

Managing Australia's Soils: A policy discussion paper
Summary of submissions from public consultation
National Committee on Soil and Terrain

May 2009

Executive Summary

In 2006, The National Committee on Soil and Terrain (NCST) requested agreement from the Natural Resource Policies and Programs Committee (NRPPC) to develop a strategic approach to managing Australia's soil and land resources.

In October 2008, the 83-page discussion paper, *Managing Australia's Soils: A policy discussion paper*, prepared by Andrew Campbell, was sent to approximately 450 stakeholders for comment.

Overall, the response to the Paper was positive and encouraging, with 101 submissions received from a broad range of stakeholders. This level of response was regarded as very satisfactory given the length of the discussion paper and the requirement to complete 11 guiding questions.

Many stakeholders congratulated the National Committee on Soil and Terrain on the release of the Paper, indicating it was long overdue.

The principal response from submissions demonstrated strong support for a strategic approach to soil management in Australia. The suggested mechanisms to achieve this approach were variable, with suggestions for a national soils policy and a national soil framework. There was a clear message that any approach should be integrated with other natural resource management issues such as water and vegetation management. The need for improved consideration of soil in wider debates on climate, biodiversity and future food security was identified.

There was broad agreement on the need to build a case for strategic reinvestment in soils. Stakeholders saw a need for more research, particularly in the areas of soil biota, soil carbon, sustainability in soil management, and practice change.

Stakeholders consistently identified the need for improved soils information including monitoring, collection, storage and access to data. The Australian Soil Resource Information System (ASRIS) was identified as a core national resource in need of on-going investment with recommendations that state based information should be linked to the website.

The low level of community awareness and understanding of threats to soil resources and the long-term consequences of this was recognised.

There is strong awareness of the growing lack of soils professionals with sufficient skills to interpret and apply soil information. Stakeholders stressed the need for specialist and local soils knowledge in the areas of soil classification and interpretation to support improved management practices leading to more sustainable use of soils.

The lack of adequate people on the ground was frequently attributed to the ageing and retiring of soils specialists and the problems of universities being unable to maintain critical mass in soils courses. The lack of skilled soils people was also seen as a future threat to properly informed soils and land management policy development. Respondents identified a strong need to promote soils literacy through the NRM regional bodies. This would provide the opportunity to promote on-ground, local outcomes and to improve collaboration between landholders, NRM bodies and state / federal agencies.

The issue of training, extension and communication as a key element in developing management practice change towards more sustainable soil management was strongly supported.

Ways forward

Key suggestions included:

- a national strategic approach to manage future threats to the national soil resource
- increasing research and development on soil health
- improving national soils skills and knowledge bases
- improving soil information and data management
- improving education and extension capacities to support practice change and
- improving public awareness of critical soil management issues.