



Assessment of
the Northern Rivers upgraded
Catchment Action Plan

March 2013

Enquiries

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List of acronyms

CAP	Catchment Action Plan
CMA	Catchment Management Authority
NRC	Natural Resources Commission
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NSW	New South Wales

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Executive summary

The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) has reviewed the upgraded Northern Rivers Catchment Action Plan (CAP), and assessed its potential to improve the long-term health and productivity of local landscapes and communities.

Northern Rivers is a diverse region facing many challenges to landscape health, productivity, biodiversity and community well-being. These include changing demographics, competing land uses and concerns over farm viability.

Key findings

The upgraded Northern Rivers CAP is a quality strategic plan for coordinated action to address the region's key issues, and is founded on meaningful consultation with farmers, local businesses, landholders, government and interested community groups.

As a plan to **guide investment and on-ground activity**, the CAP:

- presents a **clear vision for the region**, with a new focus on 'landscape, livelihood and lifestyle and culture' values
- includes strategies that clearly **address the 'big issues'** for the region, such as farm succession and aggregation, land use diversification and invasive species
- identifies four sub-regional landscapes that provide a meaningful and **locally relevant** framework for community-based delivery
- reflects **shared ownership** of the CAP built through extensive engagement with government and community stakeholders
- justifies the logical selection of strategies, targets and actions by reference to **best available information** and community input.

To improve the upgraded CAP, the Catchment Management Authority (CMA) should:

- **prioritise actions** to better guide delivery partners as to **which** on-ground actions they should take and **where** they should take them
- continue to develop the **links between social, economic and environmental aspects** of landscapes to ensure the selected strategies and actions will contribute to multiple outcomes
- **develop reference points** against which to measure CAP targets, to further improve **accountability** for delivering outcomes.

The CMA intentionally chose to defer prioritisation until the implementation stage, to ensure that delivery partners remain engaged in supporting CAP delivery. The CAP includes a well-defined implementation process designed to coordinate prioritisation of actions and further development of performance indicators in the future. The planned continuation of the reference groups developed for the CAP upgrade provides confidence that implementation will be achieved, although roles and responsibilities are yet to be defined.

Recommendation

The NRC recommends that the Minister approve the upgraded Northern Rivers CAP with the following conditions:

- **prioritise actions** within the CAP through continued development of the links between social, economic and environmental aspects of the region's landscapes
- **review and adapt** the CAP, if required, to fit with Local Land Services boundaries, pending the final decision of the Minister.

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1 Introduction

The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) has reviewed the upgraded Northern Rivers Catchment Action Plan (CAP), and assessed its potential to improve the long-term health and productivity of local landscapes and communities.

The Northern Rivers region consists of 50,000 square kilometres located in the north-east corner of NSW. It extends from the Queensland border in the north, south to the Camden Haven catchment and inland to the eastern slopes of the New England Tablelands. The region has a population of 500,000 and supports a number of industries including agriculture, fishing, timber, mining and tourism, which are heavily dependent on natural resources.

1.1 Background

CAPs are strategic regional plans for improving the health, productivity and resilience of landscapes and communities. CAPs identify what the community, industry, and government value about these landscapes, and explain what needs to be done to ensure long-term, sustainable management of a region's natural resources. Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) have primary responsibility for effectively implementing the CAPs in collaboration with their partners.

Under the *Natural Resources Commission Act 2003* (NSW), the NRC is required to assess CAPs and recommends them to the Minister for approval.

1.2 Focus of assessment

The focus of the NRC's assessment is to determine whether a CAP is a quality strategic plan that promotes the state-wide targets for natural resource management (NRM) and complies with the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*¹ (the Standard).

The *Framework for assessing and recommending catchment action plans*² details the assessment criteria, attributes and process used. The NRC examined three key criteria in its assessment:

- 1 Was the plan developed using a structured, collaborative and adaptable planning process?
- 2 Does the plan use best available information to develop targets and actions for building resilient landscapes?
- 3 Is the CAP a plan for collaborative action and investment between government, community and industry partners?

The NRC collected evidence through extensive analysis of available documentation, technical reviews, stakeholder surveys, interviews and assessment of the CMA's engagement with government, industry and community partners (see Attachment 2 for details).

¹ The NSW Government adopted the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*, which identifies seven components that are used to reach high-quality natural resource decisions. CMAs must comply with the Standard¹, using it as a quality assurance standard for all planning and implementation decisions.

² NRC, *Framework for assessing and recommending upgraded catchment action plans v2*, June 2012

2 Summary of assessment findings

2.1 Planning

The CAP upgrade was supported by comprehensive planning and improved the strategic capabilities of the CMA and its delivery partners. The resulting CAP conveys a clear change in strategy, with a new focus on cooperative actions to manage landscapes and seascapes, sustain livelihoods and enrich lifestyles. Stakeholder feedback indicates strong support for this new approach. The CAP planning process has built on the strong partnerships Northern Rivers CMA has with stakeholders to develop a whole-of-government and whole-of-community regional plan.

Strategic planning and capacity

The strong planning and project execution for the CAP upgrade demonstrate the mature strategic planning capabilities of the CMA and its Board. The upgrade was supported by sound governance practices and a genuine focus on whole-of-government and whole-of-community consultation. The Board provided excellent leadership throughout the upgrade process through high-level endorsement, strategic guidance and direct engagement with stakeholders. As a result of strong planning and engagement, the majority of stakeholders surveyed agreed that the upgrade has improved the strategic capabilities of their organisation as well as the CMA, and indicated their support for the new strategic direction.

The CMA also demonstrated strategic leadership throughout the upgrade in its consideration of how to achieve adaptable and localised delivery of actions. This is reflected in strong cross-border engagement from the start of the upgrade process, and in the CMA's strategy to develop landscape-level implementation plans.

Collaborative CAP upgrade

The CMA provided extensive opportunities for stakeholders to provide input into the CAP development. As a result, the CMA has continued to strengthen relationships that will support collaborative on-ground implementation of actions. The CMA used a government and community-wide reference group (CAP2 Reference Group) as well as technical reference groups to inform the upgrade and ensure collaborative development of the CAP. A technical reviewer noted a CAP strength is its clear identification of key stakeholders in a way that enables affiliation by readers without being overly specific.

The CMA implemented a comprehensive communications strategy to ensure ongoing opportunities for the wider community to meaningfully engage. The CMA kept stakeholders informed by releasing update letters to over 1,400 registered stakeholders, and publishing website updates and media releases. Community members had an opportunity to provide feedback on what they value through three public discussion papers, various community meetings, and workshops. For example, over 500 people participated in local community meetings where the CAP upgrade process was presented, and 25 local sessions were held to discuss *Technical Paper #3: An analysis of socio-ecological landscapes of the Northern Rivers Region*.

The CMA made considerable efforts to ensure the community was aware of opportunities to participate in the CAP upgrade and to provide feedback. The CMA's media plan included television; radio and newspaper advertisements; and a Facebook and twitter page. In addition, the communications strategy leveraged the local relationships of Area Coordinators who were assigned to ensure ongoing consultation with their local communities. The majority of stakeholders indicate that they are supportive of the engagement processes used and that their

values are appropriately captured in the CAP. One stakeholder noted 'Northern Rivers CMA ran an inclusive, well-structured and thought out process to capture government and community input.' Stakeholder feedback indicates that shared delivery could be further strengthened in the future by increasing community and industry representation on the core reference groups.

Adaptability

The upgraded CAP is consistent with the plans and strategies of neighbouring catchments, positioning the CMA strongly to be able to adapt to potential boundary or governance changes. For example, in the coastal region, the CMA participated in a coastal CMAs group to ensure strategic alignment. Integrated planning and delivery agreements with the Border-Rivers-Gwydir CMA with respect to the tablelands are particularly strong, and will allow both CMAs to improve efficiency and address community feedback.

The upgraded CAP is likely to continue to guide NRM through future change due to its strong focus on adaptability. One of the three goals for the upgraded CAP is 'an adaptive region with a high capacity to cope with change, shocks, and uncertainty'. This goal is accompanied by strategies and actions related to adaptive governance, planning and integration of new knowledge. The CAP outlines a robust planning process to ensure decision-making is evidence-based, flexible and responsive to change.

Clarity of goals and vision

The goals and vision of the upgraded CAP are well-defined, clearly articulating the CAP objectives for stakeholders. The CAP comprehensively identifies the 'big issues' for the region, which incorporate social, economic, and environmental aspects. This is reflected in the discussion of issues such as changing demographics and farm viability. While the upgraded CAP clearly outlines the key issues for the region, it could communicate key strategies more clearly. For instance, a simplified layout and improved use of graphics would better convey key points. A streamlined hierarchy for strategies and actions would also allow the CAP to more easily guide stakeholders.

2.2 Targets

The upgraded Northern Rivers CAP presents actions and targets solidly founded on scientific evidence and community values. Goals and strategies flow logically from the analysis, but the CAP would be improved by greater demonstration of how strategies will achieve social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Best-available information

The upgraded CAP is solidly based on best-available information including community values. The CMA achieved this by incorporating scientific literature, datasets on local conditions, expert input, and local knowledge to develop strategies and targets. The CAP identifies knowledge gaps and priority actions for addressing them, which will enhance evidence-based decision-making in the future. An independent technical reviewer noted the strong use of best-available science, indicating that the CAP draws well on both scientific theory and locally relevant datasets to describe how systems function.

Analysis of social, economic and environmental information

The upgraded CAP focusses on the resilience of the region through assessment of landscape (biophysical), livelihood (economic), and lifestyle and cultural (social) values. The CMA used an extensive review of data related to biophysical, social and economic aspects of the region to identify sub-regional landscapes and to allow for development of locally relevant strategies and actions. The CAP identifies 10 districts set within four socio-ecological landscapes. These landscapes are logical and supported by stakeholders. The CMA mapped the current state of natural resource health and community capacity using spatial data that was accurate at the sub-catchment level.

The CMA carried out strategy development for the CAP in two main steps. It modelled natural resource health and community capacity to identify key drivers of change and controlling variables for each 'theme' (for example, biodiversity, rivers and community capacity). It then developed strategies and actions to address broader regional drivers through multi-stakeholder workshops, with a focus on landscape, livelihood and lifestyle values. Through this process the regional drivers of change which have the most influence for each landscape were identified. Where landscapes are common with neighbouring CMAs, the Northern Rivers CMA consulted those CMAs to ensure that they adopted consistent strategies.

Strategies selected in the CAP logically flow from the assessment of key threats and drivers and the capacity modelling, and are likely to improve natural resource function. The discussion in the CAP and several of the strategies show a good understanding of the importance of connections between social, economic and environmental components. However, the CAP would be improved by further exploration of the linkages between themes and across landscapes to demonstrate that the CMA has selected the most effective strategies for achieving social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Prioritisation of strategies and actions

The CAP requires further prioritisation of actions in order to meaningfully guide government, community and industry partners. The CMA purposely deferred further prioritisation to the implementation stage. The upgraded CAP includes a complex hierarchical structure that includes three goals, five strategies, 21 strategic directions, and 85 priority actions. The number and breadth of actions reflects the diversity of stakeholders for the region, but reduces the ability of the upgraded CAP to provide clear direction for operational planning.

The decision to defer prioritisation was made due to the time frame available to negotiate CAP actions and to maintain engagement with delivery partners. It also provides for adaptability in response to uncertain funding arrangements. However, a strategic plan should strike a balance between being adaptable and specifying key actions. The CAP addresses the lack of prioritisation by including a well-defined implementation process. The CAP includes targets to develop an integrated governance framework at the regional and local landscape level, to drive the prioritisation and implementation.

The NRC recommends approval of the Northern Rivers CAP with the following **condition**:

- to prioritise actions within the CAP through continued development of the links between social, economic and environmental aspects of the region's landscapes.

Accountability

The upgraded CAP demonstrates a good level of accountability to potential investors through the establishment of targets and indicators, but could be further strengthened. It includes a table that clearly identifies alignment between the CAP targets and the *NSW 2021* goals³ and relevant national priorities. This should facilitate consistency with state-wide reporting. The targets are quite broad, but they specify timeframes and are supported by 'sub-targets' and 'key indicators of success', most of which are more measurable than the targets. Additionally, the key indicators are generally well developed and logically nested with goals.

The CAP defers further identification of key indicators until the implementation stage. Many of the targets and sub-targets use language such as 'improve', 'increase' and 'maintain', but there is no indication of the current baseline against which these will be measured, reducing the auditability. Targets are logically nested with actions, although the upgraded CAP does not specify the methodology for selecting the chosen targets. This may reduce stakeholders' confidence that the chosen actions will help achieve the targets.

The NRC recommends approval of the Northern Rivers CAP with the following **suggested action**:

- to develop reference points against which to measure CAP targets to further improve accountability for delivering outcomes.

2.3 Action and investment

The upgraded CAP provides a good foundation for directing investment in shared actions with government, community and industry partners. Due to the lack of prioritisation, the CAP document does not provide clear guidance on its own. Rather, it relies heavily on a planned implementation process to identify actions that will deliver the best possible social, economic and environmental outcomes. Selection of actions will vary with, and be guided by, investor preferences. While prioritisation is necessary to allow the CAP to more meaningfully guide partners, the CAP provides a clear road map for how to carry out collaborative prioritisation. Further, the upgrade process created strong governance structures on which to base the implementation process, providing confidence that implementation will be carried out successfully.

Alignment with partner plans and strategies

A major strength of Northern Rivers CAP upgrade is its focus on alignment with partner organisation plans, policies and strategies. This leaves the CMA well positioned to deliver on collaborative implementation plans. The CMA consulted heavily with government agencies from the start of the upgrade process through a variety of agency groups at state, regional and local levels. The CAP2 Reference group ensured good communication and alignment with government, industry and community organisations throughout the process. The Department of Primary Industries, Department of Planning and Infrastructure, Office of Environment and Heritage, and Aboriginal Affairs NSW have endorsed the upgraded CAP, agreeing that it is not inconsistent with their policies and plans. The upgraded CAP demonstrates how strategies and actions will help achieve the *NSW 2021* goals.

The upgraded CAP also exhibits excellent alignment with those of bordering regions, resulting in consistent approaches between neighbouring CMAs. This will facilitate landscape-level

³ www.2021.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/NSW2021_Plan%20Goals_0.pdf
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implementation for the tablelands, in particular where the landscape crosses over into the Border Rivers-Gwydir region.

Roles and responsibilities

Through its focus on engagement and alignment, the CMA has built a strong foundation for further negotiations and participation by all partners in delivering the CAP action items. The intent is to transform the current CAP2 Reference Group into a CAP2 Implementation Group, which will work with the CMA on setting priorities, sharing knowledge and aligning activities. The CMA has indicated that its partners strongly support continuing the group. The CAP identifies key delivery partners at the priority action level, demonstrating an assessment of where partner priorities align. The CAP indicates that more specific roles and responsibilities for each action will be developed through annual investment and business planning processes, with the support of the CAP2 Implementation Group. This approach allows the CMA to adapt to changing funding and resource availability from partner agencies.

Implementation

The CAP stops short of identifying which actions are likely to deliver the best return on investment, deferring prioritisation until the implementation stage. This was intentional and aimed at keeping stakeholders engaged, but reduces the CAP's capacity to meaningfully guide partners. Some stakeholders expressed concerns that the efforts put into collaborative CAP development are at risk of being lost if implementation isn't carried out as planned.

The upgraded CAP's strategy to prioritise actions and assign responsibilities, through a well-defined implementation plan, provides reasonable confidence that actions will be prioritised in the future. The upgraded CAP outlines a comprehensive prioritisation process based on a sound set of investment principles. The process should provide meaningful guidance to delivery partners on where they need to take collaborative actions to maximise investment. It includes assessment of delivery partner priorities and investor preferences, and identification of actions that provide multiple benefits. The CMA has developed extensive spatial data regarding natural resource health, which will aid the prioritisation process by focussing on where action needs to be taken. Stakeholder feedback indicates that the majority feel the CAP is a good tool for guiding collaborative action, as long as implementation is carried out as planned.

3 Recommendation

3.1 Approval

In accordance with section 13 (b) of the *Natural Resources Commission Act 2003* (NSW), the NRC recommends that the Minister approve the upgraded Northern Rivers Catchment Action Plan with conditions.

3.2 Conditions of approval

The NRC recommends approval of the Northern Rivers upgraded CAP with the following conditions to:

- prioritise actions within the CAP through continued development of the links between social, economic and environmental aspects of the region's landscapes
- review and adapt the CAP, if required, to fit with Local Land Services boundaries, pending the final decision of the Minister.

The CMA should report to the NRC on how it has met these conditions of approval in its Strategic Progress Letters. Commencing September 2013, the CMA should provide the NRC with a Strategic Progress Letter annually, or as conditions are met.

3.3 Additional suggested actions for the CMA

The following suggested actions should be considered by the CMA to strengthen the effective delivery of CAP:

- develop reference points against which to measure CAP targets to further improve accountability for delivering outcomes.

3.4 Readiness for transition to Local Land Services

The Northern Rivers CAP upgrade has put the CMA in a good position to transition to the new Local Land Services structure due to:

- the strong strategic-capacity and leadership demonstrated by the CMA Board and staff members
- extensive engagement and planning with cross-boundary CMAs during the CAP upgrade, including coordination with the Border-Rivers Gwydir CMA for the tablelands landscape, and with coastal CMAs
- the scientific industry, and community knowledge supporting the CAP is a valuable resource for new regional organisations.

Actions that would assist in the transition to Local Land Services include:

- analysing links between the social, economic and environmental aspects of the four landscapes
- based on this analysis, deriving landscape-level goals, targets and actions that would better withstand an institutional restructure and could be adopted in a new strategic plan.

Attachment 1 - Detailed assessment findings

Criterion 1 - Plan was developed using a structured, collaborative and adaptable planning process

Attribute 1A: Strategic planning process was logical, comprehensive and transparent

The CMA implemented a rigorous planning process, which allowed for wide stakeholder engagement. The CMA prepared a comprehensive project plan including identification of potential risks that could hinder completion of the project and a strong governance structure. There is substantial evidence that the Board was significantly involved throughout the upgrade process by providing high level endorsement and strategic guidance and engaging with stakeholders. Board members and senior staff members consistently explained how the CAP2 Reference Group facilitated true whole-of-government and community CAP development. Lessons learned from the CAP2 Reference Group and its members' commitment to convert this group into an implementation group puts the CMA in a very good position to facilitate whole of government CAP delivery. The upgraded CAP clearly identifies key issues for the region. Evidence indicates that identification of key issues was supported by a review of the first CAP and stakeholder input.

Strengths:

- The Board provided strategic guidance and leadership throughout the CAP process, as demonstrated by in depth discussion of the upgrade at Board meetings, considerable on-the-ground engagement with stakeholders, and Board members' participation in workshops.
- The CAP upgrade was carried out using a comprehensive project plan and strong governance structure for collaborative planning.
- The CAP reflects a clear shift in strategic direction with a new focus on developing a whole-of-government and whole-of-community plan to guide improvements in social, economic and natural resource conditions.

Attribute 1B: Planning process meaningfully engaged the community, Governments and other stakeholders

The CMA implemented an extensive community engagement process from the start of the CAP upgrade process. The engagement provided opportunities for stakeholders to participate at various stages throughout the upgrade process. This was facilitated by the CMA publicly releasing discussion papers and technical papers at key stages that explained the upgrade approach and progress with opportunity for feedback. In addition, the CMA had a clear strategy for targeting groups previously poorly represented. The CAP2 Reference Group demonstrates an innovative approach to ensuring meaningful engagement with key delivery partners throughout the CAP upgrade. It also provides an excellent foundation for collaborative delivery of the CAP. Stakeholder feedback was largely positive regarding the engagement process, and intent to promote the CAP. The CMA might consider expanding community representation in the CAP2 Implementation Group going forward. In addition, some delivery partners have expressed concern over whether the draft CAP fully incorporated their input. As a result of strong stakeholder assessment, the CAP provides an appropriate level of specificity regarding who the key stakeholders are, increasing the probability that it will resonate with stakeholders.

Strengths:

- The CAP upgrade involved an extensive stakeholder engagement process, which provided opportunity for feedback at multiple key stages and engaged groups that were previously poorly engaged.
- The CMA made innovative use of the CAP2 Reference Group and technical reference groups to meaningfully engage key delivery partners throughout the upgrade process.
- Evidence from stakeholders indicates that despite remaining conflicts with some stakeholders, they intend to promote the CAP within their organisation.
- The CAP clearly identifies key stakeholders with an appropriate level of specificity.

Attribute 1C: An adaptive planning process is in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan and to guide improvements as knowledge improves and/or circumstances change

The upgraded CAP is designed so that it can remain relevant by applying adaptive management principles, but defers the details until the implementation stage. The CMA applied adaptive management by comprehensively reviewing the previous CAP and incorporating lessons learned. The upgraded CAP includes an adaptive management framework, which will be the basis for a more detailed 'Adaptation Strategy'. The CAP does not identify specific 'triggers' for adaptation; instead avenues for detecting change such as regular policy scans, monitoring and assessment and community input, are identified. The framework also describes how new knowledge will be incorporated at project, program and policy levels, and the process for determining how to adjust actions in response to identified change. However, details of the adaptation strategy such as establishment of mechanisms to capture changes are deferred to the implementation stage.

Strengths:

- The upgraded CAP includes a comprehensive adaptive management framework on which to build a more detailed 'Adaptation Strategy' going forward.
- The CAP includes a clear description of how adaptive management must occur at multiple levels, increasing confidence that the CAP will remain relevant.

Criterion 2 - Plan uses best available information to develop targets and actions for building resilient landscapes

Attribute 2A: Plan describes the social-ecological systems operating in the catchment using best available science and knowledge of community values

The CMA utilised a wide range of evidence sources to inform the CAP upgrade, including literature reviews, expert, community and industry knowledge, and data sets from a range of partner agencies. The CMA developed extensive spatial data maps down to the sub-catchment level for a range of natural resource 'health' attributes and community capacity. Further, the CMA clearly identified knowledge gaps and outlined methods for filling those gaps. The identification of the landscapes (socio-ecological systems) is logical and well-supported. The upgraded CAP includes a clear discussion of each of the landscapes and the key issues to be addressed for each. While the CAP made good use of spatial data to describe natural resource health and capacity, it would be further improved by integrating analysis of spatial data to identify areas where actions could maximise benefits.

Strengths:

- The CMA made effective use of a comprehensive range of data sources to inform CAP development and support future evidence-based decision-making.
- The CMA used extensive spatial analysis to assess natural resource health and community capacity at the sub-catchment level.
- The CAP clearly identifies knowledge gaps and priority actions for improving knowledge in the future.
- There was a well-supported and logical identification of socio-ecological landscapes, which reflect social and scientific considerations.

Weaknesses/gaps

- While the CMA has developed extensive spatial data for isolated health and capacity aspects, the CAP would have benefitted from integrated analysis of spatial layers to identify areas where actions would maximise benefits.

Attribute 2B: Plan integrates biophysical and socio-economic information to analyse the systems operating in the catchment and develop strategies for improving landscape function and resilience

The upgraded CAP demonstrates an understanding of the importance of links between biophysical and socio-economic aspects. The CAP incorporates these through focus on three values, 'livelihood (economic), landscape (biophysical), and lifestyle and culture (social)'. In addition, the CMA has identified the level of influences of key drivers of change for each landscape. However, the analysis that formed the basis for these strategies was based on state and transition models prepared for biophysical and community system components in isolation, followed by a regional level assessment of key drivers and threats. The resulting strategies flowed logically from the state and transition modelling and stakeholder and landscape workshop processes, and several show good integration of social, economic and environmental consideration. However, the CAP does not demonstrate a systematic assessment of the links between social, economic and environmental components, or between landscapes, and there remains a risk that key links between these components have not been fully identified.

The CAP would be improved by further prioritising actions and developing a simplified structure for priority actions. The strategy development process led to an overly complex hierarchical structure that includes goals, strategies, strategic directions, and priority actions. The upgraded CAP also outlines the implementation stage and process through which actions will be further prioritised for each region. CMA staff acknowledged that further prioritisation was deferred to the implementation stage due to concerns about alienating partners.

Attribute 2C: Plan proposes targets and actions that are logically nested and supported by the available evidence

The targets and actions identified are logically nested, although generally too broad to meaningfully guide delivery partners. It is intended that more focussed actions will be developed in the implementation process. The upgraded CAP identifies general targets which are not easily measurable. However, each target has 'key indicators of success' and some have sub-targets both of which provide a greater level of accountability. Key indicators are nested under each of the goals, and reach across strategies. Several sub-targets focus on 'priority sub-catchments' and the CMA has a comprehensive data set with which to identify these. The upgraded CAP outlines an implementation process that will be used to adapt to investor preferences and further prioritise actions with community and industry

Strengths:

- The CMA conducted comprehensive state and transition modelling of system components (such as soil, water, and biodiversity) resulting in strategies that logically flow from analysis and are likely to improve biophysical aspects.
- The CAP assesses social, economic and biophysical influences and outcomes through its focus on 'livelihood, landscape and lifestyle and cultural values'.

Weaknesses/gaps:

- It is not clear how systematic analysis of links between social, economic and environmental components led to selection of strategies and targets, increasing the risk that important linkages between components of the system have not been fully identified.
- The low level of prioritisation of CAP strategies and priority actions reduces the CAP's capacity to guide its users.

Strengths:

- Sub-targets and key indicators of success create a good level of accountability, and are logically nested with goals.
- Some sub-targets focus on specific catchments, which will provide greater guidance to partners on where to take collaborative action.
- The clearly defined implementation process that includes further prioritisation of where to take action to meet targets.

participation. The CAP would be strengthened by a clearer explanation of the logic used to link targets to the selection of strategies and interventions. Without this it is difficult to assess whether the actions and targets will lead to the specified outcomes.

Weaknesses/gaps:

- The number and breadth of the actions identified reduces the ability of the upgraded CAP to provide clear guidance for operational planning purposes.
- The methodology for determining appropriate targets and links between targets and actions is not clearly articulated in the upgraded CAP, which may reduce users' understanding of or commitment to the targets and actions.

Criterion 3 - CAP is a plan for collaborative action and investment between Government, community and industry partners

Attribute 3A: Plan aligns with relevant policies and community aspirations

The CMA identified alignment with and support from major delivery partners as a key focus for the CAP upgrade process. This was accomplished through the development of the CAP2 Reference Group and technical reference groups, extensive engagement with neighbouring CMAs, and regional and state-level agencies. The final CAP reflects this alignment, although it has clearly contributed to the high number of unprioritised actions, which the CMA felt was necessary to keep all of the partners 'on board' for implementation. The CMA followed a logical and comprehensive process for identifying and prioritising strategic plans and policies of partner organisations for consideration in the CAP upgrade. The CMA acknowledged in interviews that there are areas where government policies and community aspirations conflict. They indicated that the CAP2 and Technical Reference Groups were used as a vehicle to develop actions that attempt to address these conflicts. The final CAP identifies management of these conflicts as a 'core priority action' for the first stages of CAP delivery.

Strengths:

- The innovative approach of the CAP2 Reference Group to ensure alignment with partner plans and policies and secure support of delivery partners for the CAP.
- The CMA prioritised partner plans and policies based on delivery partner input as to what was most relevant to the CAP, allowing the CMA to focus alignment on key partner plans.
- Strong consultation with cross-border CMAs resulted in consistent approaches between CMAs for landscapes that cross borders.

Attribute 3B. Plan can meaningfully guide Governments, industry and the community to align effort across the region

The CAP provides a good overview of the actions that should be carried out, and a strong road map for further refining those actions, but does not serve as a clear guide for stakeholder actions on its own. The CAP includes a clearly defined implementation process, which will include a whole-of-government and whole-of-community group to ensure continued alignment and identify linkages between agency actions. The CMA has indicated that the current member organisations of the CAP2 Reference Group have all agreed to participate in the CAP2 Implementation Group and are eager to begin next steps.

The implementation process described in the CAP will use spatial data to prioritise where to take action, and a set of investment principles to focus funding on actions with maximum benefit. The CAP identifies partner organisations that have agreed to participate in each of the priority actions, which will serve as a starting point for collaboration during the implementation process. The CAP includes specific priority actions to direct the development of the necessary governance processes and systems needed to support collaboration. This provides confidence that these steps will be carried out as planned.

Strengths:

- The CAP includes investment principles to guide prioritisation of actions during the development of the implementation plan.
- The CAP outlines a comprehensive implementation plan that will include a whole-of-government and whole-of-community reference group. This will help further guide delivery partners as to where and when they can support CAP actions, and will help them identify complementary actions.

Weaknesses/gaps:

- The range and number of priority actions in the CAP is too broad for partners to clearly identify where to focus investment or efforts.
- The CMA has not yet identified links between priority actions; so, it is not yet clear which actions will maximise outcomes.

Attribute 3C: Plan specifies agreed roles and responsibilities for partners in the catchment

The CAP defines the key roles for the CMA, and the CAP2 Implementation Group in delivering of the CAP. The CMA was not able to negotiate roles and responsibilities for priority actions to be included within the CAP, but obtained agreement to list 'key delivery partners' for each action. The CAP outlines a process for developing roles and responsibilities for each action. This will be done through annual investment and business planning processes, with the support of the CAP2 Implementation Group. This approach allows the CMA to adapt to changing funding and resources available from partner agencies. The CMA has indicated that key partners have already agreed to be a part of the implementation group. Results of stakeholder surveys indicate that stakeholders understand that roles and responsibilities will be clarified during implementation stage.

Strengths:

- The CAP clearly explains how roles and responsibilities will be developed during the implementation stage.
- Stakeholder support for the implementation plan, and for the continuation of the CAP2 Reference Group, provides confidence that the plan will be carried out.

Attachment 2 - About the assessment

Assessment objective

The objective of the NRC’s assessment is to determine whether a CAP is a quality strategic plan that promotes the state-wide targets for NRM and complies with the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*⁴ (the Standard).

Assessment criteria

Following extensive consultation, the NRC developed the *Framework for assessing and recommending catchment action plans*⁵ which was endorsed by the NSW Government Senior Officer Group for NRM. To define the criteria and expectations, the NRC examined the external context (institutional, spatial and temporal). It identified elements expected of a high quality strategic NRM planning process and final plan, within the context of the Standard. The NRC trialled and refined the criteria through a pilot process involving CMAs and agencies.

The NRC then determined what represents an acceptable level of performance against the criteria at a specific point in time, considering factors and risks specific to the CAP and the region it covers as well as the maturity and development of the regional model as a whole, including the comparative performance of other CMAs.

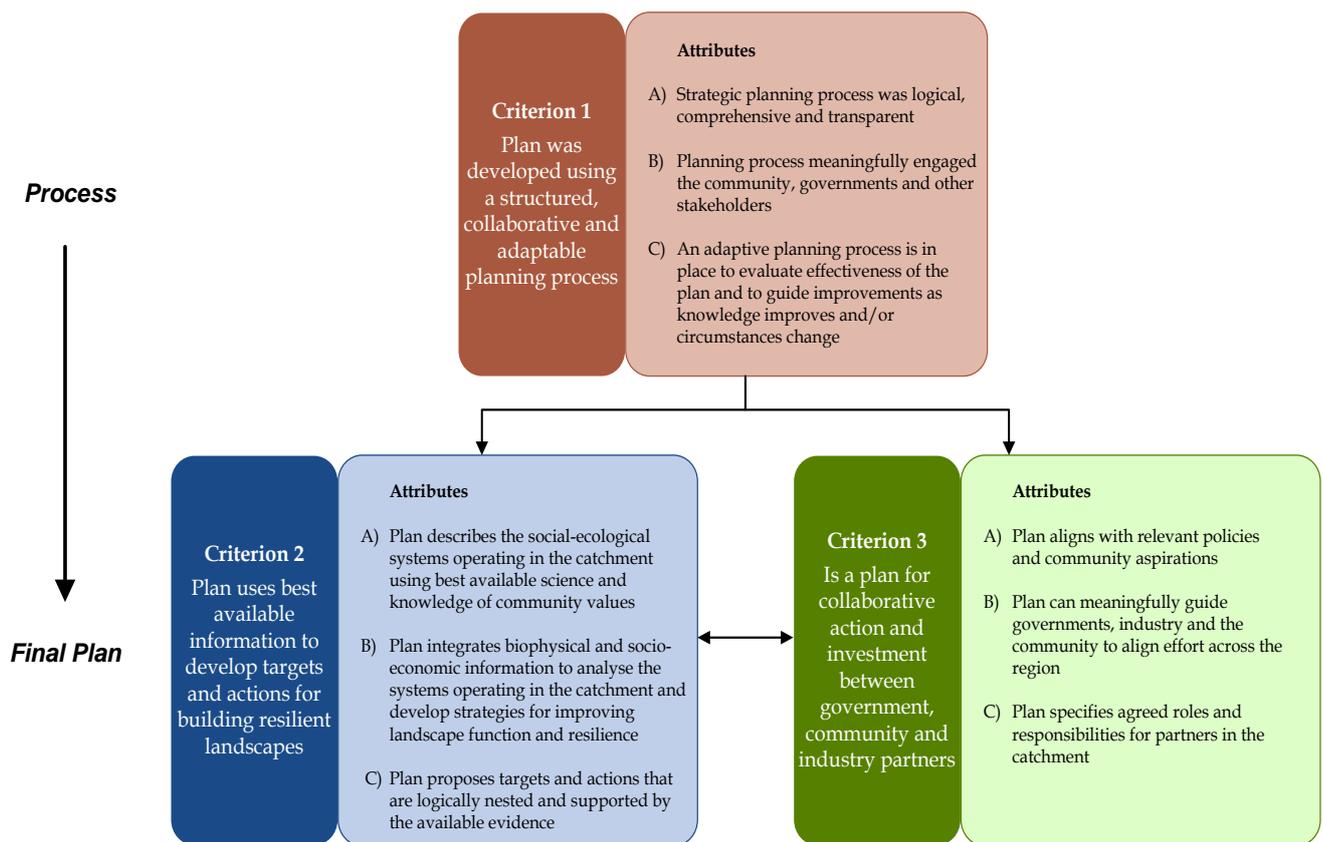


Figure 2.1: Criteria to assess whether the CAP is a quality, strategic natural resource management plan

⁴ The NSW Government adopted the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*, which identifies seven components that are used to reach high-quality natural resource decisions. CMAs must comply with the Standard, using it as a quality assurance standard for all planning and implementation decisions.

⁵ NRC, *Framework for assessing and recommending upgraded catchment action plans v2*, June 2012

Assessment methodology

The NRC assessment team followed the methodologies set out in the *Framework for assessing and recommending catchment action plans v2, June 2012*.

The CAPs were assessed in progressive phases, including preliminary assessment of evidence prior to formal submission and a full review when the CAP was formally submitted. The NRC sent the assessment reports to CMAs for consultation before they were finalised.

Assessment approach

The NRC's assessment of the CAP involved collecting evidence and consulting with government agencies, CMAs and other stakeholders. The methods and activities used to collect and analyse evidence against the criteria for the Northern Rivers CAP included:

- pre-assessment engagement with the CMAs to identify characteristics of the region that influence CAP development, such as major issues and institutional structures
- desktop analysis of the plan, planning approach, community consultation and scientific knowledge used in developing the plan
- interviews with two CMA Board members, three senior managers and one staff
- eight surveys and three interviews with stakeholders, including representatives of industry, local government, landholders and non-government groups
- government agency consultation
- four external of the analysis underpinning the targets, conducted by consultants with expertise in ecology and environmental science, social science and environmental economics.

Acknowledgements

The audit team gratefully acknowledges the cooperation and assistance provided by the Northern Rivers CMA, and agencies and stakeholders in the region. In particular, we wish to thank the Northern Rivers CMA Board, General Manager and staff.

Attachment 3 - About the region

The Northern Rivers CMA region is located in the north-east corner of NSW and covers 50,000 square kilometres. It extends from the Queensland border in the north, south to the Camden Haven catchment, inland to the eastern slopes of the New England Tablelands, and seawards three nautical miles. The region has a number of significant sites including two World Heritage Areas, the Lord Howe Island group and the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves of Australia four Ramsar wetlands and 25 nationally important wetlands. Northern Rivers has more than 500,000 residents in 18 local government areas, and a population growth rate of more than 2 per cent per year.

The region has a diversity of landscapes, natural resource values and land use types, with agriculture, timber and urban settlement dominating the landscape. Commodity production is centred on agriculture, fishing, timber and tourism, - although the retail trade, health and community services sectors employ more people. The marine environment of the region covers more than 300,000 hectares and supports a biologically diverse range of marine species and habitats including reefs, inter-tidal rocky shores and beaches that provide important habitats for threatened and protected species. It provides natural resources that support recreation and industries such as tourism and commercial fishing.⁶



⁶ Source: Northern Rivers CMA website, <http://www.northern.cma.nsw.gov.au/about/our-region>, viewed 13 February 2013.

