons for this.

Firstly, some regional bodies believed they were already knowledgeable or skilled in community engagement and did not require the support of any facilitators. In some cases the regional body had staff they believed to be more knowledgeable of community engagement than the facilitators. In other instances regional bodies had employed specific staff whose role it was to undertake community engagement or community engagement may have been an integral part of many on-ground activities and projects being undertaken by the regional body and as such there was no specific community engagement tasks to be undertaken.

Secondly, regional bodies move through cycles of planning, investment and on-ground activities and for several regional bodies the stage they were at in their 'lifecycle' did not necessarily require extensive facilitator support and assistance with community engagement.

Finally, there were some regional bodies who viewed Australian Government NRM facilitators and to lesser extent Regional NRM facilitators as 'outsiders' external to the region, with limited capacity to inform them about community engagement at a local scale. This perception was also enmeshed with the belief amongst some regional bodies that the role of the Australian Government NRM facilitator was to 'infiltrate' regional bodies and inform the Australian Government of their activities. While these beliefs are current amongst a few regional bodies, they are becoming less common as regions more fully understand the roles of the different facilitators.

All facilitators were active in increasing stakeholder awareness and participation in NRM activities. Facilitators reported numerous examples of how they had achieved this objective and described a range of processes they had used to increase awareness and participation including individual consultations, web and email information, workshops, forums and conferences.

Many of the issues reported by facilitators in increasing stakeholder awareness and participation in NRM activities are pervasive to community engagement in general and not specific to the activities of NRM facilitators. They included time constraints for implementing community engagement, institutional and attitudinal barriers to the acceptance of community engagement and the lack of integration between 'technical' aspects of NRM planning and community engagement

4.5 An Effective National Network of NRM Facilitators

An assessment of specific progress measures associated with this strategic outcome indicated that Australian Government NRM Facilitators, Regional NRM Facilitators, Indigenous Land Management Facilitators and Local Government NRM Facilitators had all made significant progress towards the achievement of this outcome.

This strategic outcome focussed on the extent to which facilitators' utilised the existing National NRM Facilitator Network and other NRM network to achieve their objectives.

Table 5. Survey Findings: An effective national network of NRM facilitators

| Belief statement | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|--|----------------------|------|------|------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| Facilitators | | | | |
| There needs to be more opportunities for facilitators within each State or Territory to interact and discuss issues important to them | 73.1 | 52.2 | 87.5 | 77.8 |
| There needs to be more opportunities for facilitators at a national level to interact and discuss issues important to them | 32.0 | 40.4 | 87.5 | 66.6 |
| Developing opportunities for interaction amongst facilitators within the State is more important than developing these opportunities at a national level | 34.6 | 35.6 | 83.3 | 66.6 |
| There needs to be more interaction amongst Australian Government, Regional, Indigenous and Local Government Facilitators | 60.0 | 83.0 | 87.5 | 77.8 |
| Sometimes I feel isolated and that I am working alone with little support | 3.9 | 27.7 | 87.5 | 66.7 |

Note: AGF: Australian Government NRM facilitator; RF: Regional NRM facilitators; ILMF: Indigenous Land Management facilitators; LGF: Local Government NRM facilitators
Indigenous stakeholders responded in relation to ILMFs and Local Government responded in relation to LGF

Source: EBC (2006).

Facilitators indicated continuous and frequent formal and informal interactions occurred within the National NRM Facilitator Network, which assisted in developing the capacity of facilitators to contribute to the achievement of their objectives. While facilitators recognised the importance of formal conferences and workshops, it was often the informal contact amongst facilitators that was seen as the most valuable. For instance, many of the more experienced facilitators within the network would often act as mentors to new facilitators or other facilitators requiring assistance and support.

Given the more focussed role of Indigenous Land Management facilitators and Local Government NRM facilitators there was some evidence that the interaction amongst these facilitators was somewhat 'siloes', while Australian Government NRM facilitators and Regional NRM facilitators were more likely to interact and provide mutual support. Table 5 tends to support this view with Indigenous Land Management facilitators and Local Government NRM facilitators indicating greater isolation and the need for broader integration and interaction within the network.

Rather than enhancing the capacity of facilitators within the National NRM Facilitator Network, the interaction with other NRM networks often showed how facilitators had enhanced the capacity of other NRM networks, or how the capacity of all NRM networks had been enhanced through mutual interaction.

5. IMPROVING THE NATIONAL NRM FACILITATOR NETWORK

The second objective of the evaluation was to identify key issues that need to be addressed in improving the National NRM Facilitator Network and the achievement of its core objectives.

Through the use of face-to-face interviews and survey research with facilitators, stakeholders, regional bodies and the State Team Directors, an evaluation of each of the progress measures as identified in the M&E plans was undertaken. However, the interviews and survey research also identified and described other issues associated with the Network, which often went beyond the narrower focus of evaluating specific progress measures.

The analysis of qualitative and quantitative information derived from the evaluation identified five clusters of issues associated with the National NRM Facilitator network. With the exception of issues associated with hosting arrangements, which were more specific to Indigenous Land Management Facilitators and to a lesser extent Local Government NRM Facilitators, all other issues were common to all four types of facilitators. The five clusters of issues included:

1. The role of facilitators;
2. Facilitator interaction with the Australian Government;
3. Management and administration;
4. The recruitment of facilitators; and
5. Hosting arrangements.

5.1 The Role of Facilitators

Issues related to the role of facilitators occurred throughout the evaluation and as was evident in the assessment of each of the evaluation outcomes (Section 4), there was often confusion and a lack of clarity about the roles of facilitators amongst stakeholders and facilitators alike. Of course this presents an interesting paradox in so far as stakeholders clearly believed facilitators were effective in delivering outcomes, but at the same time they were often unsure of what facilitators themselves actually did. Table 6 provides a summary of the findings.

An immediate and perhaps somewhat simplistic response to this issue would be to describe prescriptively what the roles of facilitators should be. However there are several issues which suggest that this approach would be inadequate and that the issue is somewhat more complex than simply defining a prescribed list of roles.

Table 6. Survey Findings: Percent indicated the need for improved role definition for each facilitator type

| | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|---|----------------------|------|-------|------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| Facilitators | | | | |
| Australian Government NRM facilitators | 64.0 | - | - | - |
| Regional NRM facilitators | - | 67.4 | - | - |
| Indigenous Land Management facilitators | - | - | 100.0 | - |
| Local Government NRM facilitators | - | - | - | 55.5 |
| Regional bodies | 65.8 | 27.3 | 46.2 | 36.8 |
| Stakeholders | 38.0 | 27.5 | 28.5 | 16.7 |

Note: AGF: Australian Government NRM facilitator; RF: Regional NRM facilitators; ILMF: Indigenous Land Management facilitators; LGF: Local Government NRM facilitators

Indigenous stakeholders responded in relation to ILMFs and Local Government responded in relation to LGF

Source: EBC (2006).

Table 6 shows the majority of facilitators indicated a need to better define the role of facilitators. Interestingly Table 6 also shows that amongst regional bodies only 27% indicated the need to better define the role of Regional NRM facilitators, while 66% indicated a need to better define the role of Australian Government NRM facilitators. This tends to suggest that the more familiar regional bodies and stakeholders are with facilitators, the better they understand their roles, suggesting that again it may also be important to market facilitators better by informing and communicating their activities and roles to others.

Firstly, and as shown in Table 6, the need for improved role definition was not only important to facilitators but also to stakeholders and regional bodies. Stakeholders and regional bodies sometimes found it difficult to interact with facilitators as they often didn't know of the role of facilitators or the type of services that they could provide.

Secondly, there are individual differences across facilitators in terms of the need for clearer role definition. For instance, some facilitators are able to work very effectively with a level of role uncertainty and ambiguity. However, there are other facilitators that require their roles to be clearly prescribed and the boundaries of their activities clearly identified. Furthermore, facilitators who have been recently recruited to the position may require greater clarity in their roles than those who have been in the position for a number of years.

Thirdly, the stakeholders and NRM issues that facilitators are involved with are grounded in their own jurisdictional, institutional and regional context. Not only are the NRM issues and on-ground activities often different for each facilitator, but each facilitator is often working within different institutional contexts, with different stakeholders who hold different beliefs and attitudes about NRM. Given the influence of the contextual environment in which facilitators operate, their activities and roles must in large part be defined by these emergent issues rather than externally prescribed. This should not be a problem in defining the roles of facilitators; but the issue needs to be clearly articulated and defined as such in any role definition.

Finally, while the term 'role' has been widely used by both facilitators and stakeholders there is a danger in focussing on the minutiae of facilitator roles. For the reasons that have been outlined, it may simply be that a better understanding of 'what facilitators do' is all that is required. Rather than a narrow focus on role definition, it may be equally if not more important to focus on informing and communicating the activities and roles of facilitators to stakeholders, including Government and regional bodies. Current discussion and debate about 'knowledge brokers' and the difference between 'provider' and 'facilitator' models, should inform a broader approach to role definition.

5.2 Facilitator Interaction with the Australian Government

Several issues related to facilitator interaction with the Australian Government have already been discussed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 and included uncertainty by some facilitators as to the process of informing the Australian Government of stakeholder issues and difficulties experienced by some facilitators in obtaining information from NRM policy areas.

As shown in the first three belief statements in Table 7, the majority of facilitators from all four networks believed there needed to be better communication and interaction with the Australian Government. In addition, with the exception of Indigenous Land Management Facilitators, all facilitators indicated they did not have up-to-date information about new or existing Australian Government NRM policies and programs. With the exception of Australian Government NRM

Facilitators, facilitators also indicated they were not always sure of the process through which they were to provide feedback to the Australian Government.

Table 7. Survey Findings: Facilitator beliefs about their interaction with the Australian Government

| Belief statement | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|---|----------------------|------|-------|-------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| Mechanisms need to be developed to allow better communications between the Australian Government and facilitators | 88.5 | 84.8 | 87.5 | 100.0 |
| I think the Australian Government needs to consult more with facilitators about how NRM programs may be implemented and delivered | 65.4 | 91.5 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| When I report back to the Australian Government there is often no feedback given on the information I provide | 52.0 | 75.6 | 50.0 | 88.9 |
| I do not always have up-to-date information about new or existing Australian Government NRM policies and programs | 80.8 | 58.7 | 37.5 | 66.7 |
| I am not always sure of the process through which I am to provide feedback to the Australian Government | 32.0 | 63.8 | 75.0 | 66.7 |

Source: EBC (2006).

The level and quality of facilitator interaction with the Australian Government is an issue that needs to be addressed in improving the operation and function of the Network. However, there are most likely to be a number of different opportunities available to address this issue. For example, in addressing the role of facilitators, the Australian Government needs to be recognised as one of many stakeholders through which facilitators facilitate the flow and provision of information and that facilitators are not simply the providers of information to Government. The process of facilitating information amongst different stakeholders and the problems and issues that are encountered and resolved by facilitators should be seen in the same context as the facilitation process with the Australian Government.

While greater clarity of the role of facilitators may partly address this issue, improving facilitator understanding of information sources, contacts and networks within the Australian Government would also assist as would improving Australian Government understanding of facilitator roles and the objectives of the facilitator Network

5.3 Management and Administration

Table 8 shows that many facilitators believed there was a need for more support and training in relation to the financial and administrative tasks they were required to undertake, with several facilitators indicating that the time they spent on financial and administrative tasks at times outweighed the core task of stakeholder facilitation. Interestingly, Table 8 shows this was less of an issue for Regional NRM facilitators, suggesting that perhaps regional bodies may be providing some management and administrative support to these facilitators.

Table 8. Survey Findings: Facilitator beliefs about management and administration

| Belief statement | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|---|----------------------|------|-------|------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| There needs to be more support provided to facilitators in undertaking financial and administrative tasks | 91.3 | 45.2 | 100.0 | 75.0 |
| There needs to be training provided for the administrative and financial tasks that I have to undertake | 88.5 | 53.5 | 100.0 | 85.7 |
| As a facilitator I feel I cannot always achieve the objectives I want to, as there is always a lot of administration I have to do | 88.0 | 52.2 | 75.0 | 55.6 |

Source: EBC (2006).

Interviews with facilitators and regional bodies also indicated the need to develop clearer administrative process and procedures; the need for training and skills development; the lack of

job security and uncertainty associated with short term contracts was not only difficult to accommodate at an individual level, but also created uncertainty within the Network and amongst stakeholders.

Issues related to leadership and coordination were also raised by some facilitators and in some instances this appeared to reflect uncertainty with their role and that there was sometimes a need for greater direction to be given to individual facilitators. While this may have been the case for some facilitators, several facilitators also expressed the need for greater strategic leadership within the network.

5.4 The Recruitment of Facilitators

There were several issues raised in relation to the recruitment process of facilitators, with many of these issues also being related to the need for a more clearly defined role for facilitators and the need for greater security of tenure. Facilitators indicated the need to review the recruitment process, which included the use and implications of short contracts for facilitators; that facilitators were required to reapply for their position every two years; and that the limited tenure created uncertainty for both facilitators and stakeholders.

In addition, facilitators indicated the need to review and identify the core competencies and selection criteria for facilitators at the time of recruitment. Some initial suggestions from facilitators as to the core competencies required included the need for good social interaction and communication skills, knowledge of natural resource management, an understanding of Government and Government policies and the ability to think strategically.

Typical issues raised in interviews with facilitators emphasised the need for training, additional support or induction processes at the time of appointment and the uncertainty created amongst facilitators and stakeholders of having short term contracts and limited security of tenure.

5.5 Hosting Arrangements

Issues associated with hosting arrangements occurred primarily in relation to Indigenous Land Management facilitators and to a lesser extent with Local Government NRM facilitators. The core issue in this context was the belief amongst some stakeholders, including regional bodies and Government, that the hosting organisation had 'captured' the facilitator, in so far as the facilitator tended to present only the views of the hosting agency. There was clearly a perception amongst some stakeholders that the hosting arrangement often created difficulties for some facilitators in adopting a more 'neutral' position and undertaking their responsibilities to the Australian Government and other stakeholders.

6. EVALUATION OF THE SIX MONTHLY REPORTING PROCESS

The third objective of the evaluation of the National NRM Facilitator Network was to report on the quality, accuracy, reliability and value of the NRM Facilitator Network self-reporting process.

As overviewed in Section 3, all facilitators were asked by the Australian Government to complete six monthly reports. The six monthly reporting template and the criteria against which facilitators are reporting, were identified in the M&E plans for each facilitator type. The self reporting process enables both quantitative and qualitative information to be collected, including the number of times or ‘moments’ facilitators believed they had progressed specific outcomes and illustrative examples of how facilitators had contributed to the achievement of these outcomes.

Interviews with facilitators included a specific question, where each facilitator was asked to identify what they thought about the six monthly reporting process and the “types of things they were reporting against.”

The most frequent issue raised, was the use of numeric counts and the difficulty in applying numeric counts to specific attributes required in the six monthly reports. For instance, the six monthly reports require facilitators to quantify:

- the number of times or moments⁷ in which facilitators believed they had progressed a specific outcome during the reporting period;
- the number of times or moments in which facilitators believed they had progressed a specific outcome in relation to identified stakeholder categories; and
- the number of times or moments in which facilitators believed they had used specific roles to progress outcomes.

Many facilitators found it exceedingly difficult to apply numeric counts in this context and questioned the meaning or validity of the counts once they had been applied. An analysis of the six monthly reports undertaken as part of this evaluation, also found that the numeric counts had limited value and could only be used and interpreted in very general terms. This is certainly not to discount quantitative assessment as part of the evaluation of the Network, but in this context the use of numeric counts were very difficult to apply and of limited value.

Table 9. Survey Findings: Facilitator beliefs about the six monthly reporting process

| Belief statement | Percentage Agreement | | | |
|--|----------------------|------|-------|-------|
| | AGF | RF | ILMF | LGF |
| I don't think the 6 monthly reporting processes to the Australian Government adequately reflects the tasks and activities that I undertake | 73.1 | 95.1 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| I find the 6 monthly reporting process a difficult task to undertake and complete | 96.0 | 85.0 | 75.0 | 100.0 |

Source: EBC (2006).

⁷ The term ‘moment’ is described broadly in the M&E plans as those times during the reporting period where the facilitator believed they were making a difference to achieving NRM outcomes and which also provided a sense of job satisfaction.

As shown in Table 9 and as was also identified in the majority of interviews with facilitators, the reporting process did not adequately reflect the type of tasks and activities that facilitators believed they were engaged in. This issue is most likely related to the lack of role definition described previously and suggests that if the role of facilitators is not adequately defined, it is also in turn difficult to evaluate achievements which should reflect the role of facilitators.

Furthermore, it also needs to be recognised that the M&E plans on which the self-reporting process was based, were developed over three years ago and in the interim the understanding and appreciation of network activities and outcomes has changed considerably. For instance, the original M&E plans emphasise a ‘provider’ model of information dissemination, whereas there is now a broader discussion of facilitators managing or facilitating the flow of information and knowledge amongst stakeholders.

Many facilitators also indicated that there was no feedback provided in relation to whether they had completed the six monthly reports correctly and whether they were meeting the outcomes that were identified in the reporting process. Furthermore, as also shown in Table 9, many facilitators experienced considerable difficulty in completing the six monthly reports, indicating the structure and terminology of the self reporting process was difficult to understand and follow.

The issues identified with the current six monthly reporting processes are easily remedied. However, it does require a revision of the M&E plans and specifically the key outcome areas and progress measures on which the six monthly reporting template is based. The self-reporting process is a valuable tool in which to monitor and evaluate progress towards the achievement of network outcomes. However, and in contrast to the current self reporting process, any future tool should (i) focus on a more conversational style and exclude the use of technical terms or the language of M&E plans; (ii) be able to be completed quickly and efficiently by facilitators; (iii) include opportunities for qualitative information and quantitative scale information of the type used in the surveys associated with the current evaluation; and (iv) be designed as a web based instrument which would allow some immediate feedback to facilitators.

Through interviews with facilitators and an analysis of the six monthly reports over two reporting periods, the evidence indicates that with the exception of some qualitative information provided by facilitators, “the quality, accuracy, reliability and value of the NRM facilitator network self-reporting process” is very poor. There is clearly a need for significant revision of the six monthly reporting processes and the M&E plans on which the self reporting process is based.

7. CONCLUSION

While the evaluation indicates the Network is achieving its defined strategic outcomes, there are as documented in the four evaluation reports, a number of significant issues that need to be addressed if the Network is to continue to provide a valuable contribution to natural resource management in Australia. There are three broad issues that need to be addressed.

Firstly, facilitators themselves should be actively encouraged and involved in addressing issues associated with improving the National NRM Facilitator Network. Not only is this appropriate for procedural reasons, but given that the specific roles and activities of facilitators are often grounded in the context in which they work, it is the facilitators themselves that often have the expertise and knowledge to address many of the issues that have been identified.

Secondly, the M&E plans for the Network should be revised in the light of the issues discussed in this report. This would not only include the development of a new and more effective self reporting process for facilitators, but would provide an opportunity for issues associated with Network outcomes and objectives; the role of facilitators; communications with stakeholders; and a range of other issues to be addressed and documented. More specifically, the very process of revising the M&E plans would be an enabling activity, through which issues can be addressed and the roles and expectations of facilitators clarified and documented.

Thirdly, uncertainty about the role of the facilitators was perhaps the most pervasive theme identified in the evaluation and was raised by facilitators and a wide range of stakeholders. This issue presents an interesting paradox as stakeholders clearly believed facilitators were effective in delivering outcomes, but at the same time they were confused about the role facilitators. This issue most likely underpins many of the other issues identified in the evaluation of the Network. This issue, as discussed previously, should be addressed through the active engagement of facilitators and through a review of the M&E plans.

Taking a broad approach to the question of facilitator roles suggests that the issue can be examined through a hierarchy of three tiers.

The first tier should focus on the meaning and definition of what it means to facilitate and should encompass a broad discussion of how the Network is conceptualised using ‘provider’ and ‘facilitation’ models or other frameworks such as ‘knowledge brokering’. Once this tier is addressed, the concepts identified can be used in the second tier, which needs to focus on what this means in terms of defining the roles of individual facilitators within the Network. For instance, how is the framework identified in the first tier translated into meaningful facilitator roles which recognise and are grounded in context and which are not therefore overly prescriptive and rigid. Once issues in these two tiers are addressed, the final tier focuses on stakeholders and addresses issues of how to better inform stakeholders of the role of facilitators and the objectives of the network.

Using this three tiered approach not only defines the broader role of the Network and individual facilitators, but it also has a strong conceptual foundation which is grounded in what facilitators do and is communicated to all those who work with facilitators.
