

Submission to the Consultation Draft Fitzroy- Derby Water Resources Management Plan (2026)

Submitted by: Gogo Station Pty Ltd **Date:** June 2026

Managing Water in the Fitzroy River Catchment

The future of the Fitzroy River catchment depends on a water plan that protects the river while creating real opportunities for the people who live and work here. Pastoralists, Traditional Owners, communities, and local businesses all rely on a healthy river system, but they also rely on a regional economy that can grow, employ people, and sustain families. This submission sets out what is needed to achieve both.

1. A Water Advisory Committee that is representative of the Fitzroy-Derby region

The proposed Water Advisory Committee, established under section 2.6 of the draft Fitzroy-Derby Water Resources Management Plan and the Water Agencies (Powers) Act 1984 (WA), must be genuinely representative of the region's social, cultural, environmental and economic interests. Membership should include Traditional Owners, pastoralists, tourism operators, aquaculture, agriculture, and community representatives to ensure that advice to the Minister reflects the full diversity of people who rely on and care for water in the Fitzroy-Derby region.

The committee's purpose should be clear: to guide implementation of the plan so it delivers social, cultural and economic outcomes alongside environmental protection. A committee without meaningful authority or balanced representation will not deliver the confidence, transparency or partnership this region needs.

The Productivity Commission's 2024 National Water Reform Inquiry recommended that a renewed National Water Initiative include recognition of First Nations peoples' continued involvement and participation in water management. The committee's terms of reference should be framed consistently with that national direction. They should also explicitly include the following as standing agenda items:

- economic development and regional livelihoods
- pastoral and agricultural industry resilience
- cultural responsibilities and community wellbeing
- socioeconomic reporting

Embedding these elements will ensure the committee's advice is grounded in lived experience, Traditional Owner knowledge, contemporary science and the realities of operating across a highly variable landscape.

A Water Advisory Committee that is **balanced, representative and empowered** will strengthen trust in the plan, support collaborative water management, and ensure that decisions reflect the full spectrum of values and aspirations present in the Fitzroy-Derby region

2. Transparent Monitoring of Water, Environmental and Cultural Values

Monitoring must be accurate, timely and publicly available. The plan should commit to:

- additional stream gauges to improve hydrological modelling and trigger-point accuracy across the catchment.
- clear guidelines for monitoring roles, specifying which obligations fall to DWER, which to licensees, and which are shared.
- meaningful Traditional Owner involvement in designing and conducting cultural monitoring protocols.
- data collection on river health that accounts for all significant pressures on the river system beyond water abstraction, including fire regimes, invasive species, and fishing pressure in dry season pools.

The plan's section 3 already contemplates adaptive management and licence condition adjustment. We ask DWER to commit to publishing monitoring data annually, and for the Water Advisory Committee to formally review that data each year. Monitoring should support responsible development, **not** be used to stall it.

3. Future Investigations Must Enable Development, Not Delay It

The plan should identify knowledge gaps and commit to filling them. However, investigations must not become a reason to defer projects indefinitely. We recommend that DWER commits to a maximum assessment timeframe and scopes investigation requirements at the pre-application stage rather than imposing new requirements after lodgment.

A water plan should open doors, not close them.

4. No Confusion Between River Dams and Off-stream Storage

The commitment to prohibit infrastructure that spans defined waterways (plan policy 3.1) is appropriate. However, this must be clearly distinguished from surface water, which is essential for development and does not dam the river. We ask DWER to issue written guidance explicitly distinguishing offstream ring tank and on-farm storage infrastructure from in-channel structures, to provide investor certainty before licences are applied for. We note that the methods report (s3.3.1) observes that high evaporation “makes off-stream surface water storages highly vulnerable to losses and limits supply reliability.” We accept that evaporation is a real constraint. However, the CSIRO Northern Australia Water Resource Assessment specifically modelled on-farm ring tank harvesting under Kimberley evaporation conditions and found the approach could still support 160,000 hectares at 85 per cent annual reliability, precisely because CSIRO designed harvest triggers and storage volumes to account for evaporative

loss. The evaporation concern is already addressed in the modelling that underpins the submission.

5. Support for Off-stream Water Storage

CSIRO's *Northern Australia Water Resource Assessment* (2018) found that water harvesting wet season flows into on-farm ring tanks, could potentially support up to 160,000 hectares growing one dry-season crop per year in 85 per cent of years. The same assessment identified this as the primary, lower-risk development pathway for the Fitzroy catchment, separate from any in-river infrastructure.

This is not damming the river. It is harvesting flood season flows at trigger points set above ecological thresholds, which is precisely why CSIRO found the approach achieves 85 per cent annual reliability while protecting environmental values. The plan should explicitly affirm off-stream water harvesting and on-farm storage as a legitimate and supported development pathway, with licensing conditions and trigger rules that reflect the lower risk profile of this approach compared to direct in-channel abstraction.

4. Groundwater Access Must Not Be Restricted for Stock and Domestic Use

Groundwater is essential for pastoral operations. Stock and domestic water use is already exempt from licensing under the *Rights in Water and Irrigation Exemption (Section 26C) Order 2010*, and we ask DWER to confirm this protection is preserved under all licence conditions and cannot be eroded by cumulative drawdown restrictions on neighboring licensed users. Groundwater allocation beyond exempt use should be based on site-specific sustainability assessments, not blanket restrictions.

7. Stage Surface Water Allocation, With Room to Grow

We ask DWER to publish a clear pathway for reviewing surface water availability once post licensing monitoring data demonstrates that environmental, cultural, and social values are being protected. We note that the methods report cautions against relying on mean annual flow figures given the Fitzroy's high interannual variability and explicitly states that "average conditions are not a reliable or suitable indicator for water availability" (Methods s3.3.1). We propose that any future surface water review be based on trigger-flow rules calibrated to gauge readings during high-flow events. Even in lower-flow wet seasons, a modest trigger-based take set well above ecological flow thresholds, and activated only when those thresholds are comfortably exceeded at key gauging stations, would represent a manageable and monitored intervention consistent with the adaptive management approach the plan already supports.

The plan should include mechanisms to increase allocation in high-flow years, with trigger-based rules tied to gauge readings rather than fixed calendar dates. Monitoring after licences are issued will show whether environmental and cultural values are protected, and if they are, more water should be progressively released.

5. Projects Must Be Economically Viable

Staged development is sensible, but overly restrictive staging will prevent the critical mass needed for support industries, agronomy, irrigation technology, machinery services, crop monitoring, finance, and marketing, to invest in the region. The Kimberley pastoral sector is nationally significant: the Katherine, Barkly and Kimberley regions together contribute over 50 per cent of the value of Australia's live cattle export trade, which employs more than 6,500 people nationally with 82 per cent of direct jobs in northern Australia.

Irrigated agriculture would diversify and strengthen this economic base, creating jobs across the entire region. The plan must support viable scale, not set limits so low that projects cannot attract the investment needed to proceed.

The Kimberley cattle industry would be a direct and early beneficiary of increased irrigated fodder production. Cattle in northern Australia follow an annual cycle of liveweight gain in the wet season and liveweight loss in the dry season, with body condition constrained by the quality and availability of native pastures. Irrigated forage crops, including Rhodes grass, sorghum, and maize, combined with locally produced cottonseed as a high-energy, high-protein supplement, would allow producers to bridge the dry-season feed gap and maintain cattle condition year-round. DWER's own methods report acknowledges this directly: "groundwater could improve the resilience and viability of pastoral operations by providing a reliable water supply to grow high quality forage for 12 months of the year" (Methods s5.2.1). Irrigated fodder reduces the age at turnoff and opens access to premium markets that current dry-season weight loss prevents.

Year-round availability of finished cattle is vital to the success of the Kimberley Meat Company (KMC), the only major beef processing facility in northern WA. KMC has historically been constrained by the seasonal nature of cattle supply. When supply dried up in 2021, the nearest alternative processor was more than 2,000 kilometres away. Irrigated fodder is the mechanism that makes year-round processing viable. A consistent, local feed supply is what converts a seasonal abattoir into a permanent, employment-generating anchor for the regional economy.

Processing cattle locally has the potential to generate substantially greater economic value in the region. KMC employed ninety production staff when operating at capacity and is forecast to employ two-hundred people and operate 48 weeks per year when it reopens in 2027. Kimberley pastoralists cannot currently access the fodder-supplementation pathways available to southern producers because freight from distant suppliers is commercially unviable; local irrigation changes that equation. The plan should recognise that water access for irrigated fodder production is not merely an agricultural decision — it is an employment and economic development decision with direct consequences for the Kimberley's processing industry and the communities that depend on it.

6. Trigger-Based Rules for Surface Water Harvesting

Rules for surface water harvesting should be based on technology, real-time modelling and gauge readings, not fixed dates. Wet seasons vary dramatically from year to year, and fixed-date rules will either restrict access in high-flow years or create risks in lower-flow years.

Trigger-point rules should:

- allow extraction only when flows exceed safe environmental thresholds at designated gauging stations.
- set extraction volumes proportional to flow conditions, not fixed annual caps that take no account of flow variability.
- ensure upstream licence holders are not disadvantaged by downstream extraction.
- be co-designed with Traditional Owners, who hold detailed knowledge of seasonal flow patterns.

Additional stream gauges will be required across the catchment to support accurate modelling. DWER should commit to a gauge upgrade program as a condition precedent to issuing the first surface water licences.

7. Establish a Fitzroy–Derby Aboriginal Water Holding with a Clear Governance Framework

We support the proposed Fitzroy–Derby Aboriginal Water Holding (~25 GL/year under plan policy 3.5). A dedicated water allocation for Traditional Owners will create real opportunities for economic participation on their own Country. The Productivity Commission's 2024 national water reform report noted that Indigenous peoples currently hold less than 1 per cent of Australia's water rights and that progress on achieving NWI commitments to account for native title rights to water has been slow. The Fitzroy–Derby Holding represents a meaningful step toward addressing this imbalance.

Research consistently shows that meaningful economic participation delivers improvements in health, education, and community wellbeing. Access to water is a foundation for that participation. However, the holding will only deliver on this promise if its governance framework is finalised **before** the plan is made final. We ask DWER to commit to co-designing the governance framework with native title parties, with a published timeline.

8. Water Licences from the Aboriginal Water Holding Must Be Commercially Workable

Plan policy 3.5 limits access to the Holding to native title holders and those with a negotiated agreement or commercial arrangement. We support this intent, but ask DWER to clarify in the final plan whether licences from the Holding can be used in joint ventures, leased to commercial partners, or sub-licensed — and under what conditions. Without clarity on these questions, the Holding risks remain unused.

Programs such as the NIAA's Indigenous Advancement Strategy and the EPIC CRC should be actively leveraged to support Indigenous water-based

enterprises. The plan should explicitly acknowledge these programs as supporting mechanisms, not leave the onus entirely on native title holders to identify funding pathways independently.

9. Best-Practice Engagement with Traditional Owners

Plan guidance 2.1 already requires engagement consistent with free, prior, and informed consent principles. We support this. However, engagement must occur early, at the project design stage, not as a late-stage tick-box exercise after project parameters are fixed. Land Councils and DWER should actively support Traditional Owners to understand the plan and the commercial opportunities it creates.

Aboriginal people have long histories of land and water management, including sophisticated irrigation, water harvesting, and land management practices. Development can strengthen cultural connections and land management capability, not weaken them. We ask DWER to publish a standard engagement checklist or protocol for licence applicants in the Fitzroy–Derby area, reducing uncertainty for proponents approaching Traditional Owner groups.

10. Development Should Avoid Areas of Genuine Environmental and Cultural Significance

This is consistent with plan policies 1.1(d) and (e). But "significance" must be defined quantitatively before applicants are expected to respond to it. We ask DWER to publish clear guidance on what constitutes an "unacceptable impact" — including specific trigger thresholds — before applicants must invest in project design. The plan's own Table 8 guidance items 8 and 9 already contemplate trigger, threshold, and target criteria as part of operating strategies, including water level thresholds at sites of ecological, cultural and social significance. We ask DWER to publish model trigger frameworks or example threshold criteria for the plan area, so that proponents are not required to develop these from scratch at licence application stage.

11. Streamlined Approvals

Water licensing operates in parallel with, not jointly with, environmental and heritage approvals under the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* (WA), the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972* (WA) and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth). This sequential, siloed structure significantly extends approval timelines and cost. DWER's licensing process currently has no statutory maximum timeframe for complex applications, unlike comparable jurisdictions.

We ask DWER to:

- (a) publish target assessment timeframes for Fitzroy–Derby applications.
- (b) explore a joint assessment pathway or single-touchpoint coordination model with the relevant heritage and environment agencies; and
- (c) require that investigation scopes be agreed at the pre-application stage so that applicants are not surprised by new requirements after lodgement.

Lengthy, expensive approvals deter investment and harm regional outcomes.

12. Socioeconomic Impacts Must Be Formally Assessed

The plan must formally recognise that water allocation decisions have **significant socioeconomic consequences** for the Shire of Derby–West Kimberley — one of the most economically vulnerable local government areas in Western Australia.

The 2021 Census (ABS, LGA52800) records the following for the Shire:

- Population of 7,075, with **60.3%** identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, compared to 3.3% for WA as a whole
- Median weekly household income of **\$1,325**, compared to \$1,815 for WA — a gap of 27%
- Median age of **32 years**, six years younger than the WA and national median of 38, representing significant future workforce and economic development potential
- The lowest income quartile is the **largest** income group, comprising 42% of people aged 15 and over
- Derby town unemployment of **22.0%** (September 2025), 18.7 percentage points above the rest-of-WA rate of 3.3%, with workforce participation of only 45.1% compared to 67.2% regionally

Restricting access to water — particularly for industries capable of generating employment and private-sector growth — will have **direct, measurable impacts** on these outcomes.

For this reason, the plan must commit to **formal socioeconomic impact assessment**, including:

- baseline ABS indicators for employment, income, education, housing, and business activity
- modelling of how water availability affects job creation, pastoral viability, agricultural diversification, and Indigenous enterprise development. DWER’s own methods report acknowledges that “groundwater could improve the resilience and viability of pastoral operations” and that Traditional Owners “see the pastoral industry’s potential to help build a strong future for their communities” (Methods ss5.2.1, 5.2.2). This modelling should be commissioned as part of the plan’s monitoring framework and reported through the Water Advisory Committee
- assessment of how water restrictions may exacerbate existing disadvantage, particularly for Aboriginal communities whose economic participation is most closely tied to land and water
- transparent annual reporting on socioeconomic outcomes through the Water Advisory Committee

Water policy must protect the river — but it must also protect the people who live here. A plan that ignores socioeconomic impacts is incomplete.

Closing Statement

The Fitzroy River is one of northern Australia's most important natural assets. Protecting it matters. But protecting the future of the people who live in this catchment matters too. A water plan that supports off-stream storage, staged development, groundwater access, Traditional Owner participation, socioeconomic assessment and streamlined approvals will deliver both outcomes.

The Fitzroy needs a plan that protects the river and powers the region – not one that shuts the door on its future.

References

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- 2 CSIRO (2018), Northern Australia Water Resource Assessment: Fitzroy Catchment Report, CSIRO, Canberra. Available at: csiro.au/en/research/natural-environment/water/water-resource-assessment/nawra/fitzroy-report
- 3 CSIRO (2018), as above. The assessment found up to 120 GL/year (<5% of recharge) could be extracted from the Grant Group and Poole Sandstone aquifers for irrigated agriculture.
- 4 Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (2026), Consultation Draft – Fitzroy–Derby Water Resources Management Plan: Methods, DWER, Perth (DWER 2026a). Section 3.3.1 of the methods report sets out streamflow characteristics and explicitly cautions that “average conditions are not a reliable or suitable indicator for water availability” given the Fitzroy’s high inter-annual variability.
- 5 Meat & Livestock Australia (2023), The Economic Contribution and Benefits of the Northern Live Export Cattle Industry, MLA, Sydney. Available at: mla.com.au/research-and-development/reports/2023
- 6 Productivity Commission (2024), as above (note 1). See also: Adams, M & Weir, J (2021), "Water injustice runs deep in Australia", The Conversation, 21 June 2021 (citing research showing Indigenous peoples hold less than 1% of Australia's water rights).
- 7 Productivity Commission (2024), Closing the Gap Data: Strong Economic Participation and Development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Communities, Dashboard, pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data. See also: AIHW (2024), Australia's Welfare 2024, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.
- 8 Langton, M & Corn, A (2023), cited in Productivity Commission (2024), Closing the Gap Data (note 7). Traditional economic activity included managing landscapes and waterways for harvesting and cultivating plants over tens of thousands of years.
- 9 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Census of Population and Housing: All Persons QuickStats — Shire of Derby–West Kimberley (LGA52800). Available at: abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA52800
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- 11 AreaSearch (2025), Derby WA — Suburb Statistical Profile (SAL 50405), based on ABS data and estimated resident population data, September 2025. Available at: areasearch.com.au/suburb/derby_wa