



COMMUNIQUE

Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce

31 August 2007

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA TASKFORCE IN THE KIMBERLEYS

The Australian Government's Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce visited Western Australia for the week 27–31 August 2007. The Taskforce, established by the Prime Minister, the Hon John Howard MP, as part of *A National Plan for Water Security*, is examining the potential for further developing land and water resources in northern Australia in an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable manner.

The Taskforce met with Western Australian Treasurer the Hon Eric Ripper, Agriculture Minister the Hon Kim Chance and WA government officials to discuss development options for the Kimberley region, with a particular focus on the Ord River region.

The Taskforce travelled to Broome and Kununurra to meet with a range of stakeholders and community leaders. The Taskforce took the opportunity to visit Roebuck Plains Station (near Broome) and Home Valley Station (south-west of Kununurra) to review the training and development programs being provided by the Indigenous Land Corporation, as well as looking at examples of successful pastoral and tourism business initiatives.

Looking at the Kimberly region as a whole, the Taskforce confirmed the role that investment in infrastructure plays in opening up development opportunities across a range of industries, such as agriculture, minerals and resources and tourism. While a number of transport infrastructure challenges were highlighted by stakeholders, the Taskforce also noted the serious impact the high cost of residential housing and accommodation is having on development, and even existing businesses in the region.

The Taskforce noted the importance all stakeholders placed on managing future development in a way that recognises the fragile nature of the unique natural assets of the region. For this to happen, the Taskforce noted that planners and developers need a good understanding of how the landscape works, especially the interconnectivity of ground and surface water systems, across northern Australia. Such knowledge requires good science, supported by sound measurement and monitoring practice, and most importantly, a system focused on the north, to capture the information, and make it accessible to those who need it.

In Kununurra the Taskforce noted the concerns expressed by community members with delays in the proposed roll out of Ord Stage 2 and, in particular, the possibility the work of the Taskforce may extend those delays. The Taskforce reiterated that its role was one of identifying solutions to constraints. The Taskforce undertook to address the following key issues relating to the Ord region in its interim report, which is due before the end of 2007:

- Supporting the Western Australian Government to re-engage the Northern Territory in taking development in the Ord region forward;
- The need for governments to remove or minimise sovereign risks, thereby ensuring that any revised Stage 2 proposal is 'market ready';
- Building flexibility into the proposal by ensuring that it includes a mix of soil types and crop options, opportunities for big and small farms, as well as incentives to continue to improve irrigation efficiency;
- The need to stage development of the total potential of the Ord River region to allow the process to be expedited; and
- Ensuring scientifically robust studies are undertaken to better understand and manage environmental impacts, especially salinity, of existing and future irrigation activities.

The Taskforce is expected to meet again in late September in Queensland where it will visit Brisbane before heading north to Richmond, Georgetown and Cairns.

More information on the Taskforce, including its terms of reference and membership, can be found at www.environment.gov.au/water/action/development/nalwt-tor.html