Secretary: *A. Allan*

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**Greening Australia Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage****Inquiry into Employment in the Environment Sector**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

**Please Note:** In addition to this submission, Greening Australia would welcome the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage as a part of this Inquiry. As a major employer in the non-government environment sector, the joint contract manager for the GreenCorps program and an organisation that values on-going professional development in the environment sector we believe we have a constructive and relevant contribution to make.

Greening Australia is a not-for-profit, non-government organisation that is a major employer in the environment sector.

Greening Australia employs a network of around 300 staff in 80 locations specialising in providing vegetation management services for natural resource management to regional communities. Our mission is:

*To engage the community in vegetation management to protect and restore the health, diversity and productivity of our unique Australian landscapes.*

Under the Natural Heritage Trust, Greening Australia is currently contracted to provide facilitation, technical support and extension services for vegetation management through the Bushcare Support and Farm Forestry Support contracts.

Bushcare Support provides employment for 100 staff in 55 locations around Australia and is funded through the Natural Heritage Trust. The Bushcare Support network provides native vegetation management advice and support to community projects. Farm Forestry Support is a network of 20 staff (predominantly part-time) in 17 regions with a presence in each State and Territory. Farm Forestry Support is a professional advice service primarily targeted at landholders and supporting integrated multiple benefit farm forestry.

Greening Australia, in partnership with Job Futures, has recently won the Green Corps contract. This is an exciting new development for Greening Australia becoming involved in the mentoring and training of young people interested in working in the environment sector. The Green Corps program will train 1700 young people per year, over a three-year period.

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## Opportunities for growth

It is widely recognised by the Australian community and Australian governments that we need to step-up our efforts in landscape repair as we are facing an environmental crisis on many fronts: salinity, soil erosion, water quality and conservation of biodiversity. The community-based landcare approach relying on goodwill and altruistic stewardship, has been shouldering a substantial responsibility, but recent evaluations show that it cannot do the job alone. There is also recognition that landscape repair will not happen quickly or easily. It will take a lot of resources and time.

This increased momentum for environmental change, creates an increased need for environmental and natural resource management professionals and is a major opportunity for growth. With unprecedented levels of Government funding committed through the second phase of the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, there is a need and an opportunity for growth and stability in the environment sector.

The move to regionally-focused and regionally determined natural resource management (NRM) is also an exciting development. Regional NRM planning and investment will create strong demand for professional NRM expertise.

## Barriers and Challenges

There are some significant issues that need to be dealt with to capitalise on the opportunity provided.

### **Current Condition of Environment Sector Employment**

#### **1. Unstable career field based on short-term contracts**

Due to project and funding arrangements environmental jobs are often based on short-term contracts, offering no employment security. As people exit the sector their skills and experience are lost. Short-term contracts also undermine our ability to achieve solid long-term environmental goals. Short time frames, such as 12 months or less, make it difficult to plan and implement an effective environmental repair or management project. If the project officer leaves at the end of the contract relationships and networks are broken and local understanding and experience are lost. Lost productivity in change-over can also impair outcomes. It is in our best interests to retain and develop the capacities of those working with communities to implement on-ground change.

As public-benefit environmental work is primarily funded through government, this is a cause of instability in the sector. Uncertainty is a major feature as governments and their priorities



change, particular programs end and funding arrangements are reconsidered. So far the environment sector has not yet established a solution to this.

## **2. Lack of established support structures**

Many environmental repair jobs are located in rural and regional areas. This means that environment workers often move to remote locations and do not have adequate support structures to assist them once they are there. If they are working with a community group as the only paid member, they can experience pressure to take on more and more work, with no back-up support.

## **3. Lack of an accessible career path**

Due to a combination of factors there is no established or clear career path within the community-based environment sector. Many positions are 'stand-alone' leaving little or no prospects for promotion, particularly within the same community. This means that it is not an attractive career to enter into or remain in and there is a strong risk that the sector will continue to lose skilled and experienced people.

## **4. Under-resourced projects and staff**

Environmental jobs often involve a component of project management. Due to both funding restrictions and lack of project planning experience, particularly with newly formed community groups, projects do not always have sufficient resources to reach their goals.

Burn-out is a threat for coordinators / facilitators and community volunteers who are working with too few support resources and trying to balance volunteer work with other life commitments.

In addition to poorly resourced project costs, salaries are also often much lower than equivalent positions in the government and commercial sectors. This makes it difficult to retain people in the sector, especially as their skills base develops and they have a greater chance of employment in other sectors.

## **Stability of Funding Public Benefit Environment Work**

Up until this point in time in Australia the resources for environment jobs have primarily come from government, such as through the Natural Heritage Trust. This has provided thousands of community groups and landholders with access to resources to employ environmental officers.





A key barrier for the public-benefit environment sector to overcome is establishing stability of funding. For example, the biggest risk facing the sector at the moment is the transition between the first and second phases of the Natural Heritage Trust. The total amount of funding under NHT 2 is increasing, but the budget year of 2002/03 is very tight. During this transition period it is likely that many experienced and skilled people will leave the sector. The Commonwealth Government, in this situation, has recognised this risk and has sought to secure the positions of core facilitators and coordinators. This will remain a major barrier if environment sector employers cannot source stable funding either from Government or other sources (philanthropic, fee-for-service contracts, sponsorship etc).

### **Education and Training**

Environmental problems are very complex and require a mixture of generalist knowledge on environmental management, specialist skills and practical experience. The diverse skills needed include working with communities, providing technical implementation and advice along with an understanding of the bigger picture of environmental management.

Though degrees and training in environmental management are widespread and popular, graduates often emerge with generalist degrees and find they are not able to get a job as most jobs in the sector require specialist skills and experience. On the flip side there is often frustration on behalf of employers who are unable to find suitably skilled and experienced people.

Education and training courses need to contain generalist environmental education but also encourage the development of specialised skills and practical experience. Better links with the industry and a better understanding of the specialist areas and skills required are needed.



## Solutions

Greening Australia is keen to develop beyond being primarily a service-deliverer for government. We are currently initiating a program designed to achieve greater financial independence through fund raising, corporate sponsorship and commercial business opportunities. To achieve our objective of establishing more effective community-business-government partnerships we will have to work hard over the next 5 years to build a new set of fundraising and business capacities within Greening Australia. The importance of this is to provide secure career structures beyond a 2-4 years budget cycle. This is critical in developing the technical experience of the organisation and its staff, to continue to achieve long-term Australian environmental outcomes.

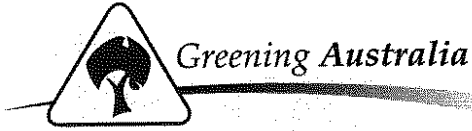
Green Corps is a good example of a current policy measure that is providing opportunities for young people across Australia to explore a career in the environmental field. It provides the first step in an environmental career and:

- Builds skills, knowledge and practical experience
- Creates direct employment opportunities for team leaders, coordinators and other support staff
- Creates flow-on business for environmental industries
- Brings environmental awareness into areas that might not have been previously engaged in environmental repair
- Demonstrates what environmental repair is, what it looks like, what is involved
- Furthers the cause of environmental stewardship

In establishing Green Corps Greening Australia and Jobs Futures have done a great deal of thinking about how to engage young people in the environment. Greening Australia would like to submit the contract's strategic plan to the Inquiry, once it has been approved by Larry Anthony, Minister for Youth Affairs.

Other policy measures that address the barriers and challenges include:

- Support for leveraging philanthropic funding
- Market-based instruments - the first step has been taken in funding some MBI pilots under the Commonwealth NRM program
- Public good Compensation guidelines
  - To reach agreement between politicians, farmers and the broader Australian community that the entitlements and obligations that landowners have under property rights need to continuously evolve and change as our



understanding of impacts of management practices improves.

- Encouraging corporate ethical responsibility in ecologically sustainable development and partnerships with environmental groups - already some good effort being made with the Environment Business Council
- Strategic and coordinated resources (Commonwealth and States) available for the transition to a mature and competitive environment sector
- Consideration of an environment levy
- Support for a diversity of environmental service providers - this is already being done, and will have the potential to flourish further under the move to regional NRM.

Greening Australia would welcome the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage as a part of this Inquiry.

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