

Opening Speech by Rob Dulhunty, Chair Landcare NSW

Landcare Muster

25 October 2017, Albury

Opening remarks

Good morning Landcarers. I just want to give you all an applause for turning up, I think this is our biggest Muster so congratulations to all of you.

I just want to begin my address by acknowledging the Wiradjuri people, who are the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet here today.

I'm privileged to make this acknowledgement because it continues an ancient custom but it also symbolises the value we place on our relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It's good to be meeting here in the beautiful regional city of Albury. I thank our hosts in Landcare and Local Land Services for organising this week's events. It's been a big effort and I sincerely thank you.

To everyone here this morning, thank you for making the time available to attend the Muster.

My job is to provide context to inform our discussions this morning. I am working from a written speech because there is a lot of information to cover...so I ask for your patience.

I have five topics I want to cover:

- The current policy environment – state and federal
- Progress since the last muster two years ago
- An update on what we're doing at Landcare NSW
- What's happening with our national bodies
- Some reflections.

Current policy environment

NSW – relationship with the Minister and the Parliament

Starting with the current policy environment.

I'm pleased to report that Landcare NSW has developed a good relationship with the NSW Minister, the Hon Niall Blair, and his senior advisors.

The Minister recognises Landcare's enormous contribution and is personally committed to Landcare's growth and development. In fact, Niall actually worked as a Landcare Coordinator at one stage in his life. He has expressed this to me in person, and he has made a number of speeches in Parliament in support of Landcare, so we are very fortunate.

We are also working well with the Shadow Ministers. I would also like to acknowledge:

- the Hon Mick Veitch and the Hon Penny Sharpe, representing the ALP,
- the Greens spokesman for Landcare, the Hon Jeremy Buckingham,
- and other Members of Parliament across the political spectrum
- all political parties are very supportive of our efforts and keen to assist us. That's unique its very rare to find a cause such as Landcare that is supported by all sides of politics.

I would like to acknowledge The *Parliamentary Friends of Landcare* which has given us a vehicle to build these relationships.

It takes time, and it takes effort.

But this work is crucial to achieve a favourable policy environment for Landcare.

For those attending the Conference you may wish to attend the presentation about a recent event in which the Parliamentary Friends of Landcare joined Boorowa Community Landcare and North Sydney Bushcare to regenerate an old industrial site on Sydney Harbour. This event was incredibly well received by Parliamentarians.

I can't stress enough the importance of MPs not only understanding but valuing Landcare.

The best way to achieve this is through contact with their local Landcare community.

We know there is already a lot to do, but please make time to nurture these relationships with your local parliamentarians. There are resources on our website on how to do this, and the staff at Landcare NSW are always available to help.

As you know, Landcare is apolitical; this means we don't back a particular side of politics.

But being apolitical does not mean we don't take an interest in politics.

It's essential that we educate and inform politicians at all levels about Landcare.

It was through the efforts of grassroots Landcare that all political parties went to the 2015 state election with supportive policies.

Out of that community effort came the *Local Landcare Coordinator Initiative* – funded to an amount of \$15m over four years, concluding in June 2019.

We need to be working right now to secure the future of those Coordinator positions and the services that are needed to enable the Landcare community.

The next State election is in March 2019. The political parties are already developing their policies. If we want support and funding for Landcare, we must present our policy ideas right now, backed by facts and by evidence.

With advice from our Council, Landcare NSW has developed a draft policy framework – the centrepiece of which is a continuation of the Government/community partnership that has been crucial to strengthening Landcare over the past two years.

Local Landcare Coordinator Initiative

We are working on a detailed proposal for the continuation of the *Local Landcare Coordinator Initiative*, based on what we've learned, this is my seventh Muster, this is definitely what is needed to support Landcare.

We need our Local Coordinators...we need central coordination...we need to provide Landcare organisations with information and support.

And, as Landcarers, you need a voice so that Government can hear from the grassroots.

In order to receive State funding for the Coordinator Initiative beyond June 2019, we need an allocation in next year's State budget.

Given the intense competition for limited state funds, making this case will need our full attention – and a joint approach with our partners at Local Land Services.

We have already started the conversation but we will need your help to demonstrate the outcomes of this program that we are currently in and help shape the next iteration of Landcare support program in NSW.

NSW – Relationship with LLS

Our relationship with Local Land Services is absolutely, hugely important.

For the past three years Landcare NSW have worked extremely hard at building an effective partnership with Local Land Services. We're making enormous progress, it's not perfect yet...there's still a lot of work to do...but we're working on it.

I'm not sure whether Alex Anthony is in the audience today but I would like to thank Alex sincerely for the major contribution she made to the partnership in the early stages.

In the current era of Local Land Services, we couldn't have a more supportive Chairman than Richard Bull and his team.

The formal mechanism for the partnership with Local Land Services is called the *Joint Management Committee*, known as the *JMC*, which is co-chaired by Rick and myself, and underpinned by the Memorandum of Understanding signed at the Muster in Orange, those of you that were there would remember.

As far as we're aware, this model is unique in Australia – it is certainly attracting the interest and attention of other jurisdictions, but most importantly the Federal Government, particularly in light of the NLP2.

Other NSW environment policies that are relevant to Landcare

Before moving to talk about federal policy affecting Landcare, I want to mention that there are many other NSW Government priorities that affect Landcare.

For example, the biodiversity conservation reforms involve a major change to land management in NSW, including new money for conservation on private land.

The *Biodiversity Conservation Trust* has just been formed to manage the change and LLS has created a *Sustainable Land Management* office to help landowners understand the new arrangements.

We need to stay across these changes and ensure Landcare is involved. This topic is on the Conference program, and I have a meeting with the Executive Director of the Trust next week to learn more about opportunities for Landcare. So I'll be working hard to make sure Landcare can be involved.

Another policy that affects us are the changes to Travelling Stock Routes, and there are many more areas in which Landcare and Government can work together. So we need to hear from you about what those policies should look like.

National Landcare Program

The next point I wish to cover is the National Landcare Program which is worth \$1.1 billion over six years. That includes the \$100 million that was promised as part of the Backpacker Tax.

The Federal Government released information on the next phase of this program a few weeks ago.

There is a lot of detail in NLP2 and I will not have time to take you through it all this morning. I will just note that:

- overall, it is a reduction in funding, although we should note that the Federal Government is not required to fund NRM under its constitutional obligations so there was a chance they would not continue the funding at all;
- the focus is on Ramsar wetlands, threatened species, world heritage areas, threatened ecological communities on private land, supporting land management practices that improve soil and biodiversity, and helping agricultural systems adapt;
- The \$450m *Regional Land Partnerships* program seeks organisations that operate at a regional scale to deliver upon these priorities. Contracts will be awarded in response to a competitive tender process, judged against criteria that include delivering in partnership with the community. That puts Landcare in a very strong position;

- The \$134m *Smart Farms* initiative is a grant-based process which will fund projects that improve agricultural productivity while protecting natural assets, the first funding round is already open;
- There is a \$5m *Environment* small grants program;
- Substantial funds have been allocated to Fire Ants, Reef protection, Centre for Invasive Species;
- Regional Landcare Facilitators will be known as Regional Agricultural Land Facilitators and have a greater focus on agriculture;
- 20 percent of project funding is nominally allocated to support small projects delivered by Landcare and other similar groups.

The \$1.1 billion investment is welcome, however it is unclear how much of this program will provide the support grassroots Landcare needs to be able to partner to deliver upon federal, regional and local priorities.

Landcare NSW is already working closely with Local Land Services to demonstrate the value that our community/government partnership brings to the delivery of NLP2.

We believe it is by working together we will have the best chance of being competitive for the funds that are crucial to the work we need to do in NSW to protect our natural resources and build the skills and capacity of our communities.

Report on progress since the last muster

I turn now to progress since the last muster.

You have received a brochure that summarises achievements since the 2015 Muster in Orange, so I won't take up valuable time by going through the details.

I will say it has been a very, very full two years and I will acknowledge publicly the effort and dedication of the volunteers on the Landcare NSW Executive Committee and Council, and our small team of staff.

You have all put in an enormous amount of work and I thank you very sincerely.

If I was to pick out three highlights from the last two years...first, I would point to the progress that has been achieved through the LLCI, both at the grassroots level and in achieving the recognition of Landcare at the State level.

When I think back to how things were in 2014 – when Landcare could barely get a meeting with a government representative at all – it's clear that we've come a long way.

I would like to pay tribute to Sonia Williams and Chris McCulloch who have done a magnificent job leading the program from their respective organisations. And I also take this opportunity to formally welcome Natasha English who is taking over as the State Landcare Coordinator following Sonia's decision to move to a part time role focusing on strategic aspects of the program.

In welcoming Natasha, who has more than 20 years' experience in Landcare and NRM, I must apologise to Bellinger Landcare for stealing her! We're sure you will see returns flowing back to your region from her work at the state level.

Second, I would highlight the work that we have done to professionalise Landcare NSW and develop our capacity so that we are better equipped to support our members and the Landcare community. For example, providing Landcare organisations with advice, information and tools along with services such as the new insurance program.

Third, I would highlight the work that has been done to set Landcare NSW on a path that will enable us to diversify revenue sources. We still have a long way to go on this journey, but we have taken the first critical steps. While our partnership with Government remains a core element to a sustainable future, we must now develop our skills and capacity to generate new funding sources.

An update on Landcare NSW

So that leads me to my next theme for today – an update on your organisation of Landcare NSW.

In June 2007 a group of volunteers met in the town of Myuna Bay on the shores of Lake Macquarie to figure out how to get the NSW Government to listen to grassroots Landcare.

In October of that year, the inaugural Muster was held in Tamworth. The headline on the flier for that event read: **Landcare Finds Its Voice!** Participants at that first muster agreed enthusiastically to form a peak body for Landcare.

Some of those volunteers are here today – still fighting the good fight. People like John Hughson, who played a catalytic role in rallying grassroots Landcarers.

Another one of the founders is Chris Scott, who was quoted in the original press release saying:

The formation of a statewide representative body for Landcare will do much to ensure the contribution of Landcarers across NSW is properly valued.

10 years later we are still here – thanks to these two gentleman and others we've come a long way.

Our Constitution defines our purpose as:

To represent, promote and advocate on behalf of community-based Landcare and community driven sustainable natural resource management in NSW.

We've been fulfilling that purpose since our formation – under the inaugural chair of David Walker, who is also here today followed by Mandi Stevenson, and during my tenure since 2012. So I'd just like to thank Mandi and David.

Landcare NSW's Chair, Executive Committee and Councillors are all volunteers.

I am extremely proud to be in their company.

While there are people here today who have a long history with Landcare, we also have a new generation of Local Coordinators and Landcare volunteers.

I welcome you all to this Muster and encourage you to get involved with Landcare NSW – we are your organisation.

From the Muster – and through our Councillors – we hear what is important to the Landcare movement. These are the key mechanisms that set the agenda for what Landcare NSW needs to achieve for our members.

For Landcare NSW to deliver this agenda, we develop a strategic plan to guide our work program.

The theme of our draft strategic plan for 2017 to 2020 is 'the next stage of growth'. You'll see a summary of the plan in draft form on the tables in front of you and we invite your views.

Under this plan – and with the help of our partners in the NSW Government – we are recruiting our first CEO, after 10 years, I think that's an amazing milestone.

We will be working to improve our services to members...become even more effective at linking grassroots Landcarers to decision makers...and we'll continue the job of building the systems and processes to diversify revenue sources for Landcare.

In the next period we will also examine our system of governance and representation in consultation with members to ensure they we remain fit for purpose.

What's happening with our national bodies?

I turn now to our national Landcare organisations.

Landcare NSW is a member of the National Landcare Network.

I am on the Board of the NLN and the mission of this organisation is to give grassroots Landcarers a voice in Canberra.

The other national body is Landcare Australia Limited which – among other things – is the steward of Landcare's caring hands logo, manages the conference and awards, and holds the DGR status, which allows tax deductible donations to Landcare.

I acknowledge LA has organised the awards that will be presented at the Conference and thank their staff who have worked very hard behind the scenes.

For some time, the Landcare community has highlighted the importance of a unified voice and cohesive national structures that meet Landcare's needs.

For this reason, NSW has been contributing to a national project to achieve a merger between the NLN and Landcare Australia.

There will be more information on this process in the next two months. So I'm very pleased to announce that that work is continuing.

Some reflections and concluding comments

I would like to finish with some reflections.

We know from nearly 30 years of experience that Landcare works.

The model adapts to the needs of the situation, whether it's regenerating a tract of denuded land; bringing farmers together to learn new ways to eliminate pest animals and weeds; or supporting city dwellers to restore remnant bushland on local council managed land.

The key factor in all of this is Local ownership. Volunteer Landcarers and the staff who support them are primarily local people who have strong social ties to their community and connections to their local environment. This community ethos is why Landcare is so successful.

Landcare fulfils a role that cannot be fulfilled by Government agencies or officers.

While Governments are naturally focused on achieving 'outcomes' it is critical they also recognise and invest in the continued existence and growth of voluntary, grassroots community groups.

After many years, the Landcare movement has developed deep technical skills, expertise and knowledge – not only in natural resource management but also in how to sustain a diverse volunteer movement.

Our job as the representative body for Landcare is to raise awareness of the Landcare model, to give you a voice, and provide services to help you.

I'm pleased to say that most feedback I receive about Landcare NSW is positive.

People appreciate the work we're doing, and understand that in moving forward and introducing new things, there are always challenges.

We have also copped some criticism. I'm pleased to hear the criticism because it means you have a voice.

Partly this may be due to the pace of change and our inability as a small organisation to fully communicate developments to our members.

Like most of you, we are doing a lot with a little, working in a constantly changing environment, trying to build a member-based organisation that will help to sustain Landcare in NSW – and also to contribute to the development of Landcare nationally.

We have achieved a lot in the past two years, across every part of our business.

I can't say that we've always got it right but we have endeavoured to stay connected to the community and stay true to our core purpose.

We haven't blown our own trumpet – rather, we've tried to let our actions speak for themselves and get on with the job at hand.

I am open to criticism because it is constructive and helps us improve.

However I would also invite you, members of the Landcare community, to get behind us as your peak body.

We only exist to further your objectives, and it is only by working together that we will succeed.

I look forward to the discussions this morning and to catching up with you over the course of the next few days.

Thank you.