



Evaluation of the NSW Environmental Trust Roadside Vegetation Implementation Project (Stages 1 and 2)



Enquiries

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List of acronyms

HCCREMS	Hunter and Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy
LGNSW	Local Government New South Wales
LLS	Local Land Services
NRC	Natural Resources Commission
NSW	New South Wales
OEH	Office of Environment and Heritage (NSW)
RAMROC	Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils
REC	Roadside Environment Committee
RVIP	Roadside Vegetation Implementation Project

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1 Executive Summary

The NSW Environmental Trust (the Trust) provided approximately \$2.35 million of funding for the Roadside Vegetation Implementation Project (RVIP) completed in two stages between 2011 and 2014. The Trust requested the NRC to undertake an independent evaluation of the RVIP in order to understand the appropriateness, cost effectiveness and results achieved from the first two stages of the RVIP.

The NRC was asked to evaluate the RVIP against four objectives:

1. to allow for the protection, revegetation and regeneration of large areas of linear reserves across the State
2. to improve environmental condition and enhance ecological corridors in NSW
3. to provide funds to regional councils and help regional economies
4. to add value to a considerable investment already made by the NSW Environmental Trust which funded councils to prepare Roadside Vegetation Management Plans in 2005.

Both stages of the program were organised in short timeframes with limited strategic analysis of whether investment in roadside reserves was a sound investment relative to other options for achieving the Trust's objectives. In particular, although roadsides are estimated to cover three percent of NSW, they are not designed as biodiversity corridors and at best fill this function accidentally. Consequently, the ambitious objectives to manage large areas of linear reserves and enhance ecological corridors were unrealistic given the relatively limited scale and duration of the projects.

Although not explicitly designed as such, the projects delivered through the program have effectively served as pilots. The program allowed for local variation in on-ground works, governance, and planning processes and tools, including some innovative good practice.

Overall, the program was successful in delivering localised on-ground projects and the NRC observed examples of capacity building within councils. While it is too early to fully assess environmental outcomes, visits to sites from eleven of the projects indicate that the activities undertaken are likely to lead to environmental improvements in local landscape function or condition of assets at many of the sites. While difficult to quantify due to limitations of reporting, the majority of projects delivered the proposed on-ground outputs, with many exceeding them.

However, the rapid organisation of the program led to some limitations in the program design, governance and administration, including a lack of program logic at both the program and on-ground project scale and limited active knowledge sharing. Reporting is insufficient to provide for an accurate assessment of cost-effectiveness, and the long-term sustainability of outcomes is uncertain.

Administration of the program was devolved to Local Government NSW (LGNSW). There was an evident lack of clarity between LGNSW and the Trust regarding the roles and responsibilities of LGNSW, particularly in regards to knowledge sharing and capacity building. The lack of clear expectations may have limited the effectiveness of devolving the grant.

The experiences from the first two stages of funding provide some useful insights to inform any future investment in roadside vegetation by the Trust. In particular, future programs need clear, achievable objectives that match the size of the program, sound program logic, investments coordinated at a regional scale for an appropriate time period, and clarity around expectations of delivery partners.

1.1 Recommendations

1. Revise the program design

The NRC recommends that the NSW Environmental Trust:

- a) review the evidence supporting investment in roadside reserves and linear corridors more generally to ensure investments are strategically appropriate for achieving objectives, relative to other options
- b) develop a program logic based on clear objectives and a strategic assessment of priority areas for investment, prior to committing funds
- c) establish clear program objectives that are achievable, measureable and aligned with the available funds, timeframe and scale of the projects
- d) seek opportunities to work with neighbouring landholders to expand efforts beyond the width of roadside reserves, including evaluating where projects may enhance works done through other Environmental Trust programs, and ways to improve alignment with other relevant plans
- e) develop a monitoring program focused on evaluating desired outcomes and linking output measures to those outcomes.

2. Strengthen project delivery

The NRC recommends that the NSW Environmental Trust:

- a) maintain flexibility for customised and innovative projects based on local or regional needs in a way that supports adaptive management and facilitates knowledge sharing between councils
- b) implement regionally planned and coordinated projects to take advantage of economies of scale and provide support for lower capacity councils
- c) establish methods to improve the likelihood that projects will provide long-term outcomes, including:
 - i. requiring demonstration of planning and budget commitment to monitoring and maintenance to ensure that the requirement for ongoing maintenance is being met
 - ii. evaluating proposals in regards to how projects will be integrated into broader council activities
 - iii. considering investing in tools that support integration of environmental asset data and management of roadsides into other council activities to facilitate practice change
- d) continue to encourage on-ground partnerships for delivery of works and capacity building.

3. Update governance and administrative arrangements

The NRC recommends that the NSW Environmental Trust:

- a) determine whether to devolve administration of the program based on an assessment of the expected added value and risks
- b) establish clear roles and responsibilities for:
 - i. the program administrator (if grant is devolved) and include requirements and budget allocation for tasks or outcomes in the program contract
 - ii. active capture and sharing of knowledge, tools and good practice, and implement measures to assess effectiveness of knowledge sharing
- c) ensure that project assessment criteria fully reflect the program objectives, that the review process incorporates sufficient practical technical review and that proposals provide sufficient information for meaningful assessment
- d) revise reporting requirements to allow for:
 - i. evaluation of the program outcomes and assessment of whether what was proposed was delivered
 - ii. efficient collection of useful information for completing program evaluation and informing future works
 - iii. consistent financial information to assess cost-effectiveness, value for money and in-kind contributions
- e) devolve administration to the lowest capable level to reduce administrative costs (if devolving the grant administration).

2 Background

2.1 Evaluation objectives and methodology

The NSW Environmental Trust (the Trust) requested the NRC to undertake an independent evaluation of the RVIP in order to understand the appropriateness, cost effectiveness and results achieved from the first two stages of funding.

The NRC conducted the evaluation in accordance with the agreed key evaluation questions and proposed methods to investigate those questions (see Attachment B). The evaluation included:

- Review of available documentation and reporting from the Trust, LGNSW, and project proponents.¹
- Site visits to conduct interviews and inspect on-ground activities for 11 projects (approximately 25 percent), including inspection of 25 work sites. Selection criteria were used to identify a representative set of projects with varying objectives, locations and funding amounts across Stages 1 and 2 (see Attachment C for summary of projects selected for site visits and selection criteria).

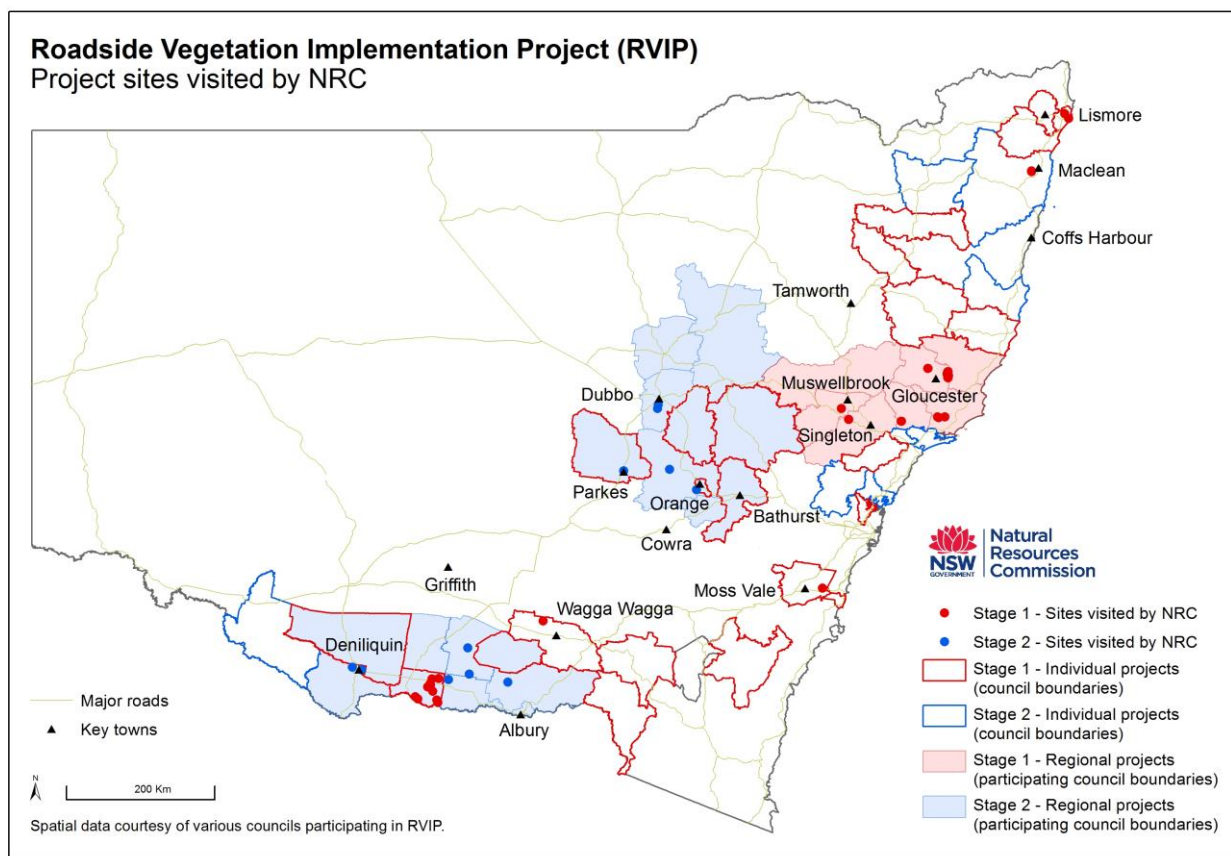


Figure 1: Map of councils with RVIP projects and project sites visited

¹ Key documents reviewed included:

- grant contracts and agreements
- project planning documentation
- guidelines for applicants
- project proposals and reports from individual projects
- project milestone reports from LGNSW to Environmental Trust
- Environmental Trust project governance procedures
- documents provided during site visits such as project plans and contractor reports.

- Analysis of the program and project level outputs and outcomes.
- Interviews with representatives of councils and regional organisations that delivered projects (hereafter referred to as “project proponents” – see Attachment C for full list), technical experts, and representatives of key stakeholders including:
 - Local Government NSW
 - NSW Environmental Trust
 - Roadside Environment Committee
 - Roads and Maritime Services
 - Office of Environment and Heritage
 - Institute of Public Works Engineering Australasia
 - Representatives from regional weed authorities and county councils.

Note that for the remainder of the report “the program” refers to the overall RVIP. The use of the term project will refer to the on-ground projects funded through the RVIP.

2.2 Roadside Vegetation Implementation Project

Between 2004 and 2006, the Trust provided \$904,000 to the then Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources and the Roadside Environment Committee with the aim to achieve “an environmentally sustainable network of linear reserves in NSW”. Through this program, local councils were provided funding to prepare Roadside Vegetation Management Plans, which involved assessing and mapping roadside vegetation and identifying priority areas for investment. By 2011, an estimated 68 councils (around 45 percent of all councils) had Roadside Vegetation Management Plans.

The Trust provided approximately \$2.35 million of funding to Local Government NSW (LGNSW) (previously Local Government and Shires Association of NSW) for the RVIP for work completed between 2011 and 2014. The program focused on delivering priority works identified in approved Roadside Vegetation Management Plans (or an equivalent strategy). A summary of the program is provided in Table 1. A detailed list of funded projects is available in Attachment D.

Table 1: Summary of the Roadside Vegetation Implementation Project

		Stage 1	Stage 2
Financial year contract issued		2011-12	2012-2013
Total funding		\$1.35 million	\$0.96 million
Grants available	Council	Grants up to \$50,000 for individual councils	Grants up to \$50,000 for projects involving one or more councils
	Regional	Grants up to \$100,000 for regional projects with two or more councils	Grants up to \$250,000 for regional projects involving councils and Catchment Management Authorities ²
Number of project applicants		40 council projects ³	10 ⁴ council projects
		6 regional ⁵ projects	4 regional projects
Number of projects approved		22 ⁶ council projects	10 ⁷ council projects
		4 regional projects	2 regional projects

The RVIP focused on roadside reserves under the responsibility of local councils. Roads and Maritime Services funds the Roadside Environment Committee, which provided assistance and advice to LGNSW throughout implementation of the RVIP. Roads and Maritime Services and the Roadside Environment Committee also participated in the technical panel that selected projects for funding.

The contract with LGNSW for Stage 1 was signed 28 June 2011. The preparation of application materials and work plan, acceptance and review of applications, and selection of projects was completed between July 2011 and mid-January 2012. Contracting individual projects was completed from February through May 2012. Projects were intended to be delivered in 12 months, but many received extensions to 18 months, three received a 12 month extension to 28 February 2014, and one project was moved to Stage 2. The final report was submitted in August 2013, with an addendum provided in March 2014.

Stage 2 commenced 28 June 2012 when most of the Stage 1 project had only just begun to be implemented. Finalisation of the work plan took almost six months and was completed 16 December 2012. Stage 2 applications were invited between 9 November and 17 December 2012. Contracts were secured between January and June 2013. Again projects were intended to be delivered in 12 months, but the regional projects and several individual projects received extensions to 18 months. LGNSW submitted the final report for the individual projects to the Trust on 30 September 2014. The final report for the regional projects was submitted to the Trust 30 November 2014.

² Regional projects in Stage 2 required multiple councils working in collaboration with Catchment Management Authorities, and were only open to targeted priority regions: Murray, Murrumbidgee, Lachlan and Central West.

³ Council projects consisted of a single council delivering on-ground projects within their own council boundaries.

⁴ Councils who received RVIP grant funding in 2012 were not eligible to apply for individual projects in this round, unless they had received less than 10 percent of funds provided for a regional project.

⁵ Regional projects consisted of partnerships of up to 11 councils and regional organisations that delivered on-ground projects across several local government areas.

⁶ An additional project received a funding offer but declined as they were unable to get their Roadside Vegetation Management plan approved by Council. Further, one of the projects selected for funding was not actually delivered until Stage 2 due to delays in the detailed planning of the project. The total number of projects actually delivered in Stage 1 was 26 (22 individual and 2 regional).

⁷ This includes Ballina which was deferred from Stage 1 and two projects for Port Stephens which received funding for two separate projects that totaled less than \$50,000. One council declined the offer of a grant.

2.3 Responsibility for roadside management

A requirement of the funding was that it would not be provided for core or legal functions of local government. With the exception of some ancillary noxious weed control, the program did not fund activities that were already the legal responsibility of local government. While much of the work was weed control, it was focused on control of environmental weeds that are not declared noxious within the council area.⁸

Responsibilities for roads, including associated reserves, are established in the *NSW Roads Act 1993*.^{9 10} The width of the road reserve is established through either historical survey or survey at the time the road is established.¹¹ Councils have complex management requirements for roadsides including safety, drainage, service provision, weeds, bushfire, signage, and environmental management. However, there is no specific obligation for local governments to prepare a plan of management for roadsides.¹² Attachment E provides a brief overview of some key legal responsibilities that local government has in relation to managing roadside vegetation, or managing potential impacts of council activities to roadside vegetation.

Council responsibilities for environmental management of roadside vegetation (other than noxious weed control) are largely limited to the obligation not to damage the environment generally under the *NSW Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997* and the requirement not to damage listed species, populations and communities under the *NSW Threatened Species Act 1995* and the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Part 5 of the *NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* requires councils to undertake an assessment of the environmental impact of their activities and implement measures to mitigate any adverse impacts on the environment.

While the *NSW Roads Act 1993* allows for controlling vegetation, there is potential conflict between the allowance of some roadside activities for safety purposes and the responsibility to mitigate environmental impacts. Roads and Maritime Services called for clarification of this issue in their recent submission to NSW Biodiversity Legislation Review.¹³ Interviews with council staff reveal a range of understanding of what level of due diligence is required to determine that activities are necessary for safety and when that overrides environmental considerations.

⁸ Councils do not have a legal obligation to control weeds that are not declared noxious under the *NSW Noxious Weed Act 1993*.

⁹ The Roads and Transportation Authority (now Roads and Maritime Services) is the roads authority for all freeways. The Minister administering the Crown Lands Act is the roads authority for all Crown roads, and the council of a local government area is the roads authority for all public roads within an area other than a freeway, Crown road, or public road for which another authority is declared by regulation.

¹⁰ In practice, the Roads and Maritime Services contracts local government to maintain many roads for which it has responsibility, through the Regional Maintenance Program, which includes 78 Councils. Many Crown roads were planned but not formed or fully constructed. These are often referred to as "paper roads" or "paper laneways". Crown Lands is actively trying to close out these roads through transfer to private property owners. The RVIP focused on roadside reserves that are the responsibility of local councils.

¹¹ *Roads Act 1993 (NSW)*, Part 3, Div. 1.

¹² Although roads are public land they are exempted under the *NSW Roads Act 1993* from the *Local Government Act 1993* requirement that land be classified as either community or operational and for plans of management to be developed.

¹³ Roads and Maritime Services submission to the Office of Environment and Heritage Review of Biodiversity Legislation,
<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/biodiversity/reviewsubmissions/389RoadsandMaritimeServices.pdf>

3 Program design

Key findings:

- DES1 The overall program and project objectives are consistent with the Trust's objectives and NSW 2021 goals.
- DES2 Both stages of the program were organised within short timeframes with limited strategic analysis of the decision to invest in roadside reserves or the needs of councils.
- DES3 Demonstration of program logic was insufficient at both the program and project scale, reducing the potential for investment to be directed towards the most effective projects for achieving the stated objectives.
- DES4 The rapid development and lack of program logic led to deficiencies in the program design, including limited evidence for assumptions, broad program objectives and a misalignment of the scale and timeframe of projects with the high level objectives.
- DES5 There was limited coordination or collaboration with neighbouring landholders, other council activities, other Trust programs, and other relevant plans, such as the Catchment Action Plans.
- DES6 Monitoring and evaluation was predominantly focused on outputs with little assessment of whether desired outcomes were likely to be achieved or the overall impacts of the program.

3.1 Program logic

Given the short timeframe in which the program was developed, it does not appear that the Trust thoroughly evaluated available information regarding enhancement of corridors generally, or roadside reserves specifically prior to commencing the program.

The program was based on several implicit assumptions including that:

- investment in linear corridors and roadside reserves specifically provided a sound investment for the Trust to meet its objectives
- the Roadside Vegetation Management Plans should be the basis for where to invest
- small local priority projects would inherently contribute to broader connectivity and corridor development.

The NRC has examined these assumptions underpinning the program.

Potential value of roadside vegetation

While, the net benefit of corridors is difficult to quantify, works to improve corridors are generally agreed to provide benefits if they are properly designed and there are clear objectives for the functionality or habitat being targeted for improvement. Corridors are intended to allow movement of target fauna, reducing genetic isolation and improving their viability. Vegetation links can also help provide habitat and shelter, reduce wind and water erosion, and have aesthetic appeal.¹⁴ However, corridors can also act as conduits for invasive species and diseases.

¹⁴ Bennett, A. F. 1998. Linkages in the landscape: the role of corridors and connectivity in wildlife conservation. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.; Gilbert-Norton, L., Wilson, R. Stevens J.R., Beard, K.H. 2010. A meta-analytic review of corridor effectiveness. *Conservation biology* : the journal of the Society for Conservation Biology, 24(3), pp.660–8. Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20184653> [Accessed July 14, 2014]; Lindenmayer, D.B. & Nix, H. a., 1993. Ecological Principles for the Design of Wildlife Corridors. *Conservation Biology*, 7(3), pp.627–631. Available at: <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1046/j.1523-1739.1993.07030627.x>.

The RVIP was based on the concept that roadside reserves should be valued from an environmental perspective for their potential to function as corridors and because in some areas they may constitute the only remaining intact natural environment due to extensive clearing.

Although roadsides are roughly estimated to cover three percent of NSW¹⁵, they are not designed as biodiversity corridors. At best they fill this function accidentally and their utility as corridors will be context specific. Roadside reserves are often quite narrow resulting in large edge effects. Much of the vegetation and roadside habitat is already highly disturbed, and distances between remnant patches may be very large.^{16 17} Therefore, any interventions would ideally be strategically planned with a clear consideration of the role of roadsides in the landscape and a focus on improving specifically defined landscape function and managing threats to that function.

Roadside Vegetation Management Plans

Funded projects were required to be identified as priorities in council Roadside Vegetation Management Plans, or similar approved plans. However, this requirement did not take into account an assessment of the quality of the plan or how its priorities relate to regional and state level plans and priorities or program objectives.

The existing plans vary considerably in quality. Many of them are over a decade old and were created before regulation of many endangered species or communities. The plans focus on management of roadside vegetation and are often not integrated with councils' other functions. As a result, they are often not kept up to date or actively used. The plans typically prioritise roadside works in regards to the quality of vegetation with limited consideration of other criteria such as presence of threatened species or communities and connectivity value. They are generally based on local priorities and many only cover a portion of council roadways that they were able to assess with the funds provided previously by the Trust.

The first guidelines for Roadside Vegetation Management Plans were developed by the Roadside Environment Committee in the mid-1990s. The Roadside Environment Committee has recently updated the guidelines for preparing these plans with funds from Stage 1 of the program, to address limitations of the original guidelines and recognise advances in technologies, such as in geographic information systems (GIS). However, the new guidelines still focus on prioritising locations primarily based on quality. Further, the updated guidelines were only recently released and therefore councils within the program have not yet implemented them.

Scale of projects relative to objectives

There was little evidence of strategic assessment of priorities at a regional or state scale, where local priorities coincide with these, or assessment of how selected projects would contribute towards broader connectivity or enhance larger scale corridors.

The grants were relatively small in size and delivered in a short time frame:

- project funds ranged from \$19,000 - \$50,000 for individual projects and up to \$250,000 (in Stage 2) for regional projects covering 9-10 councils each.
- project works were carried out on a very small percentage of roadside reserves

¹⁵ Estimate provided by the Roadside Environment Committee.

¹⁶ Doerr, Veronica AJ, Tom Barrett, and Erik D. Doerr. "Connectivity, dispersal behaviour and conservation under climate change: a response to Hodgson et al." *Journal of Applied Ecology* 48.1 (2011): 143-147.

¹⁷ Hess, GR, Fischer, RA, 2001, Communicating clearly about conservation corridors, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, vol. 55, pp. 195-208.

- projects were intended to be delivered within 12 months, although several received extensions.

The scale of the projects limited the potential for making significant contributions to the ambitious environmental objectives of the overall program. In particular, the objective “to allow for the protection, revegetation and regeneration of large areas of linear reserves across the State” was unrealistic.

The regional projects in Stage 2 were somewhat more strategic with regional coordination and planning of projects and development of a program logic for the Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils regional project. However, there was still no assessment of whether these regions were priority areas for investment to improve connectivity. Rather, the regions were chosen because they were areas where limited roadside vegetation management activities had occurred and regional coordination of activities might be particularly beneficial. The selection process also considered the level of interest and capacity of the regional groups.

Project level program logic

At the project level, there was limited explanation of the logic used to link objectives, expected outcomes and the outputs reported. The grant application and final report templates include separate sections for reporting outputs and outcomes and applicants were not required to explain the link between the two. The proposal assessment criteria included consideration of whether activities were likely to meet specified outcomes, but in many cases the information in proposals was too limited to thoroughly inform this assessment.

3.2 Program objectives

The program objectives are ambitious and broadly defined, allowing for varying interpretations. Consequently, there appears to have been differing understandings of what the key expected outcomes of the program were, as demonstrated by project documentation and interviews.

The process for developing objectives is not documented, and different versions of the objectives are identified in different documents. The most consistently noted objectives in project documentation¹⁸ including the Guidelines for Applicants were:

1. to allow for the protection, revegetation and regeneration of large areas of linear reserves across the State
2. to improve environmental condition and enhance ecological corridors in NSW
3. to provide funds to regional councils and help regional economies¹⁹
4. to add value to a considerable investment already made by the Environmental Trust which funded councils to prepare Roadside Vegetation Management Plans in 2005.

While it was not a stated program objective in the Grant Agreement, much of the reporting and comments from those interviewed for the evaluation indicate the intent to build capacity and raise awareness.

¹⁸ These objectives are in the Guidelines for Applicants, the Final Report for Stage 1, the contractually required work plan for Stage 2, and the Progress Reports and Final Reports for Stage 2 (other than Objective 3 which was removed in Stage 2).

¹⁹ Note: The Summary of Conditions that is part of the Grant Agreement for Stage 2 includes the statement “reposition or remove Objective 3 (related to improving regional economies) as it is incidental to Trust Objectives”. In the Work Plan and first Progress Report this objective was included but in later Progress Reports it was not listed as an objective in the section where objectives are summarised.

This lack of clarity was resolved to some degree in Stage 2, as the required work plan included the above four objectives. However, other Stage 2 documentation refers to three different objectives related to administration and knowledge sharing, environmental improvements, and stakeholder engagement and capacity building. One of these objectives indicates that LGSNW will “support, fund and disseminate roadside management knowledge to NSW local councils” and another specifies that projects should build capacity and improve stakeholder knowledge. The Trust and LGNSW representatives differed in their views of which were the most relevant objectives.

The NRC was requested to assess the program against the four objectives stated in the work plan.

3.3 Alignment of objectives

Project level objectives varied in type and specificity including distinct activities, general or specific environmental objectives, practice-change, training and capacity building. The following examples demonstrate this variance:

- increase natural regeneration and resilience of native grass communities
- reduce the impacts of weed invasion and improve the condition and connectivity of white box grassy woodland within roadsides through bush regeneration and fencing activities
- increase council's awareness and knowledge of best practice methodologies through outdoor training sessions focussing on threatened species and threatened vegetation communities.

A full list of project objectives can be found in Attachment D.

While they ranged in specificity, the environmental objectives for the on-ground projects are generally aligned with the broad program objectives. However, the four main program objectives do not include an objective related to capacity building, awareness raising or training. Close to 65 percent of projects had specific objectives related to one of these topics, and 22 of the 33 project measures reported on by LGNSW related to capacity building and awareness raising. These project objectives are appropriate for this type of program, as building awareness and supporting practice change and capacity building are important for maintaining long-term outcomes.

While the project level objectives related to capacity building were not explicitly reflected in the program objectives, the objectives at the program and project level are consistent with several of the Trust's core objectives including:

- to encourage and support **restoration and rehabilitation** projects
- to **fund environmental community groups**
- to promote environmental **education** in both the public and private sectors.

The program is also consistent with NSW 2021 Goal 22 – protect our natural environment.

3.4 Project timeframes

The duration of the grants was too short for many of the types of activities undertaken. Many of the projects encountered difficulties and required extensions most often related to seasonality and weather issues, short planning time frames and inability to engage contractors within the time frame.

One year is insufficient to achieve many of the desired outcomes, such as weed control, which often takes repeated treatments over multiple years in order to get an invasion to an easily manageable state. In addition, a one-year time frame does not allow for monitoring of project outcomes, which are not likely to be measureable for at least a year following treatment. For restoration and rehabilitation projects, a timeframe of two to three years would be more suitable.

Some project proponents indicated that due to short time frames, works were not as effective as they could have been. For instance, one project undertook planting during drought conditions and the majority of plants did not survive. Others indicated that weeds were not treated at the optimum time of year because they could not wait for the best season for treatment.

3.5 Coordination with other plans and programs

There was minimal coordination or collaboration with neighbouring landholders, other council activities, other Trust programs, and other relevant plans such as the Catchment Action Plans.

Improved coordination with adjacent landholders would improve long-term outcomes and identify areas where adjacent landholders are willing to undertake activities to widen the roadside reserve corridors through actions on their land. Only one project specifically included an objective related to working with adjacent landholders to enhance project works. Project proponents noted in site visits that additional work was needed to build cooperation from adjacent landholders particularly in regards to controlling targeted environmental weeds in order to improve the likelihood of long-term benefits and reduce maintenance costs, as shown in Figure 2.

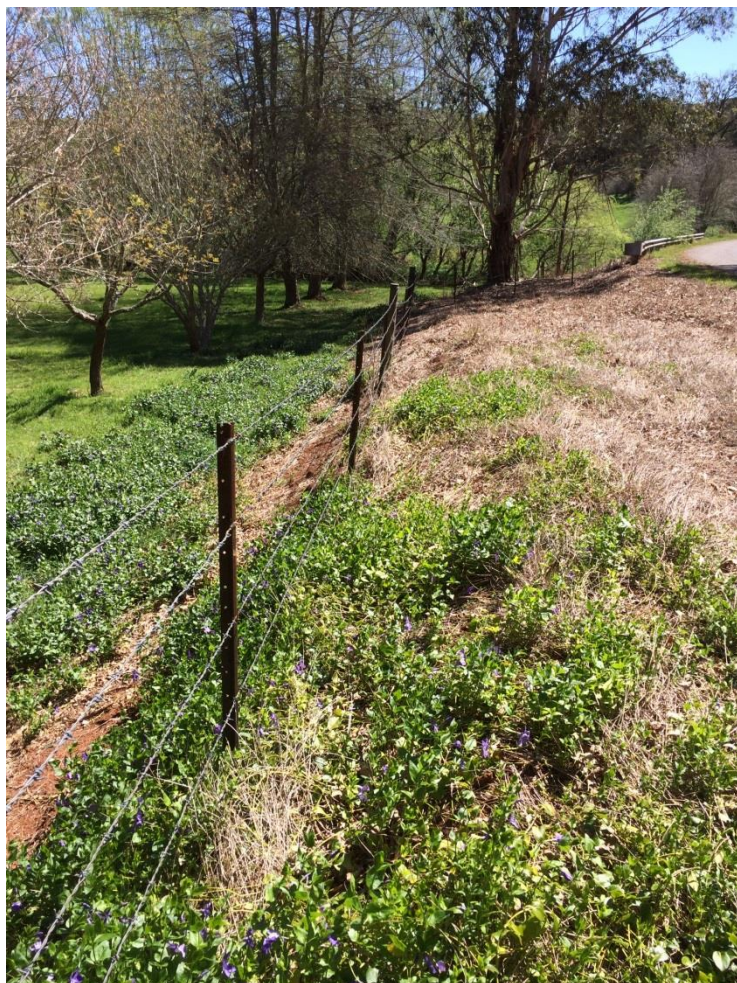


Figure 2: Council treated weeds on right hand side of photo – private land on left hand side.

The Trust could maximise outcomes and improve efficiency by increasing coordination with other relevant programs, including other Trust programs (e.g. Saving our Species, Restoration and Rehabilitation, Environmental Research, Green Corridors). Consideration should be given to how future roadside reserve management and other Trust programs might complement each other and create efficiencies.

Project proponents were required to identify environmental studies, reports, assessments and plans relevant to the project. Project applications identified a range of relevant plans including Local Environmental Plans, Community Strategic Plans, regional biodiversity plans, weed management plans, Catchment Action plans, and other natural resource management plans (such as floodplain management). Several of the project participants interviewed noted how the projects contributed to the objectives in their Community Strategic Plans.

However, it is not evident that councils identified the most relevant plans to align with, particularly at a regional scale. For instance, in Stage 2 where alignment with the Catchment Action Plans was one of the required assessment criteria, only one individual project identified the Catchment Action Plan as relevant. In the site interviews, only one regional project team and one individual project proponent explained how the work related to the Catchment Action Plans when asked about other relevant plans.

3.6 Monitoring and evaluation of the program

Monitoring and evaluation of the program focused on collecting and recording project measures which were predominantly outputs. There was limited evaluation of how the projects contributed to achieving the program objectives, or if long-term outcomes will be achieved.

Monitoring and evaluation of the projects

Project proponents were required to select from a list of 11 environmental and 22 stakeholder engagement project measures to report against, which are consistent with project measures used for other Trust grant programs. These project measures are predominantly output measures such as area weeded, length of fencing installed and number of media releases written. They do not allow for assessment of outcomes, such as whether weed management was effective in eliminating an invasion or practice change occurred.

Two of the measures are outcomes focused but are not reported in a meaningful way. For example, some projects included "recovery of threatened species, populations and ecological communities". The reporting requirement for this measure is yes or no and the summary report merely indicated "5" because five respondents had indicated "yes". However, there was no indication of how the recovery of species was measured, and the project timeframe was likely too short to reach this conclusion. Another project measure was the rate of survival of plantings, but the time frame for the projects was too short for many of the projects to meaningfully assess this.

Program evaluation

An evaluation framework was developed for the program. The framework included a mid-way evaluation of Stage 1 focused on processes implemented, and a detailed, independent evaluation of Stages 1 and 2 to be funded by the Trust to evaluate the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the program in delivering on its objectives (this report). An evaluation by LGNSW was planned for the end of Stage 1 but it was agreed this would not be undertaken as results would not be available in time to inform design of Stage 2.

The mid-way survey was completed in October 2012. Eighteen responses were received from project proponents. This survey focused on processes and administration such as the ease of the application process, usefulness of guidance materials and administrative burden. The survey results indicated that the councils largely found the processes and administration to be reasonable and guidance materials to be helpful.

The progress reports and final reports included a summary of the monitoring and evaluation reports required to be submitted by the project proponents to LGNSW. The progress and final reports from LGNSW had several limitations:

- They included a summary of outputs, but limited assessment of the overall impact of the program or what the outputs reported mean in regards to the expected outcomes.
- Inconsistencies in reporting, such as overlapping definitions were identified but were not addressed reducing usefulness of aggregated data. LGNSW indicated that definitional issues were identified too late to be corrected for Stage 2.
- Issues with project reports that provided limited detail or incorrect information do not appear to have been fully resolved. For instance, the NRC identified final project reports in which objectives changed from the proposal to the final report, not all objectives were reported against, and expenditures were reported in the incorrect categories.
- Reports consistently indicate that the project did not suffer “any significant delays”. However, several variations to the original time frame were required in both Stages indicating that the original time frames were too ambitious. Identification of the key drivers for time frame variations and implications for future stages would be appropriate.

LGNSW recently completed an exit survey for participants in both stages of the program, with 15 complete responses received.

- Project proponents generally agree that the time frame for project delivery was too short.
- Most found the reporting process appropriate and reasonable. A few noted that the grants are small and still require the same level of reporting as larger projects, resulting in a larger portion of in-kind or project funds being spent on administration.
- The most frequently indicated highest priorities for addressing future needs were training, assistance with mapping and assessment, weed control, and funding in general.

Recommendations: Revise the program design

The NRC recommends that the Trust:

- a) review the evidence supporting investment in roadside reserves and linear corridors more generally to ensure investments are strategically appropriate for achieving objectives, relative to other options
- b) develop a program logic based on clear objectives and a strategic assessment of priority areas for investment, prior to committing funds
- c) establish clear program objectives that are achievable, measureable and aligned with the available funds, timeframe and scale of the projects
- d) seek opportunities to work with neighbouring landholders to expand efforts beyond the width of roadside reserves, including evaluating where projects may enhance works done through other Environmental Trust programs, and ways to improve alignment with other relevant plans
- e) develop a monitoring program focused on evaluating desired outcomes and linking output measures to those outcomes.

4 Results

This section provides a summary of achievements and progress toward program objectives. Attachment A includes a summary of each of the 11 projects that the NRC visited during the evaluation, including a project description, identification of good practice and lessons learned.

Key findings:

- RES1 The majority of projects delivered most of the proposed on-ground outputs, with many exceeding them.
- RES2 The program delivered localised outcomes in completion of small on-ground works, and capacity building within some councils.
- RES3 Additional local benefits were observed for certain projects including: environmental improvements, 'seeding' ideas, capacity building, integration of roadside management with the council activities, increased council knowledge of threats to roadside biodiversity and improved understanding of council's compliance risk.
- RES 4 The program successfully funded projects identified as priorities in the Roadside Vegetation Management Plans.
- RES5 The scale of the projects limited the potential to make significant contributions to the ambitious environmental objectives of the overall program.
- RES6 While some progress was made in building capacity, knowledge sharing beyond project borders was limited.
- RES7 Project proponents indicated a need for improved guidance in regards to the minimum level of due diligence required to ensure compliance when working in roadside vegetation.

4.1 Delivery of project outputs

Final project reports indicate that the majority of projects delivered the on-ground project measures they were contracted to meet, with many exceeding agreed project measures. During the site visits, the NRC observed a strong commitment by council staff to delivering agreed outputs. All but one of the 11 projects reviewed in the site visits had delivered the agreed on-ground outputs, with most delivering more than proposed.²⁰ For example, projects were often able to perform activities such as weed management across a greater area than estimated in the proposal with the funding provided.

The NRC was able to compare the outputs from the project proposals and final reports for 34 projects:

- 26 of 34 projects reported the achievement of all, or all but one of the proposed project measures for on-ground works within 85 percent of the target for each measure, with 23 exceeding the agreed deliverable for at least one output.
- Four projects fell more than 15 percent short of at least three proposed project measures for on-ground works. The main reasons for this were:
 - seasonality and weather impacts (e.g. floods and droughts)
 - changes to consultants and/or stakeholders involved after the project planning stage
 - delays in organising contracts for on-ground works.

²⁰ It was indicated that the selected site location for the one project not completed was determined unsuitable.

The information provided regarding stakeholder engagement and capacity building project measures was less meaningful as many of the measures do not provide a clear indication of achievements or value, such as the number of hours worked by contractors. Further there was significantly more variation in these measures, with funds sometimes used for different training and capacity building than originally planned, based on need. Hence, an assessment of whether the project participants met the exact numbers they proposed is not necessarily a good indicator of whether they achieved desired outcomes.

4.2 Project outcomes

Benefits of the projects were generally localised, as projects were small in scale and there was limited sharing of information outside of project areas. Overall, the program has delivered outcomes in two main areas:

- completion of small scale on-ground works aimed at improving or protecting local environmental asset condition or improving local landscape function on council roadsides
- building the capacity within some councils to plan for and manage the environmental values of roadsides and start to integrate these considerations with other council responsibilities and broader asset management planning.

Although not explicitly designed as such, the projects delivered through the first two rounds of funding have effectively served as pilots to understand how councils might fund roadside vegetation management and what activities should be funded. The broadly defined program allowed for regional and local variation and innovation.

Some project proponents, the LGNSW representative and the REC representative indicated that the program has also raised the profile of roadside reserves both within local councils and the broader community.

4.3 Local benefits of specific projects

Examples of local benefits observed for certain projects include:

- **Environmental improvements** – while it is too early to fully assess on-ground outcomes, visits to project sites indicate that there is likely to be on-ground improvement in local landscape function or condition of assets at several of the project sites.
- **‘Seeding’ ideas** and supporting ongoing activities beyond the grant funding, such as:
 - The development of methods for cost-effective surveys of roadside reserves. For example, in Wingecarribee the camera angle used in a vehicle already being used to video the roadway was expanded to capture roadside vegetation, allowing for easy and cost-effective assessment using video footage.
 - Testing new technologies for the management of threats to roadside environmental assets. For example, in Dubbo they tested locally developed equipment that selectively mulches cypress pine regrowth invading box woodland.
 - Integration of management requirements into road crew guidance materials. Several councils prepared field guides for road crew trucks identifying environmental values and appropriate management by area. Berrigan and Mid-Western Regional councils both indicated they are investigating the potential to use existing smart phone applications to alert road crews to management requirements based on GPS location.
- **Capacity building and integration of roadside biodiversity management** with other council activities. This was achieved by several projects through training, improved planning, and implementation of on-ground works. For example:

- Multiple projects trained road crews to identify the risks to the environmental values posed by their activities and implement effective risk management strategies.
- Mid-Western Regional Council provides ongoing training for a range of council staff which has helped to embed the work within broader council activities.
- Singleton Council position descriptions for operational staff specify the requirement for training in the roadside marker scheme.

Councils were more successful in embedding the work within broader council activities where repeated training was provided for a wide range of council staff.

- **Increased council knowledge of threats to roadside biodiversity** and improved council understanding of the legislative context regarding roadside environmental assets and methods for effectively managing the councils' compliance risk.

4.4 Achievement of program objectives

It is difficult to assess the overall effectiveness of the program in achieving the environmental objectives. This is in part due to the fact that projects were only recently completed and in part because project objectives and reporting were often activity rather than outcome focused.

However, the NRC has made the following assessment of progress towards the program objectives based on available information:

- **To allow for a regeneration of large areas of linear reserves across the state:** A relatively small area of roadside reserves was regenerated. It is estimated that Stages 1 and 2 of the program combined allowed for regeneration of approximately 0.02 percent of roadside reserves and some type of management of up to 0.13 percent of roadside reserves in NSW.²¹ Given that most of the projects have only recently been completed it is too early to determine if the regeneration efforts are likely to be sustainable.
- **To improve environmental condition and enhance ecological corridors in NSW:** The projects focused on local priorities and there was limited assessment of the contribution to wider connectivity and corridors. As such, it is unlikely that the projects significantly contributed to strategically important corridors in NSW. Due to the works completed, environmental condition was likely improved at many of the project sites, and ten of the projects were specifically aimed at improving local connectivity.
- **To provide funds to regional councils and help regional economies:** Funds were distributed to 49 different councils across a range of regions through the two stages of the RVIP. This objective was removed for Stage 2 as it was determined to be incidental to Trust's objectives. It is not evident how this objective was selected for Stage 1.
- **To add value to a considerable investment made by the Environmental Trust that funded councils to prepare Roadside Vegetation Management Plans in 2005:** The selection criteria were heavily focused on ensuring the projects were identified in Roadside Vegetation Management Plans (or similar plans). Roadside Vegetation Management Plans were used to identify 22 of 32 individual projects completed, and the majority of the council projects undertaken by the regional projects were identified through these plans. Other projects were identified as priority in alternative plans such as the Lower Hunter and Central Coast Regional Biodiversity Conservation Strategy. Many of the councils visited for the evaluation indicated the projects would not have occurred without the program.

²¹ Based on the final reports from Stages 1 and 2 of the RVIP up to 3,360 hectares of roadside vegetation was treated. 412 hectares was reported as 'regenerated'. The Roadside Environment Committee estimates there are 2.5 million hectares of roadside reserves.

Overall, the geographic scale of the interventions was typically too small to have a significant impact on the high level environmental objectives.

4.5 Knowledge sharing and capacity building

There is a recognised need to build capacity across a range of council departments and to improve integration of roadside reserve management with other council activities. The program has made some progress in this regard. Eleven of the projects specifically included objectives related to creating practice change and 15 of the projects included objectives related to training council staff. Reporting does not allow for a clear evaluation of the degree to which these objectives were achieved, but evidence of practice change was observed at some of the sites visited where the councils had built capacity across a range of staff with repeated training and integration of environmental management of roadsides with other council activities.

Lessons from Stages 1 and 2 can be disseminated more widely. Knowledge sharing and capacity building was appropriately an objective of more than half of the projects. There was a clear intent to increase capacity through the program, but there was no program level objective to actively share good practice and encourage its uptake. Future programs should implement active feedback loops so that lessons from early stages inform future stages.



Figure 3 (left to right): Roadside signage was installed to increase awareness in council staff (three signs on left) and local communities of the value of roadside vegetation.

4.6 Additional needs

Approximately a third of project proponents interviewed discussed the need for clearer guidance in regards to how to ensure a proper level of due diligence in assessing environmental risks, particularly in regards to works being done for safety purposes. Several respondents noted recent incidents where councils were heavily fined for carrying out maintenance or other road works in a manner that violated environmental regulations. While there is a range of guidance materials for assessing environmental values of roadsides available (see Attachment G), consistent and reliable guidance that is easily integrated into council operations, and training for councils so that they understand their compliance risk is still needed.

Councils also indicated a need for assistance with cost-effective assessments of their roadside assets and tools to readily use the data from assessment.

5 Project delivery

Key findings:

- DEV1 A range of approaches to project activities, governance and planning processes and tools were applied resulting in some examples of innovative good practice. The various approaches were implemented in response to landscape differences across NSW and the size and capacity of different councils.
- DEV2 The regional models provided a forum for sharing between councils, encouraged innovation, gave access to expert advice for lower capacity councils, and created economies of scale. The NRC did not identify one ideal model, rather each had strengths and weaknesses and selection of the most appropriate model will depend on objectives.
- DEV3 The capacity of councils to manage environmental roadside assets and quality of council plans for managing those assets vary considerably. While a few councils were able to deliver high-quality plans and on-ground works independently and efficiently, many councils would benefit from regional delivery of programs.
- DEV4 Long-term outcomes may not be sustained across all projects, as there is varying commitment to ongoing maintenance and variable capacity building and integration with ongoing council activities.
- DEV5 Readily useable environmental asset information and simple tools integrated into council asset management, planning and road maintenance activities facilitated practice change.
- DEV6 The projects provide some good examples of partnering with government and community groups to deliver on-ground works and capacity building, which could be expanded in future rounds.

The program allowed participants to vary projects to suit the needs and conditions of their local area. This effectively resulted in trialling of a range of approaches, and provides valuable lessons for future funding.

Project activities

The program allowed for funding a wide range of activities. The agreed project measures for on-ground works were largely delivered (see Chapter 4 for an assessment of results).

The main types of projects and activities funded under Stages 1 and 2 included:

- restoring local high priority road reserves, involving weeding, regeneration and revegetation
- installing signage in high priority roadside environment areas, often to exclude non-authorised workers from entering the area
- implementing regional projects across council areas to manage the spread of environmental weeds along roadsides and build regional capacity
- maintaining and enhancing habitats to protect threatened species and endangered ecological communities
- enhancing and connecting high and medium quality conservation value vegetation in local areas
- increasing awareness of roadside management issues and of Roadside Vegetation Management Plans within councils, and in staff across councils' works departments
- raising community awareness regarding the importance of roadside vegetation through training, signage and media outreach.



Figure 4 (left to right): Roadside revegetation techniques included direct seeding (left and middle) and tubestock planting (right).



Figure 5 (left to right): A range of environmental weeds were treated in roadside vegetation including woody weeds like camphor laurel (left), carpet weed (middle) and vine weeds (right).

Project reports and site visits indicate that while the agreed outputs were delivered, there were often variations, typically to the chosen location for the activities. In some cases, changes made were due to a lack of information or planning at the proposal stage. Examples include:

- Fencing did not proceed in the selected area because it conflicted with councils roadside management policies, there were no impacts that would pose a threat to the community, or the road reserve width was not sufficient to protect remnant native vegetation from road interface impacts. In these cases, alternate sites were chosen for fencing.
- Proposed weed control was determined to be unnecessary because it was already the responsibility of the weed county council as the target weeds were noxious.
- One project did not proceed because the proposed area for revegetation had been planned to be cleared by the Council.

It is not possible to quantify how many councils made changes due to additional site information, or suffered setbacks due to planning concerns as not all project proponents provided the same level of detail in their reports. For instance, one report indicated that “strategic changes” were made but the specified outputs were met. Project proponents frequently commented in the “lessons learned” section of the final reports that planning and information at the proposal stage was limited and in the future, up-front planning by councils could be improved.

5.1 Regional models

Councils implemented regional projects using three different models. Regional projects provided several benefits including encouraging collaboration and sharing of good practice, supporting innovation, proving expert advice particularly to poorly resourced councils, and providing economies of scale. Regional projects also provide a better opportunity to strategically target priority corridors, although this was not a focus of the program.

The NRC did not identify an “ideal” regional model. Rather, the three regional models provide the Trust with a number of options for regional delivery of future programs based on the desired objectives, for example:

- the Central West Salinity and Water Quality Alliance steering committee **promoted innovation** and sought a variety of ways to deliver the same outcomes across different councils
- the Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils steering committee **facilitated strong collaboration** and determined the highest priority actions to achieve the same outcomes as cost-effectively as possible across a large area
- the Hunter and Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy (HCCREMS) model **provided expert support** to councils with limited resources but significant areas of natural roadside assets so that they could identify these assets and reduce any immediate threats to them.

In the Hunter region, eight councils collaborated in one or more of five projects. Councils accessed tools, expert direction and standardised guidance materials from Hunter and Central Coast Regional Environmental Strategy program staff. This model supported project delivery by lower capacity councils. However, this model achieved limited in-council capacity building and knowledge sharing between councils in most cases.

The Central West Salinity and Water Quality Alliance of 18 member councils partnered with Central Tablelands Local Land Services (LLS) to deliver a large regional project. The Alliance project was governed by a steering committee that sought input from the ten participating member councils and supported flexible delivery and opportunities to innovate. However, the Alliance did not have direct line management of council staff, limiting its influence on councils to meet their commitments.

The Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils (RAMROC) member councils collaborate across a range of local government functions. The RAMROC regional project was delivered in partnership with the former Murray Catchment Management Authority (now Murray Local Land Services), which managed the regional project and delivered key services such as direct seeding under contract. This was a well-coordinated, collaborative design and delivered large-scale, on-ground actions efficiently. There is a risk that on-ground works were not fully communicated to local councils, although the feedback loop is not yet complete. A final project meeting is scheduled for December 2014.

The NRC observed a wide range of council capacity to assess and manage roadside environmental assets and deliver on-ground projects. A few of the councils visited demonstrated advanced capacity in all of these areas. However, feedback from council staff, LGNSW, Roads and Maritime Services, the Roadside Environment Committee and technical experts indicates that many councils continue to have limited capacity and would benefit from regional coordination, planning and support. The regional approaches implemented in Stages 1 and 2 provide lessons for what worked well and potential limitations of regional models, which should inform design of future regional approaches.

Regional coordination can require additional time and resources compared to individual local council projects. However, it also provides economies of scale. For example:

- awareness raising programs that employ radio and television reach more community members and can be afforded by pooling resources
- road maker and sign unit costs are reduced as production runs increase
- training programs for regional programs can be developed once and then delivered at a number of locations
- some on-ground works such as direct seeding can be done more cost-effectively over a larger area.

5.2 Sustaining long-term outcomes

Projects varied in their commitment to ongoing maintenance and building in-house capacity, and long-term outcomes may not be sustained for some projects.

Commitment to maintenance

Project proponents were required to commit to maintenance of the project for three to five years, depending on the amount of the grant. However, the degree to which the visited projects demonstrated commitment to ongoing maintenance varied:

- Of the councils visited, three who managed individual projects were able to demonstrate a budgeted commitment to ongoing monitoring and maintenance. For regional projects, evidence of a budgeted commitment varied by council within the region.
- The majority of the other councils understood the need for ongoing maintenance but had not necessarily budgeted for that maintenance.
- In the Hunter regional projects, there appeared to be confusion regarding whether the regional body (Hunter & Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy staff) or the councils would be responsible for ongoing maintenance. Some respondents indicated that no maintenance would be required as the sites should be self-sustaining.

Firm commitment to ongoing monitoring of sites that are thought to be self-sustaining is essential to determine what maintenance may be needed and ensure long-term outcomes.

Capacity building and integration into council activities

The degree to which the projects built in-house capacity and were integrated into other council departments to support long-term outcomes varied. Over 65 percent of the projects had an objective related to raising awareness, training and/or increasing capacity of council staff. Approximately 35 percent of projects had an objective or reported outcome related to implementation of best practice and behaviour change within council. However, it is difficult to assess the degree to which these outcomes were achieved. Some councils reported qualitatively

that they have made significant progress towards creating practice change and/or integrating roadside vegetation management with other council activities such as noxious weed management and asset management.

The NRC observed evidence of practice change in sites visited where councils had successfully integrated the environmental management of roadsides into broader council activities. For instance, road crew staff noted that they have a better understanding of how to consider environmental risks before undertaking actions, and have access to more information about environmental assets. Where such integration has occurred, long-term monitoring and maintenance of sites is considered to be more likely.

The quality of planning processes and tools for implementing projects and plans also varied. While some robust assessments were identified, many councils have out-dated or limited plans that are poorly integrated with routine activities. The program supported development of good practice examples of high-quality plans and tools to integrate data into council activities that could be shared and implemented more widely.²² Wingecarribee Shire Council for instance, has created simple templates that council staff can use to complete a review of environmental factors for council works. The template links to the relevant GIS data available from their roadside vegetation management plan, so that environmental assets are easily identified.

5.3 Collaboration with partners in delivery of projects

Projects provide some good examples of working with delivery partners to undertake on-ground works and training, which could be expanded in future rounds. Fifteen of the 38 completed projects partnered successfully with organisations such as Local Land Services, Landcare, or local environment groups to implement the on-ground aspect of their projects. Twenty-two of the completed projects reported that they consulted with partnering organisations such as Local Land Services, Rural Fire Service, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Office of Environment and Heritage and surrounding councils. Many of projects did not manage to implement their projects with all planned partners identified in the proposals. Others collaborated with different organisations than originally proposed due to changing circumstances. Greater inclusion of delivery partners at the project development and proposal stage could further improve collaboration efforts.

The Trust has indicated an interest in the degree to which funds were provided to private contractors. It is not possible to determine from the reporting the amount of funds provided to private versus public contractors. For example, some projects simply indicated the involvement of "bush regeneration crews". Further, where multiple contractors were used, the financial reports do not break down the costs between contractors.

Many of the projects were delivered largely by contractors. Contractor costs made up more than 50 percent for 18 projects that have reported. Seven projects allocated 85 percent or more of the funding to contractors.

Contractors employed included private companies, other public agencies, and community or environmental organisations.²³ Use of contractors for on-ground works was often necessary and appropriate because of the specialised knowledge, training and insurance required to perform some of the roadside bush regeneration activities. The NRC observed during site visits that contracted work appeared to have been carried out in accordance with agreements. It is not

²² See Wingecarribee and Mid-Western project descriptions in Attachment A for example and further information.

²³ For instance, works were undertaken by: Conservation Volunteers Australia, Catchment Management Authorities, Livestock Health and Pest Authorities, other local councils and private bush regenerators/contractors.

evident from project reports whether all project proponents reviewed the work of contractors to ensure that it was completed as agreed. Some projects provided copies of contractor reports to demonstrate completion of works.

Councils also employed contractors in part because councils could not use project funds to pay for work that council staff would normally undertake. However, councils were allowed to specifically allocate council staff for a time period or percentage of time to the project and cover their costs with project funds. Improved communication of the requirements in this area may allow more councils to build in-house capacity through part-time or temporary assignments on funded projects.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen project delivery

The NRC recommends that the Trust:

- a) maintain flexibility for customised and innovative projects based on local or regional needs in a way that supports adaptive management and facilitates knowledge sharing between councils
- b) implement regionally planned and coordinated projects to take advantage of economies of scale and provide support for lower capacity councils
- c) establish methods to improve the likelihood that projects will provide long-term outcomes, including:
 - i. requiring demonstration of planning and budget commitment to monitoring and maintenance to ensure that the requirement for ongoing maintenance is being met
 - ii. evaluating proposals in regards to how projects will be integrated into broader council activities
 - iii. considering investing in tools that support integration of environmental asset data and management of roadsides into other council activities to facilitate practice change
- d) continue to encourage on-ground partnerships for delivery of works and capacity building.

6 Governance and administration

Key findings:

- GOV1 The lack of clear expectations may have limited the effectiveness of devolving the program, and the rationale for the decision to devolve the program is unclear.
- GOV2 A lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities of the administrator, particularly for capacity building and knowledge sharing, contributed to differing expectations by the Trust and LGNSW, and mechanisms for resolving different views were ineffective.
- GOV3 There was minimal active capture and sharing of good practice and knowledge between councils and regions.
- GOV 4 The Trust's ability to set or change expectations was limited as many of the specifics of the program, including objectives, detailed budgets, and the work plan were established after the Grant Agreement. New Trust governance guidelines, if implemented, would address these concerns.
- GOV4 A sound methodology was used for project selection, though its effectiveness was limited by the scope of the assessment criteria, the gaps in technical expertise on the selection panel, and insufficient information provided in the project proposals.
- GOV6 Reporting had several limitations including lack of alignment between proposals and final reports, inconsistent reporting of financial and in-kind contribution, and variable reporting quality from local councils, reducing the usefulness of aggregated data for assessing program outcomes and value for money.
- GOV7 Although total administrative costs cannot be quantified, the number of layers of administration, particularly for the regional projects, is likely to reduce cost-effectiveness.

6.1 Devolution of the program

The decision to devolve administration of the program to LGNSW was not based on an analysis of the benefits and risks of devolution. As a result, it is not evident what added value the Trust anticipated from the devolution or whether devolution was an effective means for delivering the program.

Roles and responsibilities

Evidence indicates there were inconsistent expectations by the Trust and LGNSW regarding LGNSW's roles and responsibilities in administration and budget allocation, particularly in relation to active knowledge sharing and capacity building. This led to different views on the activities LGNSW should be undertaking within their budget. Processes were in place to resolve such concerns, but did not appear to effectively resolve the differing expectations. The work plans for LGNSW outlined the key tasks for LGNSW in regards to knowledge sharing and capacity building, but the budget is not specified by task.²⁴

While LGNSW took actions to share knowledge, interviews indicate that these efforts did not always reach the desired audience. LGNSW provided information to project proponents and

²⁴ Tasks included for instance:

- identify opportunities for dissemination of Stage 1 learnings through case studies, networks, presentations, regional field trips and forums for sharing information
- promote roadside environmental management planning to councils yet to undertake a plan or project to support these councils and extend activities to areas currently not engaged
- create opportunities to share experiences across councils including face to face opportunities to share.

others through their newsletter, on their website and by producing case studies. LGNSW also assisted with facilitating the Linear Reserves Forum in October 2013 and participated in the Roadside Environment Committee. There is limited evidence that LGNSW was successful in promoting roadside environmental management planning to councils that are yet to undertake a project. Feedback indicates there was limited active sharing of lessons other than through the Linear Reserves Forum.

Despite LGNSW's efforts, many project proponents interviewed were unaware of the practices and projects being implemented by other councils that could have assisted in design of their projects.²⁵ Several project proponents noted that neither the Trust nor LGNSW had visited their projects. A few project managers also indicated that communication with LGNSW was largely one way, with requests to provide information and reporting, but little feedback to them.

LGNSW indicated that there was no funding provided for LGNSW-delivered capacity building initiatives, such as travel to visit project sites, and face to face meetings, and that they requested the use of excess funds for these activities. The Trust indicated that most of the requests for use of excess funds were proposed for activities they felt should be undertaken as part of the already allocated administration costs. These issues were evident throughout documentation of Stages 1 and 2 and were not resolved. More clearly defined tasks and outcomes, and budget allocated to specific tasks or outcomes in future programs could improve clarity of expectations. For instance, a budget and specific objectives for capacity building or knowledge sharing would provide for upfront agreement on reasonable outcomes and costs to achieve those outcomes.

Project administration

LGNSW effectively administered the funds provided to councils for on-ground works. They provided a series of templates for project reports and monitoring and evaluation, which could be built upon for future programs. Interviews and an evaluation survey from Stage 1 of the program indicate that project proponents largely found the administrative burden reasonable, the templates provided by LGNSW helpful and that LGNSW was easy to work with as administrator of the program.

6.2 Development of governance arrangements

There was little time to thoroughly design the governance and administrative arrangements for Stage 1. The Grant Agreement provided few details other than the amount of funding to be allocated and an indication that LGNSW would be responsible for administering the funds to support projects identified in the Roadside Vegetation Management Plans.

Stage 2 of the program demonstrated some improvements in planning and governance including requiring a proposal from LGNSW, which was reviewed by a technical panel, and development of a more detailed contract with conditions to be addressed by LGNSW.

These changes were sound, but similar to Stage 1 the Grant Agreement was organised quite quickly at the end of the financial year. The continued lack of program logic was not addressed and negotiation of details such as the specific budget, work plan, and expected outputs was undertaken after the funding was already agreed to. This limited the ability of the Trust to set or change expectations based on lessons from Stage 1.

²⁵ Several respondents noted that they learned of good practices through the Linear Reserves Forum, but felt that their projects could have benefitted from earlier sharing of information.

The Trust recently created a major project funding stream for which it has developed principles and governance guidelines. Under this model, the first two stages of the program are most aligned with the “negotiated model” for “sunset” projects, which are projects selected by the Trust based on agreed priorities. The new arrangements would require that the Trust first approve that an issue warrants funding and that project plans for addressing approved issues be developed and approved by a Trust subcommittee prior to agreement to funding.

6.3 Project selection

The methodology used to select projects was consistent with good practice. However, issues with the execution of the methodology reduce confidence that the most effective projects for achieving the program objectives were selected.

Project selection methodology

LGNSW followed a well-documented and sound methodology for evaluating project applications. Proponents for all projects in Stage 1 and individual projects in Stage 2 were required to complete an application that included a description of the project and objectives, proposed partnerships, links to relevant plans, demonstration of a roadside vegetation management plan or similar plan, potential risks and financial information.

For the Stage 2 regional projects, four areas were targeted as areas where limited roadside vegetation management activities had occurred and coordination of activities regionally in collaboration with the Catchment Management Authority might be particularly beneficial. These regions were invited to submit an expression of interest.²⁶ Two projects were selected based on the expression of interest and requested to complete full applications. Regional project respondents indicated that this was an efficient and reasonable way for them to express interest without having to spend significant resources on a full application before being selected.

Proposals were assessed by a technical committee²⁷ and the selection process was facilitated by LGNSW. The committee members had limited practical expertise in design and delivery of on-ground projects for enhancing corridors, and it does not appear that the committee established good practice for roadside vegetation management prior to assessing the proposals.

Project selection criteria

Technical committee members scored each of the projects in four categories and the scores were then tallied. The committee was given time to debate the outcomes and provide rationale for their scores, particularly where there were disparate scores. (See Attachment F for the full assessment criteria).

The broad program objectives allowed for differing interpretations, and there was limited strategic assessment of how projects might contribute to these high level outcomes. Additionally, the information in the proposals was often insufficient to fully evaluate the assessment criteria. This led to widely differing assessments by technical committee members scoring proposals against criteria.

²⁶ The expression of interest required background information regarding the state of roadside vegetation management in the regions, status of Roadside Vegetation Management plans, a general description of the proposed project objectives, budget, partners and planning.

²⁷ The technical committee was made up of representatives from the NSW Roadside Environment Committee, the Roads and Maritime Services, Local Government NSW, Catchment Management Authorities, and the NSW Environmental Trust.

The assessment criteria for project selection were not fully aligned with the program objectives. For example, the assessment did not explicitly include contribution to corridors or connectivity or contribution to regional/state scale priorities. These gaps were recognised by the Trust and the Grant Agreement included a requirement to assess projects in regards to ecologically and cost-effective on-ground works, such as the resilience of sites and the cost of full recovery of the site relative to the grant amount.²⁸

Committee members indicated criteria from the Grant Agreement were considered, but were not specifically scored against. One member indicated that it was not really possible to assess the resilience of the sites given the available information. Future programs could more directly integrate this type of criterion into the application and assessment process. Review by participants with practical knowledge of on-ground works could be improved either through addition of a member or members with this expertise to the committee, or by requesting technical review of applications prior to the committee review.

6.4 Limitations of reporting

There were several limitations in the reporting. As a result, the NRC was not able to fully assess or quantify the outcomes achieved by the program or the value for money provided. LGNSW indicated that some of the project proponents did not use the reporting templates provided, making it difficult to aggregate data. LGNSW indicated that reporting and project measures were designed to be consistent with the Trust's restoration and rehabilitation program.

Individual project reports were reviewed by the NRC, and several aspects of the reporting vary considerably, reducing the meaningfulness of aggregated data, including:

- the specificity and measurability of the project objectives
- the level of detail regarding if and how outcomes were achieved
- the level of detail regarding the activities that were carried out and the roles of partners where there were partnerships
- definitions used for reporting in various financial categories and project measures and the detail provided in comments
- the consistency of what was proposed in the application and what was reported in the final reports.

Despite common activities and outputs across projects, reporting limited what comparisons could be drawn on the efficiency of project delivery. For example:

- The narrative style of the final reports resulted in inconsistent and subjective presentation of outcomes.
- While many of the projects included common activities such as weed management, the requirements for treatment ranged from hand-weeding to high volume spraying based on local context, such as weed or landscape type. These differences cannot be fully discerned from reports.

²⁸ The Grant Agreement listed the following assessment criteria:

- projects in higher resilient sites
- the cost of full recovery of the environmental asset in comparison to the grant amount
- preference for assisted natural regeneration over planting
- support extensive knowledge of local plants and animals and their habitat and local expertise
- support for long term commitment
- use of fire as a management tool.

- The detail provided for consultancy/contractor costs was inconsistent, and it is not possible to assess the activities completed or outcomes achieved relative to the dollar amount provided to the contractors.

Financial reporting

It is difficult to draw conclusions regarding value for money from the reports provided. The project proposal required a relatively detailed project budget that provides a breakdown of the recipients and activities to be funded. However, the final reports only required reporting total spend against seven categories - salaries, salary on-costs, consultancies, materials, transport costs, project publicity and other. These could not be directly linked to project outputs as project proponents were not required to provide detailed final costs, such as the actual spend on a particular activity. The NRC observed a high degree of integrity in financial reporting during site visits. However, the project reports would make it difficult for the Trust to identify if funds had been inappropriately spent.

Further information would be needed to draw conclusions from a comparison of costs of a similar nature, for example, on whether economies of scale or geography had a bearing on costs. To get a true sense of value, project costs would need to be compared to a measure of project success, which is not possible with existing data.

In-kind and volunteer support

The scale of in-kind contributions from councils varied significantly with some councils putting substantial resources aside to ensure project implementation. Applicants were not required to include or report on in-kind contributions, but it was encouraged and considered in the project selection process. On the whole, the reporting of in-kind contributions was inconsistent and does not allow for an assessment of value for money or cost effectiveness. There was no formal place in the reporting templates for councils to report actual in-kind contributions. Some information could be found in the final reports, but the level of detail varied greatly.

Only a handful of projects reported using volunteers, for example in activities such as planting, community working days or training. Use of volunteers was often not possible on roadsides due to safety and liability concerns.

The nature of in-kind contributions from councils also varied. Some councils covered staff time including project officers, trainers, labourers, technicians, accounting and administration staff, managers and co-ordinators; others covered costs such as those associated with materials and equipment, transport and publicity. Many in-kind contributions from councils were planned; however, a number of councils reported unplanned in-kind contributions, for example, where greater than anticipated resources were needed, including staff and materials.

6.5 Administrative costs

While the available data does not allow for a quantitative assessment of total administrative costs, the number of layers of administration, particularly for the regional projects is likely have reduced the efficiency of delivering funds.

The estimated cost for LGNSW to administer the program for Stage 1 was \$85,489, which is 6.8 percent of the total expenditure.²⁹ The final report for Stage 2 indicates that \$86,658 was provided to LGNSW for administration, which is nine percent of the total funds allocated. The LGNSW proposal for Stage 2 included a range of options with between \$450,000 and \$900,000 to be allocated to projects, but with the same amount allocated for administration for each option. This indicates that the Trust may wish to consider the overall size of the grant when determining whether devolving the grants will create value for money.

While there was no total administrative cost limit identified for this program, the Trust has set a limit of 10 percent for other programs such as Saving our Species. The reporting does not allow for an assessment of whether this threshold was exceeded, but it may have been due to the multiple levels of administration. Total administrative costs include the cost for LGNSW to administer the program as well as costs borne by those delivering the projects. The reporting from projects regarding administrative costs was inconsistent making it inappropriate and inaccurate to simply aggregate reported administrative costs.

Over half the projects indicated some administrative costs in the "other" category, salary costs, or as in-kind contributions in their final reports. However, how much was attributed to administration is not clear. For a small number of projects where administrative costs were clearly indicated, administration costs ranged from 8 percent to 11 percent of the total funds provided.

Large regional projects for Stage 2 included project coordination and administration at a regional scale and may have also incurred administrative costs at a local level. It is not possible to quantify total administrative costs for regional projects with the data provided.

Recommendation 3: Update governance and administrative arrangements

The NRC recommends that the Trust:

- a) determine whether to devolve administration of the program based on an assessment of the expected added value and risks
- b) establish clear roles and responsibilities for:
 - i. the program administrator (if grant is devolved) and include requirements and budget allocation for tasks or outcomes in the program contract
 - ii. active capture and sharing of knowledge, tools and good practice, and implement measures to assess effectiveness of knowledge sharing
- c) ensure that project assessment criteria fully reflect the program objectives, that the review process incorporates sufficient practical technical review and that proposals provide sufficient information for meaningful assessment
- d) revise reporting requirements to allow for:
 - i. evaluation of the program outcomes and assessment of whether what was proposed was delivered
 - ii. efficient collection of useful information for completing program evaluation and informing future works
 - iii. consistent financial information to assess cost-effectiveness, value for money and in-kind contributions.
- e) devolve administration to the lowest capable level to reduce administrative costs (if devolving the grant administration).

²⁹ Costs taken as sum of costs not allocated to council projects reported in final financial statement from LGNSW in the Stage 1 Addendum Report. The total administrative costs reported were \$213,723. This was provided for administering Stage 1 of the RVIP as well as administering the Urban Sustainability Program and the Waste and Sustainability Improvement Payment Program. The Contract allocated 40 percent of the administration fees to RVIP. The value reported is 40 percent of the total reported administrative costs. Documentation of the actual spend on administration of each program was not provided.