The Water for Food initiative is a four-year $40 million Royalties for Regions funded State Government program aimed at increasing economic growth and regional employment.

The program will use water source discoveries to develop new irrigation areas and increase the size and productivity of existing irrigation districts.

The first four projects reflect a $15.5 million investment in the West Kimberley that includes funding to develop a policy framework to smooth the way for pastoralists to change parts of their leases to a more flexible, investor-friendly land use tenure.

The land tenure project will identify pathways to an alternative tenure, where land use is more flexible and can attract third party investments to fund on-farm improvements, such as new irrigation infrastructure.

The four West Kimberley Water for Food projects aim to stimulate irrigation on suitable land near common-user infrastructure, including all-weather roads, ports, air services and airport facilities.

Each of the projects has an Aboriginal benefit component and offers the potential for creating sustainable jobs and training opportunities.
"The West Kimberley offers significant potential to launch Water for Food with four targeted projects that can utilise new water discoveries to enhance the region’s economic footprint and create additional wealth, employment and industry diversification."*


Provided courtesy of Department of Regional Development.
Mowanjum irrigation trial – Derby

This project will be driven through a research agreement and funding partnership between the State Government and Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation (MAC), a 350-strong community on the outskirts of Derby.

The intensive grazing trial will use local groundwater for an initial 38 hectare centre pivot grazing and silage operation to support the community’s vision to establish itself as a cattle fattening and beef breeding centre.

It is envisaged that additional pivots will be installed as Mowanjum’s productivity increases.

The trial will serve as a demonstration model for other Aboriginal pastoral stations in the Kimberley with access to water.

While Mowanjum’s 55,000 hectare pastoral lease contains large tracts of prime grazing land on the doorstep of Derby, it requires a dry-season feeding capability to realise its aspiration of reaching its initial target of 10,000 to 15,000 head. This includes its own branded cattle and stock agisted for other Aboriginal stations along the Gibb River Road that would otherwise be isolated from markets during the wet season.

Knowsley Agricultural Area water investigation – Derby

The Knowsley Agriculture Area (KAA) is an area of unallocated Crown Land on the outskirts of Derby that provides potential for future irrigation and intensive cropping. This project aims to identify water supply options and prepares suitable land parcels within a 5000 hectare envelope for irrigated development.

Knowsley provides potential for staged irrigation development, intensive horticulture and high-value cropping at a scale that is likely to be attractive to third party investors, if sufficient water can be identified.

Irrigated farming, including high-value horticulture on KAA, will provide significant potential as a new industry opportunity for Derby and the West Kimberley region. Further dry season irrigation is dependent on defining a sustainable water supply and achieving approvals, including Native Title.

This project aims to define sustainable water supply options in shallow and deep aquifers and evaluate the potential to source water from the May-Meda Rivers alluvium to the east of Derby and from the lower Fitzroy River alluvium to the south.

“"We have a glowing history of success in the fiercely competitive resources sector and are now suppliers of choice to China and Japan. We must now apply the same principles of investment, market reliability and innovation to the agricultural sector.”*

"In Western Australia we must embrace irrigation, far beyond the estimated 50,000 hectares we irrigate today.” *
Land tenure project

This initiative aims to add value to pastoral leases, attract investment and allow diversification into irrigated agriculture by improving land tenure options.

The policy framework developed in the West Kimberley will support economic development across all of the State’s rangelands.

The project will develop products around robust and replicable land tenure options that promote and support investment in potential intensive agricultural sites. The Water for Food program will help develop new opportunities for intensive agricultural activity.

“Ideally, the pastoral lease of the future will not only run stock, but contain commercial-scale irrigation islands where a diverse range of cash crops and high value food products can be grown, alongside fodder.” *

New public policy positions will be developed utilising the full scope of current statutory provisions of the Land Administration Act 1997 and the Native Title Act 1993 to attract new business ventures on higher forms of land tenure.

The new policy framework aims to provide:

- Pastoralists with better security of tenure and opportunity to attract investment and diversify into irrigated agriculture
- Information packages about options for appropriate tenure for project activities
- Tools to obtain government approvals and licences with guides to negotiate Native Title, Aboriginal heritage and associated considerations

Currently, pastoral leases are restricted to grazing stock on natural vegetation and while permits to diversify are available, crop species must be used for pastoral purposes

Land tenure facts

- There are 452 pastoral stations in Western Australia made up of 507 pastoral leases which are defined for pastoral purposes
- They cover nearly 87 million hectares or 34.4 per cent of the State
- Potential to utilise an estimated 1000 billion litres of sustainable fresh water in Kimberley and Pilbara
- Diversification will support potential for expanding the northern cattle industry
Fitzroy Valley groundwater investigations

This Fitzroy Valley landscape scale groundwater investigation aims to confirm groundwater availability and increase confidence among pastoral station owners wanting to diversify their operations and lift productivity.

“There is an opportunity of a lifetime to engage with Aboriginal pastoralists, Traditional Owners and Indigenous leaders to negotiate partnerships and pathways to lift productivity in the Kimberley.” *

While much is known about water availability in the Fitzroy Valley, more work is required to define the potential to harvest and store floodwater from the river and draw from its alluvial aquifers.

This investigation between Willare and Fitzroy Crossing will focus on a number of pastoral areas where operators have already moved into irrigated fodder and where owners are expressing a desire to expand operations and diversify into irrigation.

A primary focus is to confirm the groundwater potential of the Fitzroy Valley alluvium to support expanded irrigation around the Willare, Liveringa and Gogo areas, and potential irrigation start-ups at a number of Aboriginal pastoral stations.

The project will build on existing Department of Water data along the Fitzroy River between Willare and Fitzroy Crossing, which has identified a potential 200 billion litres per year of available water in the alluvium, with a yield of 25-50 billion litres per year in the 50 kilometres upstream from Willare.

“We can be part of the global, long-term food solution - but only if we dramatically intensify and expand production.” *