

River plan 'underwhelming'

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A draft plan eight years in the making, detailing how the State Government wants to manage the 700km long Fitzroy River and its waters, has finally been released.

But the plan has been described as “underwhelming” by traditional owners — who took part in consultation ahead of the publication — saying it was a “missed opportunity” not only for them, but also for “government, industry and the long-term future of the Kimberley”.

Meanwhile, one farming association has said they want to continue to be part of conversations surrounding the river’s future to ensure options are kept open and a “draconian” management system is not implemented, precluding them from making technological leaps in future.

Water and Climate Resilience Minister Don Punch said the document’s release was an important step in giving Kimberley communities certainty about how their water resources would be managed and delivered on the Cook Government’s election commitment to protect the Fitzroy River.

“Traditional owners have played a central role in shaping this draft plan, and their knowledge will remain vital as we finalise a sustainable water future for the region. I thank them for their guidance and commitment to the planning process,” he said.

“I encourage everyone to



The Pastoralists and Graziers Association of WA president Digby Stretch. Picture: Bob Garnant

a proposed Fitzroy–Derby Aboriginal Water Holding. Initial approvals for any useage would also be limited to 3GL a year to allow for monitoring of the effects of the allocations.

As part of the plan, the Government is also suggesting a water advisory committee be set up to support long-term involvement of all stakeholders in water planning and management.

to grow cattle fodder and increase production.

A CSIRO report in 2018 found 1700GL of surface water could be conservatively taken from the Fitzroy each year.

The report said investing in dams and other water infrastructure could unlock 160,000ha of agricultural land, delivering more than 5000 jobs and creating a \$1.2 billion-a-year food hub.

as limitations of livestock movements from the river’s edge or a limit on above ground work, adding PGA would seek a seat at the table of the water advisory committee.

“Let’s respect an amazing water resource and an amazing region as far as diversity goes, and make sure that we apply good, solid contemporary science as to preserving all the best assets that we can to

“This is a missed opportunity, not only for traditional owners, but for government, industry and the long-term future of the Kimberley.

“Protecting water resources is not at odds with economic development; it is the foundation of sustainable industries, including agriculture, tourism, Aboriginal enterprises, and emerging water-dependent opportunities. Without healthy river and groundwater systems, there is no sustainable future.

“We entered this process with a willingness to provide genuine and practical recommendations and we expected meaningful progress toward a long-term partnership with government. Instead, this draft plan reflects a continuation of business-as-usual approaches that are already failing.

“After significant effort to present opportunities to government, we are underwhelmed by an outcome that undervalues the role of traditional owners and remains constrained by outdated legislation in urgent need of reform.”

The draft plan is open for public consultation for three months through online and in-person submissions.

Kimberley MLA Divina D’Anna urged the community to contribute to the consultation.

“The Kimberley is a unique place, shaped by its people and cultures and this draft plan recognises those values and supports responsible, community-focused development,” she said.

“It is especially important that

provide feedback on how the plan balances cultural, environmental and economic needs. Community insight is essential to building a resilient, long-term water strategy for the Kimberley.”

The draft reasserts the State’s previously stated commitment to not damming the river or its tributaries and to protect the waterway, while supporting sustainable economic opportunities for Kimberley communities, environmental priorities and pastoral interests.

It also sets out restrictions on the use of groundwater to 50GL a year, with 25GL a year to be put towards

Pastoralists have previously gone on record with hopes of being allowed more access to the river’s water to help them diversify their operations.

Two of the most high-profile proposals, one from billionaire Gina Rinehart, who owns Fossil Downs and Liveringa station, publicised in 2019, and one from the Harris family of GoGo Station, would be unviable under the restrictions now mooted.

Ms Rinehart’s was reported as wanting access to 325GL a year of surface water, and the Harris family’s plan, made public in 2021, requiring damming to allow them

Pastoralists and Graziers Association president Digby Stretch said the plan needed to avoid too many restrictive measures that could limit WA’s northern agricultural industry and local pastoralists.

“We need to be really, really careful that Australia doesn’t cut up its nose to spite its face as we’ve done with oil refining and a bunch of manufacturing that just doesn’t happen in Australia anymore,” he said.

Mr Stretch is hopeful the plan would not adversely affect nearby pastoral stations, but was wary of any prohibitive restrictions such

leave the doors open for the ability to use it in future,” he said.

While the Kimberly Land Council, which was part of the consultations leading up to the publication of the draft plan on April 1, said it cautiously welcomed some elements of the plan, including the far more restrictive allocations, “the measures still do not go far enough”.

“They do not address the fundamental issues at stake: the protection of country, the recognition of our rights and responsibilities, and the need for genuine shared decision-making,” a statement from the KLC said.

Aboriginal voices are heard, given their deep cultural connection to water and country and their knowledge and cultural perspectives that are essential in shaping respectful and sustainable outcomes.”

Community information sessions will be held in Perth, Broome, Derby, Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing, alongside continued engagement with traditional owners, local stakeholders and industry.

For more information visit consult.dwer.wa.gov.au/water-policy/consultation-draft-fitzroy-derby-water-resources.