

Fitzroy-Derby water planning consultation Summary feedback

Pastoralists Considering Irrigated Fodder and Cropping in the Fitzroy–Derby Water Planning Zone

Across the Fitzroy–Derby region there is broad support for pastoral-based agriculture; small-scale, well-regulated irrigated fodder and cropping that strengthens herd productivity and business resilience. Through consultation, it has become clear that while pastoralists are open to modest irrigation footprints, the detail of the regulatory settings will determine whether the opportunity is real or merely theoretical.

There is far less support for large, ORIA-style stand-alone agricultural developments. Stakeholders consistently emphasise that irrigation must remain integrated with pastoral operations, culturally respectful, environmentally responsible, and scaled to the realities of northern groundwater systems.

Proven regional examples such as Yougawalla and Gogo demonstrate that small-scale irrigation can deliver major productivity gains without broadacre clearing or high-impact water extraction.

Why Pastoralists are Interested

Pastoralists see irrigation as a practical tool to:

- Improve dry-season nutrition and cattle condition
- Reduce reliance on imported feed
- Increase branding, finishing and turn-off efficiency
- Build drought resilience
- Support local employment and regional economic activity

Real-world proof: Yougawalla Station

Yougawalla has shown that pivot-scale fodder production (Rhodes grass, sorghum) can:

- Lift breeder performance
- Improve weaning rates
- Reduce mortality in poor seasons
- Support a more stable, higher-value cattle operation

This is the model most pastoralists want to replicate: 100–300 ha footprints, not broadacre cropping.

Real-world proof: Gogo Station

Gogo's long-standing irrigation program demonstrates:

- Sustainable use of well-managed aquifers
- Strong integration with pastoral operations
- Improved turn-off weights and market flexibility
- Local employment and skills development

These examples give pastoralists confidence that small-scale irrigation is viable, appropriate, and regionally proven.

The 3 GL Cap – A Critical Issue for Industry

A major concern raised during consultation is the proposed 3 GL cap on groundwater licences.

Originally, DWER proposed the cap based on the “scale of operation desired,” rather than the hydrogeology of individual sites or the context of each proposal.

Industry advice was clear:

- A blanket cap is not consistent with other WA water planning frameworks.
- Each application should be assessed on its merits, using site-specific science and risk assessment.

The intent behind the cap; ensuring no single proponent “gets all the water”, is understood. But in practice, groundwater systems are naturally self-limiting:

- Shamrock initially sought 20 GL because it “sounded good,” but could only prove up 10 GL.
- Development costs, hydrogeological constraints, and regulatory oversight already act as strong natural brakes on over-allocation.

Pastoralists argue that a fixed cap risks blocking viable, low-risk proposals while doing little to prevent unrealistic ones.

However, the cap remains a significant issue for pastoralists.

Context: Gogo’s Surface Water Proposal

Gogo currently holds 1.5 GL of developed groundwater and a further 1 GL undeveloped. Their separate 50 GL surface water proposal was formally rejected last month, partly due to Cabinet’s position, but largely because several regulatory requirements remain unanswered since 2016.

This case illustrates two important points:

1. Large-scale water proposals face high scrutiny and are unlikely to proceed without strong evidence and compliance.
2. Political lobbying cannot substitute for regulatory process, an important signal for all proponents.

What Pastoralists need from Water Planning

Pastoralists want a practical, workable framework that:

- Provides certainty of access for modest irrigation footprints
- Enables timely approvals for diversification permits
- Recognises the low environmental impact of fodder systems
- Allows progressive development (start small, expand only if viable)
- Integrates Traditional Owner water rights and supports joint ventures
- Is based on transparent, region-specific science

They are not seeking large volumes; only enough to underpin fodder security and herd productivity.

Key Constraints Pastoralists Face

Irrigation is only viable if planning addresses:

- Infrastructure gaps (power, roads, water delivery)
- High capital costs for pivots, pumps, and land preparation
- Lease conditions that limit non-pastoral use
- Labour shortages
- Market access for surplus fodder

Yougawalla and Gogo succeeded because they had scale, capital, and management capability. Smaller operators will need clearer pathways and more supportive policy settings.

Environmental, Cultural and Engagement Considerations

Pastoralists acknowledge:

- The Fitzroy River's cultural significance
- The need for sustainable extraction limits
- The importance of co-design with Traditional Owners
- The need to avoid large-scale clearing

However, a recurring concern is the lack of clarity around what constitutes "adequate engagement."

Engagement is a two-way process, and pastoralists seek guidance on:

- How adequacy will be measured
- What happens when other parties are unable or unwilling to engage
- How to ensure engagement expectations are realistic, fair, and culturally appropriate

Pastoralists maintain that small-scale, well-managed irrigation can coexist with environmental and cultural values, as demonstrated at Gogo and Yougawalla.

What Pastoralists are Asking Government for

Pastoralists are likely to advocate for:

- A clear, region-specific water allocation plan that supports modest irrigation footprints
- Removal or reconsideration of the 3 GL cap, replaced with site-specific assessment
- Streamlined diversification permits
- Technical support (soil, water, agronomy)
- Co-investment in enabling infrastructure
- Pilot projects to demonstrate viability
- Pathways for partnerships with Traditional Owners

They want a practical, staged development model, not a large-scale irrigation scheme.

Overall Position

Pastoralists support irrigated fodder and cropping as a targeted, low-risk, productivity-enhancing opportunity, grounded in the proven success of Yougawalla and Gogo Stations. With clear water planning, modest allocations, and streamlined approvals, pastoralists can deliver sustainable irrigation that strengthens pastoral viability, supports regional jobs, and creates shared economic benefit with Traditional Owners.

Their message is clear: ***"Give us certainty, keep it practical, and we can deliver sustainable, small-scale irrigation that strengthens the region."***

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