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Regional NRM Bodies: Assessing governance capacity, community engagement, and partnerships

A national study of regional NRM Bodies and their stakeholders provides a baseline on their capacity to deliver outcomes of Australia's natural resource management (NRM) programs.

A national study commissioned by the National Land & Water Resources Audit will inform the design of future NRM programs and provide an important baseline for evaluating their impact.

The study involved a survey of regional NRM Bodies, Australian and state government policy officers, and independent regional stakeholders drawn from local government, industry, conservation and Indigenous groups. Over 85% of regional NRM bodies responded to the survey.



There was a moderate to high level of participation in NRM activities.
Photo by Land & Water Australia.

Social and institutional outcomes are crucial to the achievement of long term improvements in Australia's land, water and biological resources.

The study reports on intermediate outcomes, developed by the National Land & Water Resources Audit, such as the:

- **capacity** of regional NRM bodies to make effective decisions
- level and quality of **engagement** occurring between regional NRM bodies, resource managers, industry and the community
- strength of **partnerships** between NRM regional bodies, the Australian and State government.

Participatory evaluation

The study used intermediate outcomes, success statements and survey questions which were developed and trialled over a three year period in consultation with Australian Government and state policy officers, regional NRM bodies and researchers.

The Audit provides data, information and nationwide assessments of Australia's land, water and biological resources to support sustainable development

Capacity

The survey found that there had been improvement in the capacity of regional bodies in the past two years, including in decision making, job satisfaction, staff resources, financial management and the ability to use NRM information from government and non-government sources.

Box 1 The intermediate outcome and associated success statements underpinning the assessment of the capacity of regional NRM bodies.

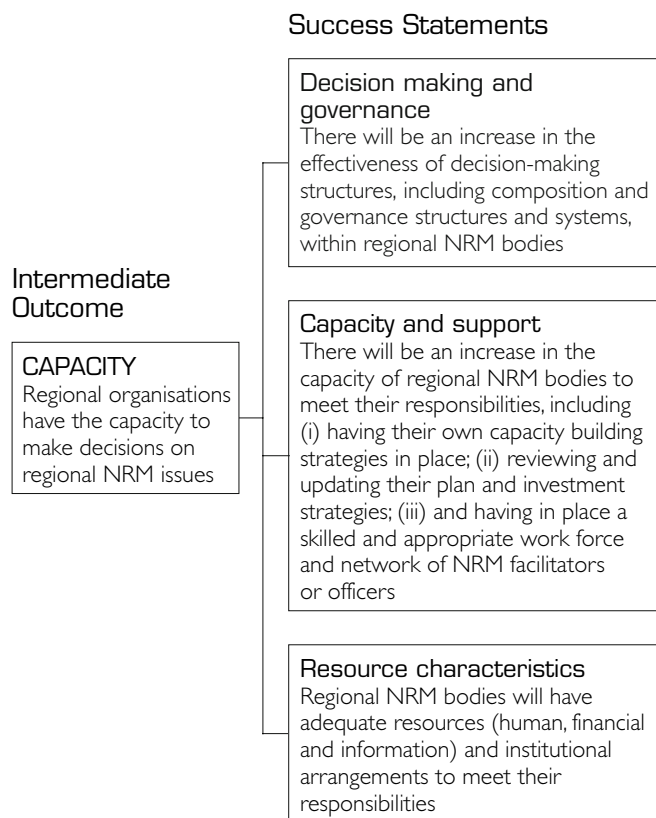
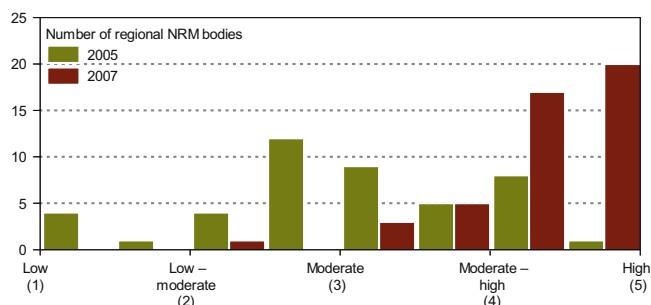


Figure 1 (Q39) "What level of confidence do you currently have that the regional body has adequate financial management systems, policies and processes in place to effectively achieve good financial management outcomes? If you were asked this last question two years ago how would you have answered it?"

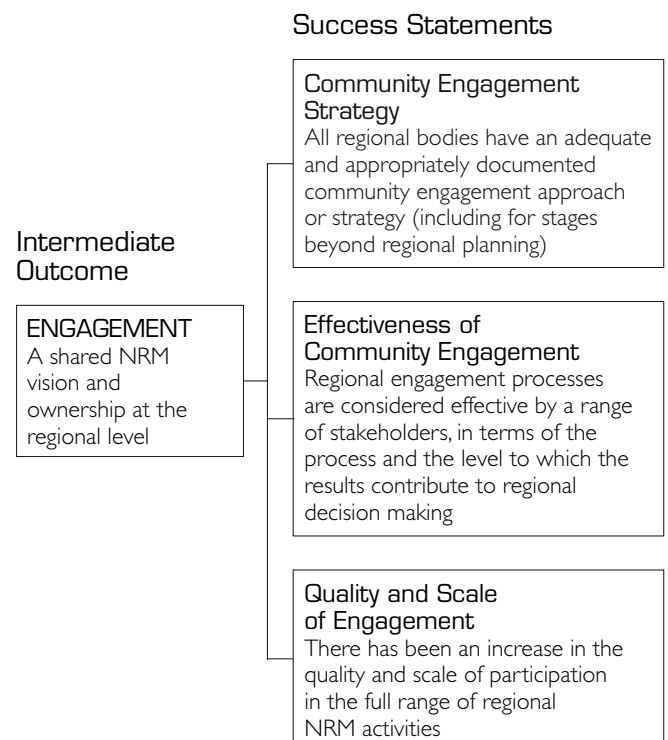


The survey also found:

- There was a perceived improvement in the effectiveness of decision making and governance in regional NRM bodies.
- Regional bodies, stakeholder groups, and Indigenous groups believed that decision making was inclusive.
- Most regional NRM bodies believed they provided appropriate regional leadership in NRM; an assessment supported by independent regional stakeholder groups.
- Most regional NRM bodies did not believe they had enough staff to meet their core business requirements. The majority believed they did not have enough resources to lever external investment, although this capacity tended to improve among the larger and more established bodies.
- Most regional NRM bodies believed that they had an effective local facilitator network to assist in building partnerships, community awareness and capacity.
- Most regional NRM bodies had relatively limited knowledge of economic and social systems, and work in these areas was often outsourced to other specialist organisations or individuals. Exceptions included regional bodies in Victoria, where knowledge of economic systems was relatively high and Queensland, where there was a relatively high knowledge of social systems.

Engagement

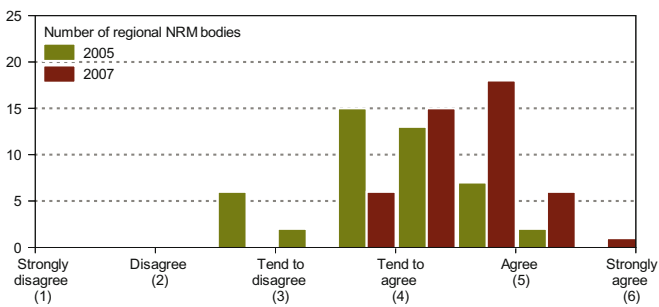
Box 2 The intermediate outcome and associated success statements underpinning the assessment of regional engagement.





- Regional NRM bodies and stakeholder groups considered the community engagement processes used in recent planning activities to have been effective, with an improvement occurring in the past two years.

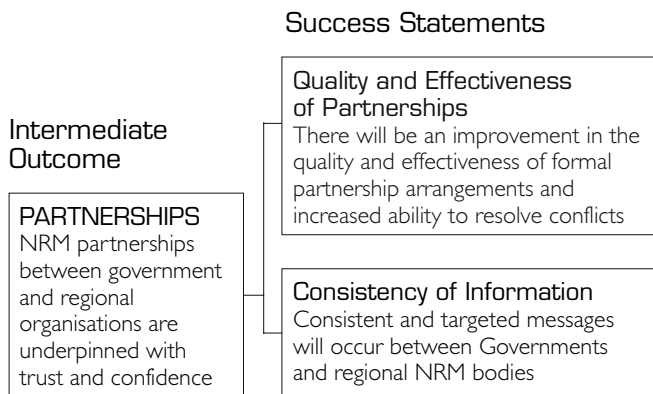
Figure 2 (Q65) "In relation to the most recent NRM planning activities, how effective do you think the engagement processes have been in contributing to regional decision making. If you were asked this last question two years ago how would you have answered it?"



- Most regional NRM bodies considered that they had an adequate community engagement strategy or approach guiding their decision making and day-to-day activities. Twenty per cent had completely evaluated their strategy, another 40 per cent had partially evaluated it and 30 per cent had evaluated their strategy to a limited extent.
- The level of participation by stakeholders, landholders and communities in NRM activities was judged as moderate to high by most regional NRM bodies and stakeholder groups, with the larger and more established regional bodies having higher levels of participation.

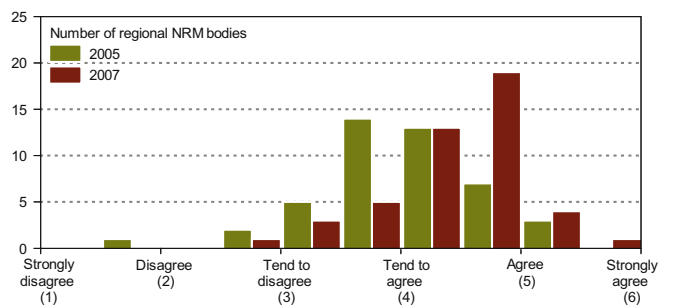
Partnerships

Box 3 The intermediate outcome and associated success statements underpinning the survey of the nature of existing partnerships.



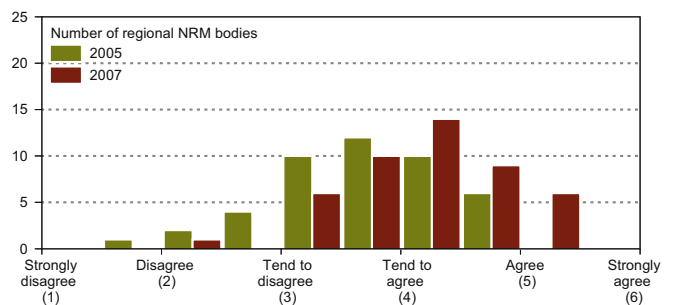
- During the past two years, there has been an improvement in the overall effectiveness of partnerships between regional NRM bodies and Australian and state government departments and agencies. This has been most significant in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia.

Figure 3 (Q57) "There has been an effective partnership between this regional body and Australian Government NRM Agencies and Departments. If you were asked this last question two years ago how would you have answered it?"



- Regional bodies regard their current Australian Government partnership arrangements as more effective than those they had with the states.
- Although state governments indicated a high level of trust in regional NRM bodies, the level of trust that the regional NRM bodies themselves had in state government agencies and departments was lower.

Figure 4 (Q50) "There has been an effective partnership between this regional body and most State Government Agencies and Departments. If you were asked this last question two years ago how would you have answered it?"



- State governments and regional NRM bodies showed a relatively high level of trust in the Australian Government.
- While regional NRM bodies believed they received consistent policy information from most Australian Government departments and agencies, around half of them considered that they did not receive consistent policy information at the state government level.
- Most regional bodies also identified the provision of consistent policy information between state and Australian government departments and agencies as an issue.

Recognition of the social foundations of NRM

The study found that Australian Government documents and policies generally recognised social and economic issues influencing NRM outcomes and the role of capacity building. However, they gave less recognition to the importance of community engagement.

In contrast, state government documents and strategies were more likely to recognise the role of community engagement and less likely to recognise the importance of capacity building in NRM.

The study also looked at the social expertise of board members, staff and advisory committee members of regional NRM bodies. Around 40 per cent of regional bodies had more than half of their board members appointed on the basis of their social expertise. A total of 29 per cent appointed more than half of their technical and professional staff on the basis of their social expertise.

Regional NRM bodies believed that their management actions recognised the importance of community engagement, capacity building, partnerships and other social and economic activities.

Further information

A full report on the study's findings, *A national baseline of the social and institutional foundations of natural resource management programs* (Fenton and Rickert 2008) is available on the Audit's website www.nlwra.gov.au. Confidential reports have been produced for individual regional NRM bodies, which present each region's scores relative to other regional bodies. This comparative information is intended to help regions identify what changes in engagement, capacity or partnerships may be needed.

Details on the project are available from Environment and Behaviour Consultants, which implemented the project for the Audit, at www.ebc.net.au.

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Most regional NRM bodies believed that they had an effective local facilitator network. Photo by Andrew Campbell, Land & Water Australia.