

State of the catchments 2010

# Economic sustainability and social well-being

## Central West region

### State Plan target

Natural resource decisions contribute to improving or maintaining economic sustainability and social well-being (ESSW).

### Background

This report focuses on links between change in natural resource management (NRM) and ESSW which can be influenced by government. These changes are hard to measure, due to the complex interactions between the environment, society and individuals.

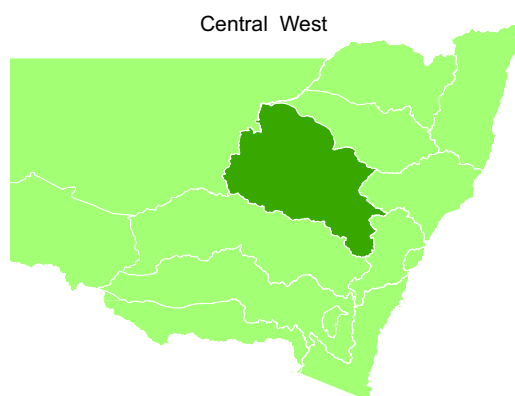
### Understanding ESSW in the Central West region

Representatives of four key stakeholder groups – landholders, Aboriginal people, townspeople and Catchment Management Authority (CMA) staff – were consulted via focus groups and interviews. Current social research, focused on NRM issues in the Central West region, was reviewed. No overall assessment of the condition (strength and number) of the links between natural resource decisions and ESSW is given, as the distinctions between stakeholders' perceptions and experiences are significant. These differences are critical to understanding the likely contributions of natural resource decisions to ESSW in different parts of the community.

A detailed technical report describes the methods used to derive the information contained in this report. At the time of publication of the *State of the catchments (SOC) 2010* reports, the technical reports were being prepared for public release. When complete, they will be available on the I&I website: [www.industry.nsw.gov.au/info/mer](http://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/info/mer).

**Note:** All data on natural resource condition, pressures and management activity included in this SOC report, as well as the technical report, was collected up to January 2009.

## Map of the catchment



## Overview

### What do people in this region see as important to maintaining community vitality?

Secure employment, especially close to home, was considered critical by all groups. Other important factors include:

- maintaining a viable, skilled population and community support (landholders)
- access to water, health and education services (townspeople)
- sense of engagement and equity in access to country and waterways (Aboriginal people)
- strong sense of place and community (CMA)
- access to healthy environments (CMA and Aboriginal people).

### What is the state of ESSW across the region?

ESSW is variable across the region. Groups considered regional centres and the upper catchment to be faring well, but acknowledged that there are a range of incomes across the region. Other key aspects include:

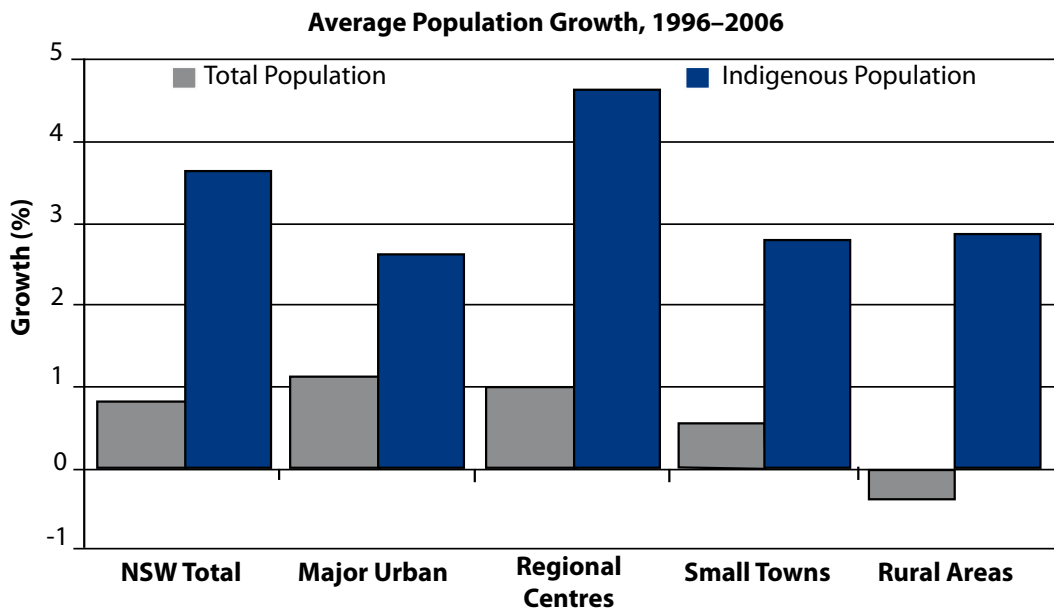
- remoteness which is regarded negatively, eg less access to medical and educational services
- Aboriginal communities do not fare as well as other stakeholders
- water availability and quality is fundamental to ESSW.

### Aboriginal interests – connections to culture

The well-being of Aboriginal communities, as well as their ability to access land and its natural resources, is entwined with the health of the environment. Limited access and its associated impacts on cultural practice have created a history of socio-economic disadvantage.

Studies demonstrate that participation by Aboriginal people in the Australian Government's 'Caring for our Country' initiative benefits both the environment and social cohesion. Meaningful NRM jobs provide many tangible, individual and family benefits as well as an increased sense of worth within Aboriginal communities.

Figure 1 shows that, over the past 10 years, the NSW indigenous population has grown at a faster rate than the total population. The indigenous population growth is around 3700 people per year; however, this number is considerably smaller than the total population increase of around 51,000 per year. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has suggested that the high level of indigenous population growth may be a result of both high natural growth and more people being prepared to identify their indigenous origins in the census.



**Figure 1 Growth of indigenous population compared with general population**

Graph provided by Bureau of Rural Sciences (BRS) from Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, 2008

## Trends – community views

### *Landscape changes*

Changes to the landscape include:

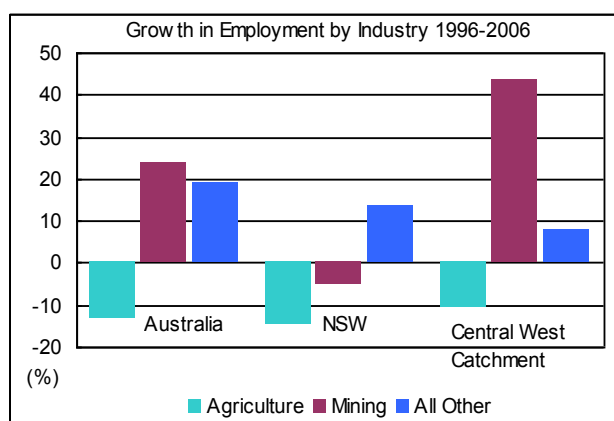
- the overriding influence of drought on water and vegetation levels
- all groups commented on an increase in ground cover, with some participants noting that this was due to increased weeds and reduced stock rates
- Landcare plantings from the 1980s are becoming taller and more noticeable
- the removal of exotic trees from watercourses was seen, by some, as positive for environmental reasons but negatively impacted those who believed such places to be a place of refuge.

### *Primary industry*

The impacts on the landscape, combined with regulatory changes and including the farm production assets previously mentioned, are diminishing ESSW for farmers. Other concerns are:

- decrease in the number of people in commercial agriculture
- the rising cost of farm inputs and reduced farm incomes placing stress on families and reduce community participation

- rural subdivision (often to fund retirement) is reducing the land available for agriculture
- mining seen as beneficial for local economies, although it increased overall competition for water and farm labour
- reduced employment in agriculture – employment in this sector declined by more than 10 per cent across NSW (1996–2006) but its decline was less reduced than this in the Central West catchment (Figure 2).



**Figure 2 Decline in agriculture employment over 10 years**

Graph provided by Industry & Investment NSW (I&I) from ABS data, 2008

## Townscapes






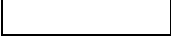
An increasing concentration of the catchment population in the regional centres is affecting ESSW by increasing demands on infrastructure and services. Other key impacts include:

- land-use changes to farmland, through peri-urban sprawl affecting a 'sense of place' at the edges of large towns, although also presenting opportunities for increasing biodiversity, depending on urban planning strategies
- limited availability of water, which can contribute to a lack of economic diversity.

Table 1 provides a summary of comments made by the key stakeholder groups.

**Table 1 ESSW check and group comments**

Likely impact of NRM decisions on ESSW	Condition	Trend	Data confidence	Typical group comments
Business profitability and expansion		↔	M	Conservation farming and the related increase in ground cover has reduced the impact of poorer seasons.  However, economic impacts are hard to measure.
Increased employment		↔	M	The Central West CMA has facilitated agreement between Aboriginal communities on areas of jurisdiction for cultural knowledge and the subsequent provision of services.  More primary producers are working off-farm.
Gaining more formal and informal skills		↑	H	Community training has been provided to assist in accessing funds beyond Central West CMA programs.  Landholders feel more empowered to make NRM-related decisions.
Community networks and interaction		↑	M	The Central West CMA is promoting access arrangements for Aboriginal people via demonstration projects on private lands.  The Central West CMA has partnered with Landcare and various others to increase connectivity in the region.
Participation in NRM		↑	M	More community engagement in NRM due to an increasing sense of community ownership of NRM processes and trust in the Central West CMA.
More effective NRM decision-making		↑	M	The Central West CMA effectively facilitates coordination of local government for landscape-level decision-making and regional identity enhancement, therefore increasing tourism potential.

Condition	Trend	Data confidence
 Very good	↑ Improving	H High
 Good	↔ No change	M Medium
 Fair	↓ Declining	L Low
 Poor	? Unknown	
 Very poor		
 No data		



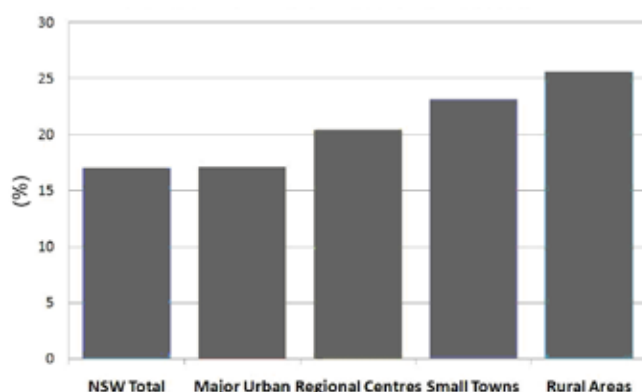
## Pressures

A number of pressures, including climate change concerns, are influencing land-use change and modifying links to ESSW. These links affect people's ability to use environmental services but can be felt individually as financial, relationship and time pressures.

Major pressures come from the overall resource condition (eg soil health), availability (eg increased competition for water), access (eg for recreation, traditional foods and medicines) and quality (eg water quality). Additionally, people with long-term associations with an area – particularly Aboriginal people with cultural responsibilities for landscape health – can feel strong emotional and spiritual connections to the land which increases overall ESSW.

Key pressures include:

- population change – across NSW, rural areas have experienced decline while small towns (200 to 1000 people) have had low growth. The Central Western region has experienced low growth over the past decades. Gradual migration from the western parts of the catchment is occurring, which is contributing to the larger, more mobile urban populations. Maintaining a viable population is critical, as NRM is labour-intensive
- community capacity – community capacity is often measured by a community's level of volunteering, optimism and participation in community life. Although rural communities traditionally have a high rate of volunteers (as shown in Figure 3) they also have an ageing membership and are experiencing decline. These results suggest little capacity for more voluntary work in NRM in rural areas



**Figure 3 Percentage of population who volunteer (2006)**

Graph provided by BRS from ABS Data 2008

- drought/climate change – there are prospects of ongoing reduced water availability and quality and increasing competition for water
- market incentives – there are emerging opportunities for valuing and trading environmental assets, eg carbon trading and biobanking
- technology – farm practices requiring less water enable labour savings, adjustment and greater environmental flows.

## Management activity

Monitoring ESSW is an evolving field for government and, as such, monitoring work has been developed to mesh with national approaches. Fieldwork has gathered qualitative data on the impact of CMA actions and also larger scale government investments in NRM. Monitoring occurs through several processes, including key stakeholder focus groups and interviews, with larger community samples improving reliability where possible.

### State level

The State Plan target requirement is to ‘contribute more effectively to natural resource investment decision-making achieving socio-economic outcomes.’ The NSW Government aims to achieve this through improved priority identification and decision-making capacity of CMAs and agencies. A socio-economic training module, designed to extend Industry & Investment NSW’s (I&I) monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement processes, is currently being developed. I&I is working with several CMAs and state target themes to ensure the effectiveness of this module.

Other socio-economic activities being undertaken at the state level include:

- developing common guidelines for country-wide socio-economic analysis
- identifying Aboriginal cultural heritage assessment priorities and progress assessments to assist land-use planning and NRM investment decision-making
- implementing the Aboriginal BioBanking Program
- development of a state-wide Aboriginal Land and NRM Action Plan ‘Healthy Country – Healthy Communities’ – this will assist in developing clear policies, principles and tools to improve socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal people through enhanced capacity to participate in land management and NRM
- the Aboriginal Heritage Mapping and Assessment Program, which is a whole-of-Government program that provides a coordinated and consistent approach to collecting, managing and using spatial information for Aboriginal heritage values – the program incorporates cultural mapping standards, regionally based assessment and appropriate management of Aboriginal information. It aims to develop inter-agency priorities and key deliverables for Aboriginal heritage information, assessment and mapping.

### Regional level

The Central West CMA is undertaking the following activities in relation to the socio-economic target:

- community consultation on important NRM issues
- educational opportunities such as workshops and training days
- providing support to other groups and individuals for NRM activities
- communication with the wider community on NRM issues
- community monitoring programs (Kids and Rural Environment education program, Streamwatch) at all NRM projects
- programs to increase knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal cultural heritage issues
- projects to protect Aboriginal people’s access to culturally significant sites
- integrating Aboriginal cultural heritage into property management plans.

## Local level

### **Aboriginal NRM – Bogan River, Peak Hill**

The CMA has provided training and resources to the Little Burning Mountain Aboriginal Corporation, as well as advice on funding and partnering. The members of the group are trustees of a property which is culturally significant to the Wiradjuri people. The group is working to rehabilitate the land and the river, strengthening identity (cultural and social), widely sharing knowledge (institutional and inter-generational) and improving biodiversity along the previously degraded stock route.

### **Performance Story – Little River**

The CMA collaborates closely with Little River Landcare which represents local groups across the subregion. Little River is recognised as a state leader in NRM innovation and plays a crucial role in building landholders' capacity in the region. With support and technical help from the CMA, Little River Landcare is taking a sustainable approach to building social capital by enhancing networks in the subregion and beyond.

## Further reading

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Map Stats by Natural Resource Management Region*, [[www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/ABSNavigation/prenav/TopicList?method=Place%20of%20Usual%20Residence&subaction=1&producttype=MapStats&areacode=NRM104&action](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/ABSNavigation/prenav/TopicList?method=Place%20of%20Usual%20Residence&subaction=1&producttype=MapStats&areacode=NRM104&action)].

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: New South Wales*, Cat. no. 4713.1.55.0001.

EBC 2007, *Central West Awareness and Attitudes to Natural Resource Management (NRM) Benchmarking Survey*, report prepared for Central West Catchment Management Authority, Townsville.

Graphs for employment change by Information and Library Services 2008, NSW Department of Primary Industries, Orange.

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DECCW 2010/380 ISBN 978 1 74232 693 1 November 2010

Cover photo: Michael van Ewijk/DECCW – 'canoeists on river'