



Council Name: Hunter & Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy (HCCREMS)

Web Address: www.hccrems.com.au

Size: 39,021 square kilometres

Population: 1 million (14 councils combined)



Abstract:

This project improves the capacity of coastal councils in the Hunter, Central and Lower North Coast region to proactively identify and implement adaptation solutions to the risks posed by both existing coastal processes and those projected to worsen due to climate change. Significantly, it promotes a consistent and transparent approach to adaptation decision making through the development and application of a comprehensive and integrated Decision Support Framework and Guide. Specific components of this resource include a clear and structured decision making process; a process for evaluating the direct and indirect costs and benefits of adaptation options; a process for identifying and applying decision-making triggers to monitor progress toward identified threshold points, and to inform the timing of implementation of adaptation responses.

Background:

Individual climate change risk assessment and adaptation plans were completed by each of the seven participating coastal councils in 2010. A regional process to synthesise and aggregate the risks identified by each was completed by HCCREMS to identify common risks to councils across the region, and determine a suite of regional adaptation actions with the potential for collaborative implementation by councils and other stakeholders.

The risk assessments identified the need for significantly enhanced integration and information sharing within and across councils and other stakeholders, and in particular, the need for more consistent and transparent decision making processes for land use and infrastructure planning. High priority actions that have been directly progressed through the 'Decision Support for Climate Change Adaptation: Coastal Councils' project include:

- Development of decision support systems to provide flexible adaptation pathways
- Land use planning and infrastructure management support in the form of guidelines, templates & information resources
- Professional capacity building across councils and stakeholder organisations
- Further research and information.

The project is regionally significant given its delivery and outputs encompass all seven of the region's coastal councils, as well as key regional partners including Department of Premier and Cabinet, Office of Environment & Heritage, Department of Primary Industries (Crown Lands), Department of Planning and Infrastructure and regional water utilities. Additionally, the project has State and National significance, as all coastal councils will gain value from the handbook.

This program aims to facilitate the active transition of broader risk and vulnerability assessment work into practical adaptation measures and pathways. As such, the project outcomes and learnings will contribute to a broader national adaptation policy direction as well as provide practical resources with the potential for application by a wide range of councils across Australia, both coastal and non coastal.



Implementation:

Target audience comprised council staff including land use, statutory and coastal planners, asset managers and engineers, environmental managers and community planners. These represent the primary roles with responsibility for integrated coastal management and adaptation planning. Other public decision makers, including state government departments and utilities whose work involves interaction with councils were included in the project.

Project partners include the region's 7 coastal councils (Gosford, Wyong, Lake Macquarie, Newcastle, Port Stephens, Great Lakes and Greater Taree Councils) and the NSW Department of Environment & Heritage. The project has been effective in engaging a range of other key regional stakeholders including Department of Primary Industries (Crown Lands), Department of Planning and Infrastructure, Hunter Water Corporation and Mid Coast Water.

The methods implemented include:

Practitioner Workshops –designed to engage direct input from the range of roles and management levels within partner and stakeholder organisations to inform the nature and design of project outputs, and to foster ownership of outputs.

Background Discussion Paper –aimed to describe and clarify expectations regarding the proposed Decision Support Framework and the process for testing its application. Feedback was gained through both a formal review process and dedicated Practitioner Workshops.

Literature Review & Consultation Paper- provided a synthesis of key findings from earlier consultation processes and how these would be addressed in project design and delivery. The review also synthesised existing international and national approaches to coastal adaptation and the implications of applying triggers and thresholds for decision making.

Product Development and Testing – Following development of the draft Handbook, 6 pilot workshops were delivered to facilitate council staff and other stakeholders directly testing the rigour, logic and content of the draft Handbook against real life coastal management issues. Outcomes directly informed the final template based 'Workbook' designed to practically assist staff step through each stage of the decision making process.

The project was delivered over a 14 month period (July 2011 – September 2012).

Delivery of the project directly progresses adaptation priorities identified in individual council climate change risk assessment and adaptation plans and regional scale Coastal Councils Adaptation Plan. Outputs also directly contribute to delivery of numerous climate change adaptation and coastal management priorities and actions included in the Community Strategic and 4 year Delivery Plans of all participating councils.

The project budget is \$1,265,975, which was joint funded through the Commonwealth Government's Coastal Adaptation Projects Initiative (\$400,000), project partners contributions (cash \$465,000 and in-kind \$400,975)

Outcomes:

The development of the Decision Support Framework and Guide (The Handbook), one of the first of its kind in Australia, will enable coastal councils to consistently and transparently approach the assessment and determination of adaptation pathways for vulnerable coastal areas. Key elements include a focus on integrated decision making, dealing with risk and uncertainty and the importance of effective collaboration, engagement and communication processes.



Importantly, the process provides an emphasis on collaboration, consistency and transparency represents a key opportunity for councils to engage communities and elected officials in the decision making process. This will contribute to more collaborative, informed and effective decision making for what are often controversial coastal management and adaptation planning issues.

A key achievement has been the considerable and sustained engagement in the design and testing of project outputs by practitioners (representing a diversity of roles and management levels) from across councils during the project. While resource and time intensive, this approach has facilitated a high degree of ownership by councils of the project outputs and a commitment to ongoing implementation.

The project has been effective in building the professional capacity of council staff in a number of areas central to effective coastal adaptation planning, including:

- Cross council and multi organisational approaches to dealing with complex, interrelated coastal management issues
- Objectives based decision making in a coastal planning context
- Prioritising potential adaptation options
- Processes and tools available for valuing and assessing the costs and benefits (market & non market) of adaptation options
- Processes and tools for understanding and managing the risk and uncertainty intrinsically present when considering coastal processes and the influence of climate change
- Processes for identifying, applying and monitoring triggers and thresholds to inform the timing of decision making and implementation of adaptation options.

Key Learnings:

The value and effectiveness of active, participatory, cross organisational processes when designing, developing and reviewing tools and resources addressing cross sector and cross disciplinary issues. This approach has facilitated significant and direct input from a range of roles and management levels in partner organisations and a high degree of understanding, ownership and application of project outputs.

There is a high degree of consistency across councils (regardless of size and resource capacity) on the adaptation issues they face and the nature of resources needed to effectively progress adaptation. As such it is considered that the project outputs are highly transferable beyond the region given that the decision making process developed could be readily adapted to other localities and issues.

Piloting application of the draft products has clearly demonstrated the value of a structured decision support process. It has also confirmed the importance of keeping information simple and concise. Despite the complexity and interrelated nature of issues the Handbook is aiming to address, the capacity and time constraints of practitioners require highly practical tools that readily integrate with existing work schedules and processes.

References: Further information will be available on the HCCREMS website early 2013.

Name: Steve Wilson

Position: Program Manager

Phone: 02 4978 4026

Email: steve@huntercouncils.com.au