

Submission to the *Fitzroy--Derby Draft Water Resource Management Plan*

Choosing a Better Pathway Towards Protection for the Martuwarra

Introduction

The WA Government must act to protect the National Heritage listed Martuwarra Fitzroy River. The Martuwarra is one of Australia's last great living rivers and is central to the culture, law and livelihoods of Traditional Owners, as well as the health of regional communities, wildlife and the unique Kimberley coast.

I welcome the government's commitment in the draft plan to **no surface water extraction and no dams**. Delivering on this commitment in the final plan would reflect the wishes of thousands of community voices which strongly support of protection for the Martuwarra.

Embedding such a policy commitment into the final water plan would recognise the river's outstanding values and also prevent some of the most damaging mistakes seen elsewhere in Australia being deliberately repeated on the Martuwarra. Protecting the river floods is critical to preserving the natural and cultural values of the river, including its role as a last stronghold for the critically-endangered freshwater sawfish which only breeds in large flood years.

Preserving Groundwater is Critical

Groundwater is a key risk the plan must address. Over-allocating groundwater will allow large-scale irrigated agriculture to take hold in the Fitzroy catchment. Across Australia and globally, this pathway has led to rivers being slowly drained, ecosystems collapsing and local communities losing control, exactly the outcomes which have beset the Murray-Darling system.

The WA Government must strengthen the draft plan by:

- **Locking in a commitment to no further surface water take and no dams**
- **Protecting groundwater from large-scale extraction to prevent mass irrigated agriculture taking over the Kimberley**
- **Supporting Traditional Owners' rights, including genuine decision-making role in licensing, monitoring and governance.**

Getting this plan right is only the first step towards protecting one of Australia's last great free-flowing rivers, and shows we are learning from past national failures and choosing not to repeat them.

At present the Martuwarra still flows freely, and this gives us a chance to do things differently. Groundwater is what keeps the river alive through the long dry season, feeding pools, springs, and wetlands that people, fish in, and allows species like the critically endangered sawfish to survive. Pumping groundwater in the dry season will show up months later as shrinking pools, and recovery for a boom and bust system like the Martuwarra will at best take many years.

That is why the plan must begin by **drastically limiting groundwater-take on a precautionary basis**, to avoid making such mistakes before they occur. Acting early is far safer, cheaper, and more effective than trying to fix the damage after it has been done.

The Crucial Role of Traditional Owners and the Kimberley Community

Locally led development across the catchment should be supported, and there are many opportunities for partnerships with communities, and particularly with Traditional Owners that do not rely on extraction of water.

An essential safeguard in getting this plan right is a **strong, well-resourced ongoing role for Traditional Owners in water licensing, monitoring and decision-making**. This must be a pre-condition for any future ground water extraction. Traditional Owners hold deep knowledge of how the river behaves and are best placed to identify early signs of harm. Embedding shared decision-making is one of the most effective ways to reduce risk, and to address shortcomings highlighted in the *2025 WA Auditor General's Performance Audit - Regulation of Water Licences* and so protect the river for the long term. The role of Traditional Owners in water licensing and management decisions is also crucial to preserving the National Heritage Listed cultural values of the river and its groundwater.

Conclusion

The WA Government must listen to the community, and use this water plan to protect the river by making commitments on next steps beyond this plan which will ensure long term and legally binding protections for the river, and continue working with Traditional Owners on a sustainable development plan that delivers for local people.

The destruction of this magnificent river system would be a terrible legacy for any WA government.

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