



ISSUES PAPER

REVIEW OF LANDSCAPE OR MULTI-FARM VEGETATION PLANS

December 2005



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Submissions

There is no standard format for submissions. Submissions must be made in writing and sent to the postal address, fax number or email above clearly marked to refer to the review of landscape vegetation plans.

Submissions must be received by 17 February 2006.

Shortly after receipt, the NRC will make submissions publicly available unless clearly marked confidential. Claims for access to confidential submissions will be determined in accordance with the *Freedom of Information Act 1989*. All submissions will be treated in accordance with the *Privacy and Personal Information Act 1998*. Any personal information you give us will not be used for any other purpose.

List of acronyms

CAP	Catchment Action Plan
CMA	Catchment Management Authority
NRC	Natural Resources Commission
NRM	Natural resource management
NSW	New South Wales
PVP	Property Vegetation Plan
RVMP	Regional Vegetation Management Plan

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1 Why is the NRC doing this review?

The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) has been asked to advise the Ministers for Natural Resources and Environment on the potential for landscape or multi-farm vegetation management plans to produce better economic and environmental outcomes than small-scale or single-farm plans. The NRC has also been asked to advise on how Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) should consider this potential in assessing landscape vegetation plans under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*.

The NRC will conduct a public review of these issues between now and the end of May 2006. Broadly, the terms of reference for the review require the NRC to:

- review the scientific and economic viability of landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans, commenting on any available landscape plans as case studies
- recommend how CMAs should assess the environmental and economic sustainability of landscape vegetation plans, and
- advise the Ministers on any amendments that should be made to the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology* and Property Vegetation Plan (PVP) Developer under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003* to implement the recommended approach.

The terms of reference are reproduced in full in Appendix 1. More information about the review and the NRC's functions can be found on our website.

1.1 What are landscape vegetation plans?

While the terms of reference do not precisely define landscape vegetation plans, the NRC considers that they are plans that cover multiple properties or single farms that are large enough to envisage 'landscape' scale management actions and trade-offs not available within the boundaries of most properties.

For example, a vegetation plan that covers multiple properties might provide landholders with the flexibility to identify and trade-off clearing of low value vegetation for conservation of high value vegetation on other properties to produce better outcomes for the environment *and* a net economic benefit for themselves.

It is important to note that landscape vegetation plans are different from the Regional Vegetation Management Plans (RVMPs) developed by community-based committees under the former *Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997*. The NRC recognises that many regional communities invested considerable effort in developing their RVMPs, and may perceive landscape vegetation plans as an attempt to revisit the past. However, this is not the case. The key difference is that landscape vegetation plans will be developed by collectives of landholders (or single landholders where plans cover single, large properties) who are seeking private benefits over a designated area of land for which they hold property rights and have stewardship responsibilities.

Recently, the Lower Pian/Pagan Creek Conservation Group (which consists of 13 farmers) developed a multi-farm vegetation management plan. This plan covers an area of 40,887 ha between the Barwon and Namoi Rivers, east of Walgett, and includes proposals to clear vegetation for environmental weed control, landscape rehabilitation, pasture re-establishment and crop establishment. It is likely that other landscape vegetation management plans will be developed in the future, and CMAs will be required to assess whether these plans should be approved under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*.

1.2 Why will CMAs need to assess these plans?

Under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*, individual landholders who want to clear native vegetation or obtain financial incentives for managing the natural resources on their property can submit their proposals as PVPs to CMAs. CMAs are required to assess any clearing proposed as part of these plans according to the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology* implemented under the *Native Vegetation Regulation 2005*.

In particular, CMAs are required to determine whether any proposed clearing of native vegetation improves or maintains environmental outcomes and, thus, whether it is consistent with the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*. The Department of Environment and Conservation and the Department of Natural Resources (formerly part of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources) have developed the PVP Developer tool to assist CMAs in applying the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology*. It will assist CMAs in assessing water quality, soil health, salinity and biodiversity outcomes of proposals for clearing and native vegetation management.

Where a group of landholders submits a vegetation plan that has been developed at the landscape scale (rather than the property scale), the CMA will still be required to assess whether any proposed clearing of native vegetation in the plan will maintain or improve environmental outcomes. However, to achieve its broader NRM objectives, the CMA will also need to assess whether the plan is well-developed, sustainable and aligned with its NRM goals (including those specified in its Catchment Action Plan (CAP) and in the state-wide standard and targets for natural resource management).

This assessment will involve additional considerations that are beyond the scope of the PVP Developer. For example, it may require consideration of:

- socio-economic impacts
- biophysical impacts at various scales
- the strength of partnership agreements between landholders.

1.3 What are the objectives of the review?

The overall objective of this review is to develop an integrated decision-making approach for CMAs' assessment of landscape vegetation plans that:

- incorporates environmental, social and economic factors
- helps government and CMAs to target investment in native vegetation management.

In developing the approach, the NRC will use existing landscape management plans to assess and identify any potential benefits of landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans over small-scale or single farm plans.

Implementing the approach may require changes to the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology* and/or the PVP developer. Therefore another objective of the review is to identify these changes.

The achievement of the review's objectives will be another step towards achieving the long-term NRM outcomes – environmental, social and economic – that are sought by the broader community and articulated in current government legislation and policy. The short and long-term success of the review might be measured by the following outcomes:

- an assessment approach that facilitates local decision-making between all parties
- broad agreement that the assessment approach is fair, transparent, rigorous and makes all parties accountable
- additional benefits identified in landscape vegetation plans that are consistent with NRM policy and legislation and contribute to NRM catchment targets, state-wide targets and ultimately national targets
- the future development and implementation of landscape vegetation plans by landholders (and their assessment by CMAs) that is consistent with NSW's *Standard for quality natural resource management*.

1.4 Purpose of this issues paper

This issues paper is intended to help stakeholders to participate in the review, and contribute to the development of a fair and effective assessment approach. It is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 outlines how the NRC will conduct the review, and explains how and when you can participate in this process by making a submission or attending a workshop or public forum
- Chapter 3 identifies some of the key issues and questions that the NRC believes need to be considered as part of the review.

Please note that issues and questions in Chapter 3 are not intended to be a comprehensive list of all relevant issues, nor are they intended to limit comment. However, the NRC would appreciate submissions and feedback that address some or all of these questions.

2 How will the NRC conduct the review?

The NRC will conduct a transparent review process that includes extensive consultation with a broad range of stakeholders and experts to explore the relevant issues and develop and refine an approach for assessing landscape vegetation plans.

The sections below outline the key steps in this process, and explain how and when you can have your say.

2.1 Key steps

The NRC's review process involves five key steps, each of which is outlined below.

2.1.1 Gathering input

The first step in the review process is to gather input from a broad range of stakeholders. As part of this step, the NRC has released this issues paper, and called for formal submissions from key stakeholders and the broader community. The NRC will also use this issues paper to undertake early, targeted consultation with key stakeholders including landholders who have already prepared landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans, CMAs, NSW Government agencies, non-government organisations, industry groups and other parties that indicate they are interested in the review.

2.1.2 Identifying main options

Based on the information and comments it receives from submissions and targeted consultation, the NRC will develop a paper that outlines the main options for an assessment approach for landscape vegetation plans. This paper will also call for formal submissions from key stakeholders and the broader community, in response to the options. This feedback will help the NRC understand the pros and cons of each option from different perspectives, and identify how the options could be improved. This paper will be available by late February 2006.

2.1.3 Testing the options 'on the ground'

In addition to calling for submissions, the NRC will 'road test' the potential approaches identified in the options paper. To do this, it will visit some regions in NSW and hold public workshops, expert panels and forums. This will provide an opportunity for those people who did not make formal submissions to contribute their ideas and raise their concerns, and for key issues to be debated and explored. The NRC will also test the options with key stakeholders, through direct consultation.

2.1.4 Explaining the preferred approach

Based on the submissions it receives in response to the options paper and the comments and perspectives it gains from its regional visits, the NRC will form its initial position. It will then develop a draft report that:

- identifies any potential benefits that landscape vegetation plans may have over small-scale plans

- explains the NRC's preferred approach to assess landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans
- explains the reasons it prefers this approach.

The draft report will be made available for public comment. In addition, the NRC will seek direct comments and formal submissions from key stakeholders.

2.1.5 Delivering final advice to the Ministers

The NRC will refine the preferred approach to assess landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans, taking into consideration the comments and submissions it receives in response to the draft report, before delivering its advice to the Ministers for Natural Resources and the Environment. This advice will include recommendations on the approach CMAs should use in assessing landscape vegetation plans and any amendments that should be made to the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology* and PVP Developer under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003* to implement the recommended approach.

2.2 How can you have your say?

As Section 2.1 highlights, the review process includes several opportunities for all stakeholders, including members of the public, to contribute their ideas. The NRC will call for formal submissions at key stages of the review. It will also seek direct feedback from key stakeholders through consultation, and from the broader community through a series of public workshops and forums. The timing of the key steps in the review process is shown in Table 1 below.

Details about specific dates and location of public workshops will be advertised on the NRC's website when these have been finalised.

Table 1: Timetable for the review

Key step	When consultation will occur	When submissions are due
Gathering input <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Release issues paper ▪ Call for submissions ▪ Undertake targeted consultation 	December 05 and January 06	Due Mid February 06
Identifying main options <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Release options paper ▪ Call for submissions 	Late February 06	Mid April 06
Testing the options 'on the ground' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hold regional workshops and public forums with experts, CMAs and landholders 	March 06	
Explaining the preferred approach <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Release draft report ▪ Call for submissions ▪ Undertake targeted consultation 	April 06	May 06

Submissions can be made electronically through the NRC's website, or in printed format. Printed submissions should be sent to the NRC, at the address provided at the front of this issues paper.

Shortly after receipt, the NRC will make submissions publicly available unless clearly marked confidential.

3 What are the key issues?

Guided by the terms of reference, one of the central issues for the NRC to understand is what are the potential *additional* economic and environmental benefits of using landscape-scale plans relative to other available alternatives – that is, single-farm property vegetation plans or ‘business as usual’ (no plan). The NRC would appreciate submissions that address this central issue. In particular:

- Q 1 What are the potential additional benefits of a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan compared to single-farm/ small-scale property vegetation plans or ‘business as usual’ (no plan)?
- Q 2 What does a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan need to demonstrate as proof that it can deliver benefits and appropriate trade-offs not available with single-farm/small-scale property vegetation plans?
- Q 3 How would a CMA apply the ‘maintain and improve environmental outcomes’ test at the landscape scale? How might this differ from its application to single-farm or small-scale property vegetation plans? Are there different trade-offs admissible at this scale?

Another key task of the review is to develop an assessment approach for CMAs to assess landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans. The NRC has developed the *Standard for quality natural resource management* (‘the Standard’) which requires CMAs to use quality business systems to develop and implement their CAPs. This provides confidence to investors and their communities and increases the probability of achieving NRM outcomes described in their CAPs. The NRC believes the standard may provide a good framework within which CMAs could assess landscape vegetation plans. The NRC seeks submissions on:

- Q 4 Is the Standard an appropriate framework for CMAs to assess landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans?
- Q 5 Should CMAs require landholders to have a minimum standard of management practice before they approve any landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan?
- Q 6 What is the potential for landholders’ management systems or landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans to be based on an accredited Environmental Management System?

Applying the standard, the NRC has identified a range of other key questions that it believes are important to the review. The 7 components of the standard are:

- Determination of appropriate scale
- Use of best available knowledge and information to inform decisions
- Collaboration between parties

- Risk assessment and management
- Monitoring, evaluation and reporting
- Community engagement
- Information management.

3.1 Determination of appropriate scale

There is no precise definition of what 'landscape-scale' means in relation to vegetation management plans, or specific criteria that could be used to determine whether such plans are at a 'landscape-scale'. The spatial scale of a landscape plan will be largely determined by its geographical location. For example, on the eastern seaboard a vegetation plan that covers a few or many properties might be considered a landscape-scale plan. In the western division, a plan that covers a 'large' single farm might be a landscape-scale plan.

- Q 7** What is 'landscape-scale'? What criteria should we use to determine whether a vegetation management plan is at a landscape-scale? How could landscape-scale be different from multi-farm scale?
- Q 8** What are the differences between landscape scale and multi-farm plans and should they be considered differently?
- Q 9** What would be an appropriate time span for a vegetation plan in order to ensure the benefits are fully realised? Should environmental outcomes be achieved before any vegetation clearing can occur under a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan?

It seems reasonable to assume that landscape plans will be developed only when the landholders involved expect that this approach will lead to additional economic benefits to them. They may not be developed with a view to managing vegetation at the optimal biophysical scale – that is, at the minimum biophysical scale required to address the particular vegetation management issues in their region.

- Q 10** Given that landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans may not be developed at the minimum biophysical scale required to address specific vegetation management issues, are they capable of delivering additional environmental outcomes?
- Q 11** How could CMAs encourage landscape vegetation plans to be developed at the right biophysical scale?

If a 'one size fits all' approach is developed for CMAs to assess landscape vegetation plans, it will need to have sufficient flexibility to cater for the biophysical and institutional variability across the state.

- Q 12** How should regional variability be considered when developing an approach for CMAs to assess landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans? What might this look like?

3.2 Use of best available knowledge and information

To ensure that NRM decisions are of a high quality, decision makers need to be informed by the best available information and knowledge. This information and knowledge potentially includes biophysical characteristics; community social and economic profiles and impact assessments; regionally relevant and scientifically supported technical guidelines; local experience and expertise; Aboriginal traditional and contemporary knowledge; community and stakeholder values; NRM legislation, policies and strategies, cultural heritage assessments; and evaluation results. The 'best available' knowledge is the most current information that has wide acceptance.

- Q 13** Given the above list of potential information and knowledge that may be relevant, what type of information and knowledge should landholders consider when developing a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan? Should they consider the relevant CAP?
- Q 14** How would a CMA determine if the landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan was developed with the 'best available knowledge'? Should there be a mechanism for peer review of the technical validity of the plans?
- Q 15** Would guidelines detailing specific requirements help landholders in developing landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans? Or would a broad set of principles to guide the development of such plans offer more flexibility and perhaps encourage innovation?
- Q 16** What level of information should be provided in a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan to demonstrate the validity of any claims about the likely additional economic and environmental benefits of the plan – for example a benefit/cost analysis including a sensitivity analysis? If a benefit can be demonstrated, at what scale does it occur?

Currently, CMAs are required to assess any clearing proposed as part of these plans according to the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology*. In particular, CMAs are required to determine whether any proposed clearing of native vegetation improves or maintains environmental outcomes and, thus, whether it is consistent with the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*.

- Q 17** What role could the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology* and PVP Developer have in developing a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan? How could CMAs use these tools in assessing landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans?
- Q 18** What sort of information and detail should be provided in a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan to demonstrate that it will maintain or improve environmental outcomes?

3.3 Collaboration between parties

Collaboration with other parties is a key component of effective NRM at all scales. It promotes the achievement of integrated outcomes at the optimal scale, and can enable managers to access additional resources, properly address the needs of diverse stakeholders, minimise risks and share information.

The sustainability of landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans will rely on effective collaboration between landholders themselves and with CMAs. For example, as the success of a multi-farm vegetation plan will rely on the collaboration of the landholders involved, it seems likely that multi-farm landscape plans will need to have strong governance arrangements to minimise potential risks.

- Q 19** What would be the minimal acceptable governance arrangements for a landscape or multi-farm plan? For example, how should it be 'pinned' together so as to ensure continuity and maintenance of the plan? What are the incentives for the individual landholders involved in the plan to 'stick to it' in the long term?
- Q 20** Given that the success of the plan will rely on a coordinated effort by landholders (and other institutions), should plans spell out the roles and responsibilities (and their timing) of individuals and other stakeholders? If so, what is the appropriate level of detail?
- Q 21** What potential is there to reduce transaction costs between landholders and CMAs with a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan approach?
- Q 22** How significant are transaction costs for landholders in determining whether they decide to take a single-farm/small-scale property plan or landscape/multi-farm plan approach?
- Q 23** How should potential external impacts (economic, social and environmental) generated by landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans be assessed and provided for?

Each CMA will develop a CAP to describe the strategic direction for NRM investment in its catchment. CAPs need to consider and be consistent with relevant legislation, policy, strategies and planning instruments. Landholders could collaborate with CMAs to develop and implement their landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan and to ensure progress towards broader catchment goals is integrated and synergies are maximised.

- Q 24** Are landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans more likely to help CMAs achieve their CAP outcomes than single-farm/small-scale property vegetation plans?

3.4 Risk assessment and management

In NRM risk can be associated with, for example, biophysical, socio-economic, institutional, technical, financial, temporal and cultural factors. Potential and real impacts are the positive and negative consequences of management actions and may be environmental, economic, social and/or cultural.

To achieve the desired outcomes of any landscape vegetation plan, the landholders developing the plan will need to assess risk properly and manage it appropriately. High risk does not necessarily preclude an action, but rather dictates the need for a management strategy and appropriately focused monitoring and evaluation.

- Q 25 What are the additional key risks of landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans versus single-farm/small-scale property vegetation plans or 'business as usual'?
- Q 26 How should risk assessment and management be incorporated into landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans?
- Q 27 In the event of failure to deliver the outcomes of landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans, who should be liable?
- Q 28 What are the key risks CMAs face in assessing landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans? How could these be best managed?

3.5 Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

Under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*, any landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan must maintain and improve environmental outcomes while also offering potential economic and productive benefits. Commitment to monitoring and evaluation programs is essential to determine the effectiveness and appropriateness of landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans and ultimately whether environmental outcomes are maintained or improved.

- Q 29 How important is it that landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans include targets that are measurable and time-bound? If targets are important in landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans, should these plans also demonstrate the linkages between projected actions and long-term objectives? Should this approach require demonstrated linkages with catchment and management action targets?
- Q 30 What sort of key performance indicators could a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan use to measure and evaluate its performance? How could this relate to monitoring and evaluation undertaken at the regional level? Who would manage monitoring and evaluation protocols and how?
- Q 31 How will environmental outcomes be enforced under a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan?

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting should drive continual improvement through an adaptive management approach. It will be important that landholders implementing landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans identify opportunities for improvement, and implement or revise plans to achieve desired outcomes.

- Q 32** What mechanisms or triggers for review should be included in landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans?
- Q 33** What are the appropriate reporting requirements for monitoring and evaluation for landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans?

Under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*, PVPs have effect for 15 years with the key intent of providing an individual landholder with certainty in property management. However, a landscape vegetation plan may consist of multiple landholders who could provide greater flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances.

- Q 34** Given any plan under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003* has to maintain and improve environmental outcomes, what additional flexibility and benefits would a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan give to landholders to adapt to changing circumstances, such as market and climatic change?
- Q 35** If landscape vegetation plans have an adaptive management approach, how could you ensure any changes to a plan over time will maintain and improve environmental outcomes?

3.6 Community engagement

Community engagement is critical to the achievement of natural resource goals. Landholders, Aboriginal communities, environmental and other interest groups, government and the general community are all important stakeholders in NRM at all scales.

- Q 36** What is the appropriate level of community engagement landholders should undertake when developing a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan?
- Q 37** What process should CMAs use to engage the community when assessing any landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans?
- Q 38** Who is the relevant 'community' for landholders and/or CMAs to engage?
- Q 39** What mechanisms should be available to the community to comment on proposed landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans?

3.7 Information management

Effective management of information is critical if it is to contribute to quality NRM decisions. Information management systems should be fit-for-purpose, meeting the needs of users operating at different scales and with different capacities.

To develop and implement a landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan, landholders undertaking collective landscape vegetation management would probably need to implement a system for managing information that meets the need of the collective and relevant parties, and is fit-for-purpose given the scale of investment and the nature of decisions.

- Q 40** What sort of protocols or standards for information management should be required of landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans, for example, to meet other user needs? How would they differ from a single-farm/small-scale property vegetation plan?
- Q 41** Should landscape or multi-farm vegetation plans, once approved, be publicly available? In what circumstance should information not be publicly available?
- Q 42** What is the appropriate degree of disclosure CMAs need to assess the potential vulnerability of individual landholders that may affect the viability of the landscape or multi-farm vegetation plan?

Appendix 1 Terms of Reference

Landscape Vegetation Plans Terms of Reference

When Catchment Management Authorities are asked to consider vegetation plans developed at the landscape scale (involving areas of large land and/or multiple landholders), they must assess whether the proposals will 'maintain or improve native vegetation'. However, CMAs should also be encouraged to promote plans which are designed in a way which optimises economic and productive outcomes.

A landscape approach to vegetation management offers many potential environmental, economic and productive benefits over property-scale management because individual farm plans can be aggregated into a single landscape unit, involving a review of corridors and habitat areas to ensure connectivity and biodiversity is maximised whilst achieving greater economic and productivity gains.

The Natural Resources Commission will provide advice to the Ministers for Natural Resources and Environment on the potential for Landscape Vegetation Plans to produce better economic as well as environmental outcomes than single-farm, or small-scale property vegetation plans, as part of the process to develop an approach for assessing landscape scale vegetation management that may be submitted by multiple landholders under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003* and its associated regulations.

For this task the Commission will provide advice on:

1. The scientific and economic viability of multi-farm Landscape Vegetation Plans, commenting specifically on the general issues and any case studies with regard to:
 - a) biophysical characteristics and environmental assets;
 - b) potential threats to environmental assets;
 - c) sustainability of potential land management systems; and
 - d) anticipated economic benefits and potential risks of the approach over single farm property vegetation plans.
2. A robust 'landscape design' for sustainable management of a project area, commenting specifically on general issues and any case studies with regard to:
 - a) landscape and property scale actions necessary to manage threats which will improve or maintain environmental outcomes; and
 - b) management options which would increase productivity and would be sustainable over the longer term.
3. Any improvements that should be made to the *Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology*, *PVP Developer* and CMA procedures to facilitate landscape scale Property Vegetation Plans consistent with the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*.

Timeframe for advice: to be received before 31 May 2006, or sooner as is reasonably possible.

