

# Australian Network for Plant Conservation response to Clear Horizon evaluation of the Healthy Seeds Project

## Clear Horizon Consulting recommendations

### 1. Clear Horizon recommends:

Where it is anticipated that Trust-funded projects may identify issues that have implications for government policies and responsibilities, due consideration should be made to effectively communicate the Trust's position and ensure stakeholders are aware of the remit of the Trust in these contexts. This approach will help manage industry stakeholder expectations regarding what can be requested and achieved by government agencies.

In making this recommendation, it is noted that there are cases where grant outputs may highlight areas for policy or legislative reforms. However, any activities undertaken by stakeholders to campaign for such changes would be outside the scope

## Australian Network for Plant Conservation response

Australian Network for Plant Conservation (ANPC) and Healthy Seed partners identified a number of issues having direct implications on native seed integrity and supply, and made recommendations that require agency review and decisions to be implemented to address ongoing and future operational strategies to deliver effective restoration programs. These included:

- a. the need for regionally devolved restoration planning models that take account of seed supply, infrastructure and human resources.
- b. devolved regional funding models appropriate to the above planning framework.
- c. the review of current licensing systems and processes and devolved seed database and record systems to

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of the Trust funding, which precludes grants being used to change policy or legislation.

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effectively manage seed supplies and distribution at regional NRM level.

- d. the introduction of a program of agency-wide seed literacy and project logistical understanding to assist in systems support and improving project outcomes (This should not be interpreted as funded advocacy. The project activity was confined to 2 lines of approach. Firstly, creating better understanding of the impediments in natural systems operating under increasing climatic variability colliding with inflexible and inappropriate administrative systems. Secondly, diagnosis of the set of interlocking systemic administrative and economic problems that are frustrating progress, and the generation of informed proposals for agencies and other parties to consider in order to overcome them).

**2. Clear Horizon recommends:**

When designing projects that would benefit from the participation of practitioners, consideration should be given to some level of remuneration for their involvement in consortium and reference group activities beyond funded activities. This would assist them to produce project outputs without a subsequent loss of income from their primary business activities.

Australian Network for Plant Conservation supports this recommendation. Practitioners provide a wealth of on-ground knowledge regarding seed availability and success of restoration efforts.

That said, 2 practical caveats should be considered. The first relates to how ‘practitioners’ are to be defined. In this case, professional (commercial, non-government) seed collectors are obviously a major sub-set of the ‘practitioners’ for whom this would be appropriate – as was made clear in the outputs from the ANPC-convened sector workshop in 2016 in Melbourne. But beyond this set, there are at least a couple of other ‘practitioner’ categories (however, defined), outside of government salaried positions, who also face the same problems of time and attendance, and capability limits on doing background research or reading. In relation to this project, these would have included representatives of some relevant restoration/conservation NFP-NGOs, and at least some ecological consultants. In relation

to other Trust projects where this Clear Horizon Recommendation 2 might be applied, there could be further categories still. So where and how to equitably draw a line of circumscription of 'eligibility' for such remuneration, and its quantification, is not entirely straightforward.

The second caveat is more abstract and relates to expectations that might arise (among various parties to a project, including the funder) from building-in such a provision in future projects. Remuneration will not of itself necessarily result in anything approaching full representation of the practitioner sector(s), however, defined, either in terms of points of view or material interests. It will at best be a sample of both, and the Trust as a funding agency should bear this in mind in the context of sector diversity. Conversely, practitioners who have not had their voices heard in a project sample (and even those who have) may or may not follow-through with use of project outputs, sustained engagement, etc. The Native Seed sector is very unorganised, a characteristic which might also apply to other practitioner sectors where the Trust might apply this recommendation (e.g. the nursery industry). We (ANPC) are mindful of the complexity of the Native Seed practitioner sector revealed at the 2016 workshop and in our survey. Some practitioners are wholly in the private sector with a non-government market, others wholly or partly private with a predominantly government market, and others again working both sides of the street as commercial or semi-commercial seed collectors **and** as consumers (planters) of seed collected by themselves or others. It is this complexity of material interests that makes movement towards a unified voice for the sector quite difficult.

Remuneration of non-government participants would improve project inputs (perspectives, priorities, etc.) and outputs (reality-checking). It would also improve the

likelihood of ongoing retention of interest by the remunerated participants, and **might** increase their willingness to use project outputs, but this (and wider diffusion across the sector) are really dependent on other drivers beyond a single project.

3. Clear Horizon recommends:

During project design and the development of the delivery schedule, that practitioners have the opportunity to participate in relevant project activities, including involvement in the consortium and contributing to project outputs.

These should not conflict with their major business activities (such as seed collection periods).

Australian Network for Plant Conservation supports this recommendation and extends the notion for timing of agency workshops, timing of funding rounds and project reporting timelines not coinciding with key on-ground project pinch points (i.e. seed collection, processing, planting/preparation, and direct seed timelines).

Again, some practical caveats are necessary. ‘... involvement in the consortium and contributing to project outputs’ is a good principle but practical limits on consortium size and finalisation schedules for outputs do exist. To the extent possible, close canvassing of views of non-core consortium members should commence during the scoping and preparatory phases of a project (i.e. **before** project-specific funding kicks in), as happened to some degree with the Trust’s help during the lead-up to this project. This will help to ensure that the sample of practitioners that do wind up in the core consortium do represent the range of relevant concerns – or, if they are not available or appropriate for the core consortium but are motivated to contribute, it will enable other mechanisms to be established for their involvement during the life of the project (and afterwards), such as being earmarked for a wider comment/consultative circle mid-project or during output crafting.

Avoiding conflict with seed-collecting periods may or may not always be possible; bear in mind also that most of the professional and semi-professional collectors also work other jobs, so even if peak seed period is avoided, obstacles to involvement may still exist.

**4. Clear Horizon recommends:**

Ensure practitioners are involved in the co-design, and subsequent testing/piloting of any resources that are intended to be used in the field. This will ensure the outputs are practical and relevant and increase the likelihood of adoption.

Australian Network for Plant Conservation supports and encourages the implementation of devolved regional project development, and devolved regional seed supply through paid regional coordinators, as among the best measures to ensure that this object is met. Testing and piloting of outputs may or may not be feasible within the life of a project, or within its **main** period of activity – building a long ‘tail’ into the project to allow for this activity could be done, but the grantee organisation (at least, if not the consortium) will need some level of continued capability to respond to the piloting feedback and adjust outputs accordingly.

For a sector as complex (even within NSW) and under-developed as the Native Seed sector, adoption of even the best outputs is going to require sustained efforts and incentives. As stressed in the Healthy Seeds Roadmap, one of the key drivers would be quality-related stipulations for seed in government planning, procurement and granting. Active communications to and within the sector, facilitated by trusted sources, would be a likely co-requisite.

**5. Clear Horizon recommends:**

When designing projects, consider building in a six-monthly or midterm process evaluation to review a project’s design and implementation to enable project teams to make modifications that could improve the appropriateness of the project’s design and effectiveness of the project delivery.

Process evaluations form part of the NSW Treasury Policy and Guidelines (Evaluation TPG22-22). Evaluation TPG22-22 indicate that process evaluations can be designed ‘to examine the contexts in which the initiative is operating, identify who the initiative is reaching and their experiences, identify issues with

Australian Network for Plant Conservation agrees, and this was done through Healthy Seeds, in part as an adaptive response to COVID restrictions and intermittent agency non-participation.

delivery, review appropriateness (to needs, community and conditions), assess efficiency, and provide information for process improvements. 'Further, the guidelines suggest that process evaluation can be undertaken early to check if an initiative is being implemented as intended, or to support outcome evaluation by helping distinguish implementation issues from design issues'.

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ISBN 978-1-923357-45-7; EH 2025/0021; January 2025.