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Transcribed oral submission to: **Productivity Commission's Circular Economy Inquiry**

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Submission

This submission is being made on behalf of the Bega LALC and does not represent the views of the Aboriginal community as a whole.

Bega LALC's involvement in the circular economy

We are involved in the circular economy in primarily through delivering cultural land management programs and through delivering education and training in circularity.

Aboriginal people have been in the circularity space for thousands of years. Caring for Country and circularity are interconnected, if you are caring for Country you are participating in the circular economy. Cultural land management is very much about circularity, ensuring that things are replaced if they've been removed, to enable circular activity in the environment. For example, cultural fire practitioners ensure circularity in ecosystems during cultural burning, including collecting seeds and returning species to the natural environment.

Education and training in circularity is another piece of work we are involved in. We have established a mobile café, which provides hospitality training and employment opportunities for young Aboriginal people. This is a circular project, as it is interlinked with our horticulture venture – plants from the horticulture venture are used at the café and food waste is brought back to the horticulture venture to be used in the garden. A lot of young Aboriginal people haven't had opportunities to learn about caring for Country. This is one way for them to experience this while they are still at school, setting them up to work in this space in the future if they are interested.

Challenges to participating in the circular economy

We face several challenges to participating in the circular economy and in our work more broadly, particularly regarding the funding models available to us.

Regulatory issues can be a challenge. For example, there are regulatory constraints on cultural burning that place western standards on this practice. Regulations consider cultural burns similarly to a hazard reduction burn, which has significantly more environmental risk. Regulatory assessments also don't consider the environmental benefits that cultural burns can bring, they can improve the soil and the land.

Current funding models, which are primarily grant-based, are also a significant challenge as they limit our ability to run long-term programs. The only source of guaranteed income for a LALC is via the peak body. Most of this money must be put towards operational expenses such as insurance, rent and audits, leaving very little guaranteed funding for projects. At the Bega LALC, we have been able to get grant funding for several of our programs, but this model is not sustainable.

There is a culture in government, where every time there's something they perceive as a problem, they throw money at it. However, the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act is clear that the goal is social, cultural and economic empowerment. Throwing annual grants at people is not economic empowerment. It creates a cycle of grant dependency and perpetuates the view of Aboriginal people as grant recipients. There is a wealth of knowledge and skills within the Aboriginal community that is underutilised.

Yearly grant funding means that our workforce is unnecessarily casualised, because we cannot be certain year-on-year how much money we will have, and funding must be acquitted at the end of the year (it cannot be saved or rolled over). Consequently, land councils often have skills deficits and it's difficult to build capability.

Grant funding is short-term and often cannot be re-applied for, even if a program is successful. Ironically, successful programs can be less likely to be funded again, because they've demonstrated their outcome, so there won't be any new 'annouceables'.

The Bega LALC won a grant from the state government to set up the mobile café. Despite this project being considered successful, the Bega LALC cannot re-apply for grant funding for the same project. One year is not enough time for a project to be able to run on its own, even commercial ventures generally take more than a year to become profitable.

Actions government should take

While there has been increased government appetite for LALCs to participate in the circular economy, support varies between departments and is very ad-hoc. Government needs to consider how its actions can facilitate long-term success and make sure that everyone can participate.

Government should be looking for ways to reward successful projects. If a trial is evaluated and found to have merit, government should invest further. Investment does not have to mean lot of additional funding, it could be to provide wrap-around support and connect the project to potential partners it can work with long-term. We're not talking about millions and millions of dollars. We're talking about investment in the building blocks of an organisation's capability so it can be resilient and sustainable. In an Aboriginal organisation, building that bridge has an impact on whole families. This is not limited to Aboriginal organisations, a lot of organisations in the circularity space are small and would also benefit from investment in capability.

Instead of always having to rely on grant funding we would prefer a model where government procures our services. One piece of work the Bega LALC is doing to support this goal is working with a consultant to develop a cultural land management program and pricing matrix. This will then be presented to the federal government, to show a methodology for pricing and procuring parts of a land management program. This will then be shared with other LALCs, so they could also deliver these services.

Importance of the right partnerships

Finding the right partners can be critical to success, but they can be difficult to find, especially in regional and remote areas. We would be interested in government helping connect us with partners, such as universities or other like-minded organisations. There could be a role for an organisation like a university that's interested in building circular economy partnerships.

There's a lack of recognition that in rural and regional areas there aren't many big players to partner with. It's common in rural and regional areas that you have amazing ideas and minds, but we are never considered because we can't connect in with the right people. The tyranny of distance means that organisations in other areas may be doing activities that are closely aligned with our work but there's no way of knowing. There's low hanging fruit in this space and it won't require much monetary investment. It's about recognising the value of Aboriginal people and connecting them with what they need to succeed.