

Enquiries: Jane O'Malley
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Executive Officer
Ms Lisa Chalmers
Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
State Soil Health Strategy
Locked Bag 4
BENTLEY DELIVERY CENTRE WA 6983

Email: SLCC@dpird.wa.gov.au

Dear Lisa

Comment: Sustaining Western Australia's Agricultural, Horticultural and Pastoral Soils, Western Australian Soil Health Strategy – Discussion Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper for the Western Australian Soil Health Strategy.

The Peel-Harvey Catchment Council (PHCC) is the NRM regional body responsible for the Peel-Harvey Natural Resource Management (NRM) Region. The following comments are provided within the context of our mission statement : *"as environmental stewards we will encourage and enable effective catchment management to create a healthier natural environment in the Peel-Harvey by building community education and capacity, influencing and leading critical thought and environmental pride, and exemplifying and implementing best practice"* Our NRM Region covers over 1.1 million hectares of the Serpentine, Murray, Hotham, Williams and Harvey River catchments. Of this, 573,350 hectares is within the Hotham-Williams Catchment. In these areas, waterlogging, salinization and acidification are key issues directly impacting farm productivity and indirectly generating off-site impacts that also impact productivity and the natural environment.

Dryland salinity/salinization is one of a number of important NRM issues in our catchment, closely linked to the management of soils, vegetation and water. Our approach to working with farmers who have saline and or waterlogged areas is to pool multiple resources across private, public and community sectors to ensure maximum NRM outcomes. This integrated approach means that a range of agricultural and environmental objectives can be met through the one planning-investment-implementation pathway.

The PHCC welcomes the initiative to prepare a State Soil Strategy and looks forward to the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy.

58 Sutton Street, Mandurah
Western Australia 6210
T: +61 8 6369 8800

www.peel-harvey.org.au

*We acknowledge the Noongar people as Traditional Custodians
of this land and pay our respects to all Elders past and present*

Dryland Salinity

In May 2018 the Auditor General's office undertook an audit which assessed the management of salinity in the agricultural regions of the South West of WA. The audit report provides the following as background to the salinity challenge facing the south-west region of Western Australia:

“By the 1990s dryland salinity was considered the greatest economic and environmental threat to the State. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) estimates that since 2009-10 the opportunity cost of lost agricultural production from dryland salinity has been over \$500 million a year and that 25% of cleared agricultural land will be at risk of salinity in the long term. It was also predicted by DPIRD that the cost of protecting water supplies and maintaining infrastructure could be even higher. Clearing over 18 million of the 21 million hectares of native vegetation in the agricultural regions has occurred in an area that is internationally recognised as a biodiversity hotspot. Salinity has had a significant and long lasting impact on the region's natural biodiversity and land systems.”

As noted in the Auditor General's report, the management of dryland salinity lacks strategic direction, since 2008 the State has operated without a Salinity Strategy, nor a Salinity Action Plan. With no goals and targets for reducing water tables or planting deep-rooted perennial species, decisions to protect land are left to individual landholders often with diminished resources or fragmented in approach. The Auditor General's report stating that:

“DPIRD measures to prevent land degradation are mostly reactive and reliant on applications for drainage or complaints from the public. It is not effectively using its legislative powers to prevent land degradation”.

The PHCC position in relation to dryland salinity is that via the Soil Health Strategy, an action plan to address soil salinity in the south-west of the state be prepared which:

- 1. establishes targets for reducing water tables or planting deep-rooted perennial species,**
- 2. states that the Soil and Land Commissioner and DPIRD will proactively enforce compliance with the Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945 to ensure that landholders prevent and/or mitigate land degradation.**

Agricultural Soil

The National Soil Advocate in December 2017 presented his third report, *Restore the Soil: Prosper the Nation* to the Commonwealth Government, within which he stated:

“The emerging concept of ‘soil security’ also underpins the world's six existential challenges: food, water and energy security, climate change abatement, biodiversity protection and human health. I believe that soil and water security will increasingly underpin global social stability and security. Soil is a critical national strategic asset, and it is surprising to me that the scientific advances of the last 20 years in understanding the role that soil plays in each of these challenges have only recently been recognised”.

The report included (among others) the following recommendations:

No. 3: Establish a long term, permanent soil, water, vegetation and agricultural knowledge program that encourages collaboration between scientists and successful farmers to build knowledge, collate the evidence to support successes and improvements, provide improved extension services to share the information and promote the wider use of regenerative farming techniques, which will inform and educate a broad range of stakeholders about leading regenerative land management practices.

No. 5: Increase the funds available through the National Landcare Programme to encourage more farmers to adopt regenerative evidenced-based, long-term land management practices.

No.6: Ask Rural Research and Development Corporations to direct a proportion of their research funds to improve understanding of the plant and soil microbiome processes underlying regenerative farming practices.

The PHCC considers that principles of regenerative agriculture based on sound, long term evidence should be central to Western Australia's food future, as it will allow food production to occur in harmony with the natural ecosystem. Western Australian's Soil Health Strategy ought to include reference to the value of solid, long-term based understanding of agricultural practices on the impact on the soil and downstream effects.

State Government should contribute to the research of these practices and the funding of programs which educate farmers of the practice and on-farm implementation of long-term, evidenced-based, sustainable practices as part of the research program.

The PHCC position in relation to agricultural soils is that via the Soil Health Strategy, the State Government and via the Soil and Land Conservation Commissioner discharge their statutory obligations under the Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945 and the Land Administration Act 1997 to:

“(a) the carrying out of surveys and investigations to ascertain the nature and extent of land degradation throughout the State;

(b) the investigation and design of preventive and remedial measures in respect of land degradation;

(c) the carrying out of experiments and demonstrations in soil conservation and reclamation;

(d) the recording and publishing of the results of such surveys, investigations, designs, experiments and demonstrations;

(e) the dissemination of information with regard to land degradation and soil conservation and reclamation;

(f) the instruction and supervision of landholders in matters pertaining to soil conservation and reclamation;

(g) the advising and assistance of landholders whose land has been affected by land degradation;”

The PHCC believes that the State should reverse the decline in funding for agricultural resource management to enable the resources to support the Soil Health Strategy and:

1. Commit funds to long-term agriculture research as required by the Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945 that assesses the long term impact of farming systems on the natural resource base.
2. Commit resources to partner with farmers to create agricultural farming systems which mitigate impacts on the natural resource base.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact Jane O'Malley on (08) 6369 8800 or email admin@peel-harvey.org.au.

Yours sincerely

Jane O'Malley
Chief Executive Officer