

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA IRRIGATION FUTURES

REPORT OF STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

31 MAY 2004



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A series of meetings were held in various centres in West Australia from Perth to Kununurra in the week beginning Monday 3 May seeking comment from stakeholders in WA on the Northern Australia Irrigation Futures (NAIF) project. Five meetings and two face to face meetings were held during the week.

Generally there was widespread support for the NAIF project and the tone of each meeting was positive and encouraging for the future.

The key issues that emerged were the need for a systematic and transparent way of making decisions on irrigation development proposals in the north. It was suggested that proposals for irrigation developments are currently dealt with in an *ad hoc* way and often different government departments have specific criteria for evaluating proposals. These criteria are unique to the department which developed them.

The view that the current process for planning and getting approval for irrigation development is flawed was shared by the industry, government and conservation groups.

The various conservation groups consulted were more supportive of the project once they had heard the presentation from the project team. Before the meetings several groups appeared to have formed the view that the project was a thinly veiled attempt to promote irrigation development generally and some individual projects in particular. The project team was successful in changing this perception. All of the representatives from the different conservation groups indicated a willingness to be engaged in the future.

The two major challenges for the future of NAIF are:

1. developing a consultation process that will achieve outcomes in a suitable time frame
2. developing a framework that while focussed on biophysical aspects of sustainability demonstrates clear linkages with the socioeconomic aspects of sustainability

Previous experience in northern WA has shown that it is easy for consultation processes to become bogged down. There are particular issues that the project must consider because of the nature of the community across northern WA, including the remoteness of the region and the previous history of similar consultations.

On a technical level it became clear that any sustainability framework developed would need to demonstrate clear linkages to socio economic issues. This does not mean that the NAIF project has to address all socio economic issues in depth but that the framework developed must show that socio economic issues are integral to overall sustainability.

As long as these two issues are carefully considered and a transparent and open process can be developed for the project it is likely that cooperation and support for the project will be forthcoming from WA.

INTRODUCTION

The North Australian Irrigation Futures (NAIF) project aims to build an understanding of key landscape attributes (including soil and water resources, climate, vegetation, rivers, near shore marine environments) relevant to sustainable irrigation in tropical systems. This knowledge will be used to deliver a framework based on sustainability indicators and management criteria at a range of scales (field, farm, district, scheme, and catchment) to support planning, development, implementation and management of new schemes, and if necessary, modification of existing schemes across northern Australia. The project area extends from Carnarvon and Broome in West Australia through Darwin in the Northern Territory to Townsville in north Queensland.

This report describes the results of a consultancy carried out by CapeAbility Consultants Pty Ltd for the North Australian Irrigation Futures Project. The aim of the consultancy was to set up a series of meetings in West Australia to begin the process of engagement with the stakeholders. The meetings took place between Monday 3 and Friday 7 May, beginning in Perth and ending in Kununurra. The project team for this series of visits comprised the project leader Dr Keith Bristow, CSIRO Land and Water and CRC IF, Townsville and Mr Bart Kellett, PhD student with CSIRO and CRC IF.

The consultancy helped to identify and contact potential stakeholders in the NAIF project, arranged a series of seminars and meetings, reported on the process and has discussed the implications of the information put forward at the meetings.

ITINERARY AND VISITS

Table 1 details the activities completed during the week. The participants at each of the seminars are detailed in Appendix 1.

Table 1 Activities of week beginning Monday 3 May 2004

Date	Activity	Location
Monday 3 May	Meeting at CSIRO Floreat Park with CSIRO staff from the Ord Bonaparte Project	Perth
Tuesday 4 May	Seminar	Perth
Wednesday 5 May	1. Meeting with staff of Departments of Environment and Agriculture 2. Seminar	Karratha Broome
Thursday 6 May	Seminar	Kununurra
Friday 7 May	Meetings with staff from Departments of Environment and Agriculture	Kununurra

The same agenda was followed at each location, the aim being to provide more information about the project to the participants at each location and to begin the process of engagement with the stakeholders.

The consultation had a number of aims:

- identify a broad range of project stakeholders; some preliminary work prior to the visit had identified a number of key stakeholders but the project team needs to develop a more complete list
- identify data sources and data required by the project including
 - an inventory of current irrigation activity across northern Australia
 - availability of information on resources that affect irrigation
 - identification of current planning and approval processes and the strengths and weaknesses of each process
 - identify other current natural resource management projects with which the NAF project should interact
- determine the willingness of stakeholders to participate in NAIF by engaging in the framework development process by providing information and data to NAIF and commenting on draft frameworks

Once introductions were completed Dr Keith Bristow and Mr Bart Kellett provided an overview of the project. The key points addressed included:

- The big picture (background)
- What the projects about
- What the project is not about
- Where the project is up to

This included presentation and discussion of stakeholder engagement, the steering committee, the proposed stakeholder reference group, key features of sustainability frameworks, indicators and management guidelines, with particular reference to the Amoeba sustainability chart and Bayesian Belief Networks.

STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS

This section of the report is a summary of key comments made by the participants at each of the workshops, meetings and seminars. The comments are reported here as they were recorded. They represent the major points made in the meetings. Some were made by a single person and some were put forward by several people. They are reported here because they are part of a complete record of the meetings and because they help to represent the range of opinion that was expressed. The next section of the report discusses these comments and the implications for the future management and conduct of the project.

Perth Tuesday 4 May

General background:

This meeting had representatives from Government, environmental groups, agricultural groups and CSIRO researchers from the Ord Bonaparte project. People were keen to find

out more about the project with the meeting characterised by lively, positive and constructive interactions.

Key comments / issues:

- Need planning and engineering expertise skills in the project
- Need to include green groups and the community as potential users of the framework
- Make sure that the framework has relevance to the user and is described in their terms
- Be aware of value laden statements about development
- Put the positive aspects of where this project fits into existing activities
- Be careful with data gathering; need to respect the current ownership of data and make sure that people do not feel threatened by the data gathering process
- It appears to be a high level framework above existing activity so there is a marketing challenge for the project because of its strategic and long term time frame
- Stakeholder involvement and ownership will only come if stakeholders feel empowered to influence the shape and design of the project
- The framework should include all lifetime costs and ensure that all cross subsidies, if they exist, are made explicit
- Economic analysis is too narrow and is not good at evaluating the externalities associated with development projects
- It is important that some of the indicators in the framework are social and economic as well as bio-physical
- Need to ask the question as to how and where data is sourced from
- If the framework only includes bio-physical data it will be too restricted and not widely applicable
- Long term planning and time frame for the project is critical
- Most people are very sceptical of such projects, and people in the north of WA are particularly sceptical
- Communicate how the project will work with stakeholders
- As a higher level project as it engages the irrigation industry and the remainder of the stakeholder network; this gives an opportunity to include existing projects and provide some coordination
- Must be clear indications for “what’s in it for them”
- The framework could lead to a no answer to a particular development however some groups remain sceptical because of the perceived political agenda behind the project
- The framework will only be useful if it can easily be used
- Current decision making for irrigation is very poor and needs a lot of improvement and if this delivers then it will be very good
- From a WA perspective we lack a good framework for judging such applications. The North feels under pressure to make decisions and the project will get good support
- Currently the WA government is supporting investigations into sustainability – need to decide what projects might interact with this project and to keep an open mind on the process
- For buy in and engagement there must be sufficiently developed frameworks for there to be a clear benefit to potential users.

Karratha Wednesday 5 May

General Background:

The meeting was held in the offices of the Department of Environment in Karratha. It included Department of Environment staff and one officer from the Department of Agriculture. The attendees were all keen to find out more about the project and provided a lot of advice about consulting with people in the Kimberley.

Key comments / issues:

- There is existing baggage for the project already as it is perceived as being pro irrigation
- The Kimberley is quite unusual in that 50% of its population are aboriginal, it is a relatively unspoiled environment and so there is a clash between the 70's development paradigm and the new triple bottom line approach
- The key issue in the Kimberley is how to use water for aboriginal economic development
- The Ord Bonaparte project did some good work but was seen as being too Canberra centric, top heavy and the style of the process was not inclusive
- CSIRO also has a reputation and is often perceived as a "seagull", an organisation that comes in picks up what it wants and then leaves
- In the Pilbara the WA Department of Environment is keen to find out how to manage small, local pastoral station based irrigation activity
- There must be consistency with NRM guidelines and frameworks
- A selling point for the project is the potential to generate management and site specific guidelines for WA Environment
- Indicators of river health could include frequency of species, number of species, appearance at a particular season or time of the year.

Broome Wednesday 5 May

General Background:

This meeting was attended by a broader cross section of stakeholders including government representatives, irrigators, the Kimberley Land Council and the environment group Environs Kimberley. Initially the attitude of the environmental groups was extremely hostile to the project and most of the initial questions asked were about the relationships between the various funding bodies, the membership of the steering committee and proposed irrigation developments in northern WA. As more information was provided to the meeting, this attitude changed for most of the participants and there appeared to be acceptance that the project had genuinely independent goals and worthwhile aspirations.

Key comments / issues:

- Basic premise of the project was questioned; how can an irrigation project possibly be looking at sustainability?
- The role of the steering committee was questioned, was it impartial? Wasn't it just serving industry interests?
- There should be indigenous involvement on the project steering committee

- CSIRO tainted in that its views represented interest groups and did not reflect objective science
- Willing to be engaged as it appears that the project is not about what we first believed.

Kununurra Thursday 6 and Friday 7 May

General Background:

The group meeting was arranged by Ord Irrigation and was held in the Ord Irrigation offices. While a disappointing number of people attended the meeting good contact was made with key organisations in the area. The meeting was well disposed towards the project and believed strongly in the need for a more effective and efficient decision making process as far as irrigation development applications is concerned.

Group meeting 6 May - Key comments / issues:

- Because it's about irrigation it is not about sustainability
- It will be expensive to establish the consultation process initially but by sensible use of email, telephone, the web and video conferencing people can be involved from remote locations
- The spatial scale of the project is important; some locations and developments may be sustainable in some parts of a landscape but not in others
- In the Kimberley aboriginal values and decision making processes are different and the project must bear these in mind for its consultation

Meeting with Leith Bowyer Department of Environment, WA 7 May - Key comments / issues:

- How will the project engage with and include information that might impact on irrigation, for example ethno-biological information. The Kimberley Land Council is only willing to engage with groups that can deliver some direct benefits to the Council.
- The project needs to be across different spatial scales from specific locations to valleys to catchments.

Meeting with Peter McCosker and Francis Bright, Department of Agriculture, WA 7 May - Key comments / issues:

- Be aware of the long history of negotiations and discussions on many subjects with the communities across the Kimberley. Care must be taken to ensure that some action takes place and that the project does not get bogged down in talk
- There is a very strong conservation alliance across the north of Australia
- It was suggested that there were issues with mixing qualitative and quantitative indicators and getting agreement on what these indicators should be
- Possibly critical path analysis could be included in the framework
- There will be difficulty in getting access to and simply having appropriate data for some potential indicators
- It was suggested that the indicators could be mapped out with a few people; these indicators could then be distributed to stakeholders and community for their reaction. The issue will be the actual use of the framework in particular areas

- In some peoples view the native title issues in the West Kimberley will preclude consideration of any other issue
- Very keen to see some concrete outcomes in terms of the project as such a framework is needed

MEDIA

During the week Dr Bristow was interviewed by ABC radio. The interview was broadcast across northern WA. The representatives of the organisations attending the meetings also agreed to publicise the project, as a result information about the project is scheduled to appear in the industry magazines for the WA Pastoralists and Graziers, the WA Farmers Federation, the Irrigation Association of Australia, WA region newsletter and in some of the conservation magazines published in the north.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NAIF

The meetings provided a valuable insight into how people in northern WA regarded the project. It is clear that there are strongly polarised views on irrigation development in northern Australia. Some groups clearly believe that no large scale development should ever be contemplated, while other groups are just as firm in their conviction that such development was desirable. This is the background against which the project must be managed. It has implications for both the process the project must follow and also the actual content of the framework. These are discussed below.

It is also important to note that this consultation only involved people in Perth and northern WA. Given that the project deals with the whole of tropical Australia it is important that similar seminars are held in the NT and northern Queensland to capture different views or to confirm the views expressed in WA.

The framework

Few direct comments were received on the different methodologies for developing a framework. However two major issues emerged; the framework should be able to consider socio-economic issues as well as bio-physical issues and that the framework should be able to consider qualitative and quantitative data in a meaningful way.

While a detailed study of the socio-economic issues that should be included in the NAIF framework may be beyond the original scope of the project it is clear that any meaningful consideration of sustainability must be able to address or at least link to relevant socioeconomic factors. This view was expressed by all parties, even though different perspectives were expressed. The technical issue for the project is how to identify and link with the most useful and relevant socio-economic indicators and how to combine qualitative indicators with quantitative indicators.

A related issue for the project is how the framework should consider different values. For example some groups expressed the view that Aboriginal values should take precedence

over other values in some parts of the Kimberley. This issue has relevance to potential bio-physical indicators as well as to socio-economic indicators.

Consultation process

The composition of the stakeholder groups has significant implications for the process that will be required for successful engagement and ownership of the framework in the north of WA.

A major issue is the relatively high proportion (approximately 50%) of Aboriginal people in northern WA. Representatives of the Department of Environment expressed the view that the major economic challenge in northern WA was using water for the economic development of Aboriginal communities. From the NAIF project perspective gaining Aboriginal ownership of the project is important. As a result this could mean that successful consultation will be a lengthy process requiring visits to a number of relatively small communities and using facilitators who are language and culturally aware.

As well as addressing the issues inherent in consulting with a geographically widespread, culturally diverse group of people the project has to consider the fact that there has been extensive consultation with these communities over a wide range of issues in the past. As a result of past perceived failures many communities have adopted a legalistic view and bargain for whatever benefits they can get. This adds an element of difficulty to the process. In addition, some non Aboriginal groups who are pro development, have lost patience and faith that extensive consultations can lead to worthwhile results in a reasonable time frame.

The NAIF project has to maintain a balance between these different points of view if it is to manage a worthwhile consultation process. Achieving this is very important; as one department suggested if a sound process for consultation can be established to discuss the issues then the NAIF project could be counted a success.

Project management

The technical and consultation issues identified above have obvious implications for the management of the NAIF project.

The key to successful management of the project will be maintaining a balance; maintaining a balance between different interest groups and allowing all to feel that their issues are being carefully considered, maintaining a balance between listening and talking to people and working on framework development, and maintaining a balance so that stakeholders can see the benefits to them of a well developed framework.

APPENDIX 1 SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

NAIF MEETING PERTH 4 MAY 2004

Attendees

Name	Organisation	Phone	Email
Andy McMillan	WA Farmer's Federation	9325 2933	andymcmillan@waff.org.au
Jos Mensinck	Department of Premiers & Cabinet	0418 918 943	josmensinck@dpc.wa.gov.au
Adrian Nicholas	IAA (WA Region)	9474 9089	Adrian.nicholas@irrigation.org.au
Tony Smith	CSIRO Land and Water	9333 6259	Tony.smith@csiro.au
Andy McCrea	Dept of Environment	9278 0550	Andrew.mccrea@environment.wa.gov.au
Lorraine Bates	CSIRO Land and Water	9333 6323	Lorraine.bates@csiro.au
David Meehan	Dept of Industry and Resources	9327 5466	David.meehan@ior.wa.gov.au
Jordan Li	Dept of Premiers & Cabinet	9222 9365	jli@dpc.wa.gov.au
James Duggie	Conservation Council of WA	9420 7269	James.duggie@conservationwa.asn.au
Henry Esbenshade	Pastoralists & Graziers of WA	9479 4599	henrye@pgaofwa.org.au

NAIF MEETING KARRATHA 5 MAY 2004

Attendees

Name	Organisation	Phone	Email
Susan Worley	Department of Environment WA	08 9144 2000	Susan.worley@wrc.wa.gov.au
Owen Bennett	Department of Environment WA	08 9144 0214	Owen.bennett@environment.wa.gov.au
Peter Smith	West Australian Department of Agriculture	08 9144 2065	pcsmith@agric.wa.gov.au

NAIF MEETING BROOME 5 MAY 2004

Attendees

Name	Organisation	Phone	Email
Craig Phillips	Environs Kimberley	0419 851 220	craig.eclipse@westnet.com.au
Krysti Guest	Kimberley Land Council	0439 936 199	krysti.guest@lc.org.au
Maria Mann	Environs Kimberley	9192 1922	envkimb@broome.wt.com.au
Danny Fyffe	Grower	9192 4824	shamrockgardens@tpg.com.au
Steve Gray	Grower; Grays Organic Produce	9193 7485	
John Durant	Kimberley Area Consultative Committee; Kimberley Sustainable Regions Advisory Committee	08 9192 2450 0407 773 258	eo.kacc@westnet.com.au

NAIF MEETINGS KUNUNURRA 6 and 7 MAY 2004

Attendees Group Meeting

Name	Organisation	Phone	Email
Tanya Vernes	WWF	9168 0903	tvernes@wwf.org.au
David Menzel	Ord Cucurbit Growers	9169 1386	barradale@wn.com.au
Tara Gawned	WA Agriculture	9166 4032	tgawned@agric.wa.gov.au
Jodie Hawley	WA Agriculture	9166 4007	jhawley@agric.wa.gov.au
Dick Pasfield	Ord Land and Water	9169 2222	dick@olw.com.au
Andrew Kelly	Ord Irrigation	9168 3300	oic@westnet.com.au
Anna Price	Ord Irrigation	9168 3300	apoic@westnet.com.au
Elaine Gardiner	Ord Irrigation Coop	9168 1850	upstreamord@bigpond.com
Gabi Bloecker	Kimberley Primary Industries Association	9168 1305	bothkamp@bothkamp.com.au

Attendees Department of Environment Meeting

Name	Organisation	Phone	Email
Leith Bowyer	Department of Environment	08 9168 1082	Leith.bowyer@environ.wa.gov.au

Attendees Department of Agriculture Meeting

Name	Organisation	Phone	Email
Peter McCosker	Department of Agriculture	08 9166 4001	pfmccosker@agric.wa.gov.au
Francis Bright	Department of Agriculture	08 9166 4001	fbright@agric.wa.gov.au