Better practice guide: Adapting catchment action plans to fit Local Land Services boundaries

1. Purpose of this guide

▪ To present to CMAs examples of better practice demonstrated in upgraded catchment action plans (CAPs) to support them in adapting their CAPs to fit Local Land Services (LLS) boundaries.

▪ To share better practice to continue improvement of regional natural resource management (NRM) planning in NSW.

2. Context

▪ This guide aims to capture the better practices in NRM strategic planning as assessed by the NRC. It is not intended to act as a guide for developing an LLS local strategic plan for functions beyond NRM.

▪ This guide focuses on demonstrations of better practice relating to elements of a good strategic plan such as planning hierarchies, strategies, actions and targets.

▪ It is a guide for how to present the results of a planning process in a professional document to clearly communicate the strategic intent.

▪ This guide is not prescriptive nor adoption of the guidance mandatory. It is a guide on better practice for those CMAs looking for direction. It seeks to encourage CMAs to pursue innovation and regional variation.

▪ CMAs should adopt the guidance contained in this document as they see fit and within the bounds of the opportunities and resources available as part of adapting CAPs to fit LLS boundaries. The transitional process of adapting CAPs to fit LLS boundaries should be quick, straight-forward, minimise the level of resources required[1] and be focused on NRM (not wider LLS functions).

▪ This guide focuses on how best to present the outcomes of strategic planning rather than the landscape analysis process (refer to section 4 of this document).

▪ Examples are drawn from the nine NSW CMA CAPs assessed by the NRC in 2013.

▪ The following sections of this guide address the core components of a strategic regional NRM plan:

  - the executive summary

  - planning hierarchy

  - description of planning process

  - description of the region and subregions

  - strategies

  - actions and targets

  - implementation

  - adaptation

  - presentation (layout and design).

▪ For each component, the guide presents a brief summary of the attributes that contribute to a good CAP and provides examples from existing CAPs that best demonstrate the requirements.

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[1] NRC briefing paper to meeting of CMA GMs on 31 July 2013 – Transitioning CAPs to LLS boundaries

3. Using this guide

This guide identifies better practice examples for each plan component. In a quality plan, these components are linked and work together to communicate the strategy clearly and consistently.

A CAP needs to be crafted so that each component has a clear purpose and contributes to the overall message in the plan. As such, taking the examples of each component in this guide and simply combining them will not result in a quality strategic plan. The examples of good practice should be considered on their individual merits, their relevance to the region and should be applied within the broader context of plan development.

4. Continuous improvement in strategic planning

The practice of strategic planning is challenging. It presents planners with inherent tensions that need to be resolved in order for the strategic plan to be meaningful. In the case of CAPs, CMAs were required to make a conscious and explicit decision about how they would resolve the inherent tension between:

- achieving adaptability to deal with ongoing change and uncertainty but also having measurable targets that facilitate performance reporting and accountability

- analysing large volumes of data to solve complex problems but presenting the outcomes in a concise and accessible way

- maintaining stakeholder support and buy-in whilst effectively prioritising the few priority strategies for the region.

Some CAPs achieved greater adaptability at the expense of measurability of targets. Other CAPs chose to maintain high levels of stakeholder support and partner commitment at the expense of effective prioritisation.

In all cases, it is important that CMAs continue to address these inherent planning challenges and prepare CAPs that are both specific and supported, and that facilitate both accountability and adaptability.

This guide aims to support CMAs by capitalising on the opportunity to learn from the collective experiences of the recently completed CAP upgrades. The introduction of social-ecological systems as a new frame for NRM planning has been influential in both emphasising links and connections between people, economics and natural resources and in providing new shared goals at scales which are meaningful to communities. This change in scope has been developed in a variety of ways across the CAPs and should continue to be developed.

No one CAP has captured the full promise of a socio-ecological systems based strategic plan but great progress has been made. Better practice in this area is still emerging and the NRC encourages CMAs to further their understanding through participation in the resilience planning community of practice. When CMAs revisit CAPs in future, exploring new combinations of various approaches to socio-ecological systems based planning will lead to continuous improvements in both planning practice and in the quality of CAPs.

5. Core components of a strategic regional NRM plan

5.1 The executive summary

A good quality strategic plan should start with an executive summary section.

The key attributes of an executive summary are that it:

- is brief (preferably 1 to 3 pages)
- is addressed to the target audience of ministers, agency executives and investors
- can stand alone as an easily digestible 'snapshot' of the strategic plan
- includes the planning hierarchy
- outlines what a CAP is, why one is needed, who it is for and the key content of the CAP
- makes good use of diagrams, tables and other visual communication tools that can convey large amounts of information quickly and clearly.

Better executive summaries in CAPs were pitched at the ministerial level and used plain, accessible language also appropriate for a broader audience. They focused on communicating the key elements of the strategy, leaving the detail of the planning process for other sections of the CAP and other documents.

Executive summaries could also include a regional map that shows the sub-regions that form the building blocks of the strategy and which regional stakeholders can relate to (see Northern Rivers CAP figure 1.). Some CMAs chose to briefly explain the CAP's role or purpose; what it does and does not do; and who it is for (Southern Rivers). Whilst stating that the plan is a document for 'everyone' may be valid, CMAs could consider identifying broad stakeholder groups in the executive summary to create a connection with readers. Additionally, they could include a brief explanation of how different stakeholders might use the plan so that readers can associate with the plan's purpose and strategic direction.

For examples of executive summaries in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Border Rivers-Gwydir, Southern Rivers and Murray.

5.2 Planning hierarchy

A good strategic plan must include a simple but effective planning hierarchy. The hierarchy would normally include the following elements:

- Vision (supported by the community and stakeholders)
- Regional level goals (outcomes focused and auditable)
- Regional level strategies (prioritised)
- Priority actions (specific)
- Targets (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound).

The planning hierarchy is the heart of the plan document and should be introduced to the reader early. The hierarchy should clearly communicate the linear logic that links the vision to the selection of strategies, actions and targets. It should demonstrate how each element contributes to elements higher up the hierarchy.

In achieving clarity, the hierarchy should aim to be visually appealing, be contained to one page and be economical in its use of words. Simplicity helps where possible. Greater consistency in use of planning hierarchy terms across all CAPs would promote greater reader understanding and facilitate state-wide comparison.
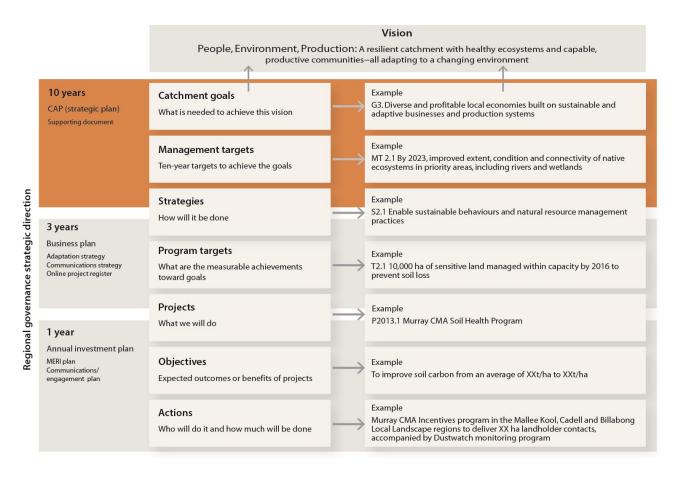
Regional or overarching goals should be outcomes focused and reflect the integrated nature of the social, economic and environmental aspirations of the region. For example the Murray CAP prioritises improving production and local decision-making alongside environmental improvement.

For further guidance on strategies, actions and targets refer to sections 5.5 and 5.6 of this guide.

Finally, it is useful for the reader if the planning hierarchy uses an effective numbering or referencing system that can be used for 'sign-posting' throughout the rest of the plan. It should be easily navigable so that the reader can move around the plan and understand all the linkages.

For examples of planning hierarchies in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Western and Murray.

Murray CAP 2013, figure 1

5.3 Description of the planning process

Whilst it is important for users of the plan to have an understanding of how the plan was developed, the description should be brief. It should focus on what is most important for users to know about the planning process to provide context for the plan itself - what is critical to their understanding of the strategy.

Some of the elements of the planning process that are important for readers include:

- why the plan is being developed or upgraded

- how this plan is different from previous plans eg. new planning tools, approaches and frameworks used

- what principles guided development of the plan

- who was involved in developing the plan.

For CAPs being adjusted to fit LLS boundaries, a brief description of how the CAP was developed will also be important for new Boards, management and staff.

For brevity, diagrams and tables are useful where appropriate. Plans can refer readers to other documents or websites etc. for further information or detail regarding the planning process. Ensuring that the description uses plain English (no jargon) and is appropriate for the audience is key.

For examples of descriptions of the planning process in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Border Rivers-Gwydir and Murray.

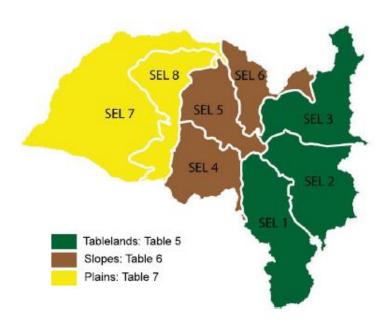## 5.4 Description of the regions and sub-regions

A description of the region and sub-regions that form the building blocks of the plan is important to the successful communication and implementation of the strategy. It should be brief and include a map (which most CAPs did, but refer to Murray's 'landscapes at a glance' as a good example).

It should also include a brief overview of the region and sub-regions that contains quick facts on relevant social, economic and environmental indicators. Refer to Southern Rivers 'at a glance' and 'key statistics' for each sub-region as well as Murray's use of the 5 capitals approach. A snapshot of relevant historical factors may also be appropriate.

Priority issues to be addressed for the region and sub-regions should be identified. Socio-economic and environmental information included in the description of the regions should be used to explain why the plan prioritises some issues over others.

The plan should explain how regions and sub-regions were determined using common social and ecological characteristics. For example, the Border Rivers-Gwydir CAP divides the region into three landscapes that reflect its dominant landforms (tablelands, slopes and plains). It then further divides these into discrete socio-ecological landscapes (SELs) that reflect local factors.

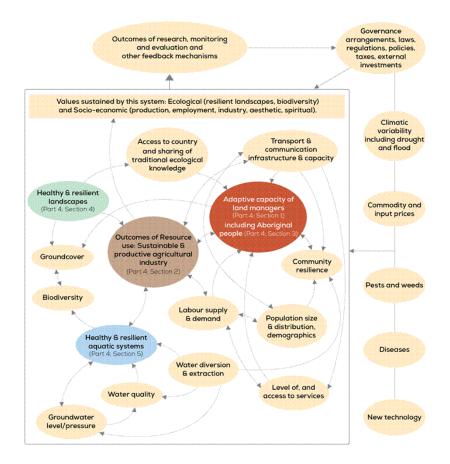*Border Rivers-Gwydir CAP 2013, figure 9*

For further examples of sub-regional identification, see also:

▪ Hunter-Central Rivers and Murrumbidgee's use of Brunckhorst's eco-civic regions (in combination with social surveys, community workshops and biophysical data) was a useful way to define integrated social-ecological systems

▪ overlaying Aboriginal areas of interest with mapped social-ecological systems was also useful (refer Murray's CAP).
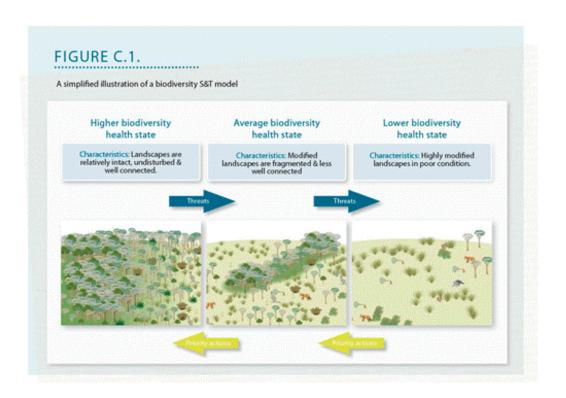
Plans should describe and analyse the region in terms of dynamic systems with interacting parts. To illustrate this interaction, most CAPs included a conceptual model and identified the social, economic and environmental factors that influence their landscapes. These conceptual models should aim to explicitly recognise the interdependent nature of ecosystems and communities and are important for the readers appreciation of the strategies selected.

Two general types of conceptual models were used in plans: state and transition models and causal loop diagrams. Both have advantages and disadvantages. While causal loop diagrams can help identify the key intervention to improve the landscape system (see Western's regional resilience model at figure 7) they can look complicated and be difficult for readers to quickly understand. The state and transition models used, although easier to understand, tended to list possible interventions rather than identify the key intervention for landscape change.

Western CAP 2013, figure 7

Northern Rivers CAP 2013, figure C.1

FIGURE C.1.

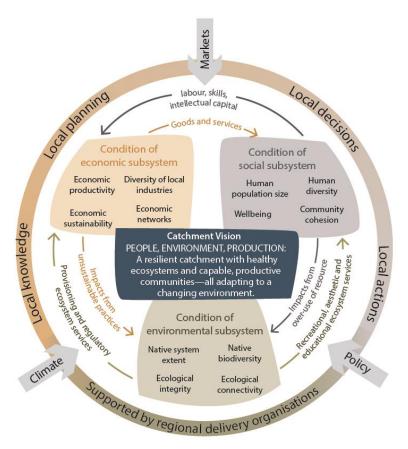A simplified illustration of a biodiversity S&T model

CMAs should consider that for the purpose of *analysing* systems and for the purpose of *communicating* how they work different conceptual models are useful. The trick is to choose the right conceptual model for the purpose. Practice in this area is relatively new and innovation will be required to continue to improve the quality of regional plans. CMAs could consider identifying shared meanings and definitions of commonly used terms in system-based analysis and planning to improve communication.

Despite these difficulties, CAPs provided some useful tools and models that should be considered as part of the suite of tools used in analysing and communicating systems:

▪ Murray's conceptual diagram at figure 5 'interactions in our catchment and partnerships to deliver the CAP' explained that landscapes do not function in isolation

▪ Lachlan's figure 3 'conceptual overview of the interaction of the five social-ecological systems…' included external and internal drivers.

Murray CAP 2013, figure 5

5.5 Strategies

The strategies in the plan should be clear statements of what the CMA intends to do to address the priority issues identified for the region. There should be a clear and logical link between the priority issue identified through analysis and the strategy selected to address it. Strategies are the bridge between goals and actions and help describe *how* goals will be achieved (refer Border Rivers-Gwydir's system strategies on page 3 and 4 of the CAP).

The plan should not contain an exhaustive list of how to address all the issues identified by stakeholders, but the small number of priority issues that the plan will give effect to. Conversely, the plan should explain why some issues identified during consultation are not being addressed or some strategies not employed.

Strategy selection should give regard to alignment with priorities and strategies of other stakeholders (such as agencies and NSW 2021). Early consideration of alignment will improve the likelihood of agency endorsement and collaboration.

Some CAPs contained a large number and range of strategies, with the result that it is not clear to investors what is most important and where limited funds will be directed. CMAs who may be amalgamating parts of CAPs in the transition to LLS may wish to consider the opportunity to further prioritise or rationalise strategies to improve clarity.

Strategies should be specific and limited in number, say 3 to 5 per goal. One way of more effectively prioritising strategies could be to rank them by importance, implementation timeframe (short, medium and long term) or to group/nest strategies (see Western 'differentiating strategies across social-ecological communities').

Finally, the CAP should spatially present the regional priorities by mapping (if practicable) where strategies and actions will be implemented. This improves reader understanding and allows investors to see areas of alignment where mutual priorities and opportunities for investment may occur. Refer to Hunter-Central Rivers CAP which relates spatial priorities to a specific question, which adds clarity. Use of maps to spatially present strategies should consider the appropriate scale for mapping and the usability of the maps for stakeholders and investors.

For examples of strategies in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Border Rivers-Gwydir, Southern Rivers and Murray.

5.6 Actions and targets

Actions should logically contribute to the identified strategies. Where possible, the plan should identify actions that link to multiple strategies, and actions that are complementary, to maximise return on investment.

Actions should also be specific so that they are meaningful to partners and partners understand what they should be doing and how they can contribute. Most of the upgraded CAPs lacked the specificity required to provide clear guidance to their delivery partners and enable meaningful progress reporting to investors. Additionally, some CAPs contained a large number and range of strategies and actions, the result being that it is not clear to delivery partners which on-ground actions they should take, and where they should take them.

Targets drive accountability and auditability and are therefore important to the success of the strategic plan. To this end, targets should be specific and measurable and provide a baseline where possible. They should enable reporting of progress towards regional goals and contribution to state-wide targets.

The Border-Rivers Gwydir CAP is a good example – its targets are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound, and contain sufficient detail to enable delivery partners to plan actions that will contribute to the agreed goals. For other CAPs, it is suggested that more specific and realistic targets are developed for each goal to improve accountability and facilitate progress reporting.

Border Rivers-Gwydir CAP 2013, extract from table 5

System Targets | 1: "Thunderbolts Country" (Tablelands)

System Strategy:
Manage water movement through the landscape to mitigate salinity hazard and peak discharge impacts to soils and stream systems. Increase connectivity and condition of native vegetation at the landscape scale.

System Targets:
SEL 1-1 By 2023, a 10% increase in agricultural enterprises being managed above critical thresholds for groundcover, soil organic carbon, litter, pasture biomass and native vegetation cover.

SEL 1-2 By 2023, riparian stability and in-stream habitat quality is improved in 40% of high and very high priority reaches (86km).

Priority Actions:
- Manage total grazing pressure.
- Manage threatening processes including salinity, weeds, feral animals, soil erosion, soil fertility decline.
- Improve native habitat extent and heterogeneity for increased connectivity.
- Manage threatening processes to upland wetlands.
- Buffer streams and regenerate riparian vegetation.

A plan should consider the feasibility of actions and targets selected in terms of organisational and community capacity. Targets should seek to find a balance between striving for what the analysis indicates needs to be done in the landscape whilst still being achievable. Targets that are loose, qualitative or at mixed scales without analysis of cost-benefit or likelihood of success will not adequately inform implementation. Some CAPs included targets that were too easy and others included targets that were unrealistic to achieve within the timeframe set or were outside of the CMA and their regional partner's sphere of influence. Targets and actions are the link between the strategic plan and business planning and so should be designed to inform 1, 3 and 5 year planning processes.

Where possible targets and actions should be outcomes focused, rather than output focused. The CAP should clearly articulate the assumptions that link the measurable outputs to the desired outcome. These assumptions provide the basis for monitoring, evaluation and reporting of CAP strategies. When these links are not obvious it may be difficult in the future to adequately assess CAP performance and to build effective adaptive management. CAPs could take steps to describe the data collection and interpretation process that will build the new targets and themes into their MER systems.

Finally, the plan should aim to identify those partners who share responsibility for achieving actions and targets to strengthen accountability for implementing the plan.

For examples of actions and targets in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Border Rivers-Gwydir and Western.

Western CAP 2013, extract from table 6

Indicator of Success: IS-2. By 2023 there is a 10% increase in the number of property managers in each SEC actively engaged in activities and programs that support enterprise viability above the benchmark[10]

Priority Initiative: PI-9. Promote activities and programs that encourage innovation, diversification and the ability to

Indicator of Success: IS-3. By 2023 ten programs that support the resilience of primary industries in the Western Catchment are implemented

5.7 Implementation

It is important for a strategic plan to articulate how it will be implemented. Having a strong implementation plan increases the likelihood of successful execution and is critical to adaptation.

The implementation plan should cover the following topics:

- how implementation will be facilitated and coordinated

- an outline of the process and timeline (including links to business planning processes)

- governance arrangements for implementation

- key partners and collaborators, their roles and responsibilities

- scale of implementation (will there be separate plans for regional and sub-regional implementation).

Including an implementation plan signals the intent to continue engaging with partners and describes how it will collaborate going forward. It should be specific about who is involved and when so delivery partners can own, effectively coordinate and/or collaborate in the delivery of the strategies. Areas of alignment between the implementation plan and partners own activities should be identified. Most of the CAPs have provided a strong foundation for collaborative implementation.

Providing clear timelines for implementation also assists partners to engage effectively. For example, outlining an implementation planning stage that coincides with the delivery planning cycles of local government and State agencies increases opportunities for alignment and maximising investment.

For an example of an implementation plan in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Northern Rivers, Murray and Border Rivers-Gwydir.

5.8 Adaptation

A strategic plan should outline its adaptation strategy, that is, its plan to remain relevant in an uncertain future. Having a clear intent to adapt the strategy for future changes creates a more flexible planning approach that better accommodates new information and circumstances as they arise.

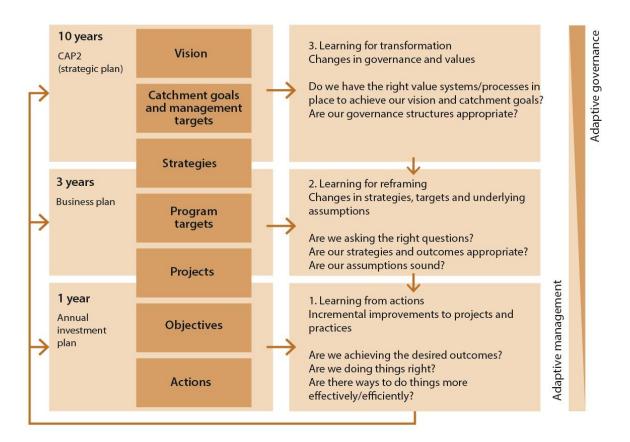A plan for adapting the strategy for future changes should include:

- the governance arrangements for adaptation of the strategy

- what types of new information or events would require an adaptation

- proactive monitoring and scanning processes that would identify new information

- appropriate processes for testing assumptions in the plan, such as predictive modelling and scenario analysis

- links to MERI policies and processes

- mechanisms for adapting the CAP eg. periodic reviews, with every annual investment plan etc.

- how learning will be captured and incorporated into the CAP.

Most CAPs have considered the range of events that may trigger the need to adapt the plan and how this adaptation will be carried out. However, some CAPs have achieved this greater level of adaptability at the expense of effective prioritisation of strategies.

For examples of an adaptation plan in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Murray. Additionally, Hunter-Central Rivers CAP outlines a periodic review process for the four-year rolling implementation plan, the annual investment plan and the strategic CAP. This is supplemented by a diagram demonstrating the types of triggers and level of review required for each.

Murray CAP 2013, figure 12

5.9   Presentation (layout and design)

A strategic plan should be a professional document that engenders confidence in the organisation. The presentation of the strategy should reflect the analysis and effort involved in its development. Poor presentation of a good strategy can result in difficulty engaging partners and stakeholders and even under-investment.

A strategic plan should be succinct, to the point and use plain English. It should be easy to read and accessible to a broad audience. The aim is to get as many people as possible to want to read and understand your strategy. In achieving readability, be mindful of:

- the use of jargon and technical language
- the use of colour and space
- document length (refer people to other sources where possible and appropriate)
- file size and download speed.

The intelligent use of graphics, diagrams, tables and maps can have a large impact on the readability of the strategy. They can convey large amounts of information quickly and are useful for communicating new or complex concepts. When using graphics ensure they have a purpose and support a point you are making in the text. They should always be legible and easy to use (refer maps in Hunter-Central Rivers CAP).

A glossary of terms should be included in the plan to assist readers. CMAs could consider developing a glossary of terms common to all plans upon which individual plans could build to accommodate regional variation.

For examples of an implementation plan in CAPs that demonstrate the above attributes refer to Southern Rivers CAP which was neat, tidy, well organised and easy to read. Additionally, see Border Rivers-Gwydir, Murray and Hunter-Central Rivers CAPs.