



A flask of the chemical compound conocurvone takes pride of place before (left to right) Executive Director Syd Shea, Environment Minister Kevin Minson and Amrad Corporation Ltd General Manager of Business Development Barry Moore at the agreement signing ceremony. Behind them is a poster showing the molecular structure of conocurvone.

Photo by Verna Costello

World exclusive conocurvone contract

AN HISTORIC agreement to help conserve the State's native flora through the development of the pharmaceutical drug, conocurvone, has been signed.

In a joint announcement, Premier Richard Court and Deputy Premier Hedy Cowan said the agreement could bring the State more than \$5 million for research and conservation work.

Environment Minister Kevin Minson and Executive Director Syd Shea signed the contract with AMRAD Corporation Ltd.

AMRAD, an Australian company, has been allocated a world-exclusive licence by the US National Cancer Institute to develop conocurvone as a pharmaceutical drug.

The compound, which is derived from a smokebush plant found only in Western Australia, has

by Caris Bailey

shown promising results in initial tests for a treatment for the HIV virus.

Mr Court said although testing was only in its early stages, the agreement meant far more than royalties from any fully developed drug.

"What is so important is that the agreement ensures the involvement of WA scientists in the research work and it brings private sector investment for nature conservation," Mr Court said.

Significant precedent

"This agreement sets an internationally significant precedent and opens the way for other countries to benefit from their natural resources."

CALM has formed a

research consortium, including chemists, ecologists, biologists, virologists, horticulturalists, medical researchers, botanists and remote sensing specialists, to develop conocurvone to a marketable product.

The consortium, which is chaired by CALM's Director of Science and Information, Jim Armstrong, includes scientists from the department, WA universities and the government's Chemistry Centre.

The consortium has already made significant progress in studying the active chemical, its location and concentration in the target plant species.

An improved method of extracting the compound has also been developed and the group's work has enabled CALM to lodge six provisional patents since the middle of last year.

Mr Cowan said the recently amended CALM Act clearly affirmed the State's sovereignty and intellectual property rights in its wildlife.

"There have been too many examples of other countries reaping the benefits from our natural resources - just look at how many eucalyptus products Australia now imports," he said.

Mr Court said the CALM/AMRAD agreement did not mean others in the community would be denied all access to the smokebush and other plants under investigation.

"Aboriginal people, for example, certainly won't lose their access to bush medicines," he said.

"Far from locking up the resource, CALM can now ensure that all West Australians benefit from its use.

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The CALM/AMRAD agreement provides for:

- the rapid production of conocurvone, while the plant resource from which the drug is obtained is protected and conserved;
- cost recovery funding by AMRAD for the con-

sortium's work and research funding so that other WA smokebush species with potential pharmaceutical properties are protected, evaluated and developed. The first payment of \$1.15 million was made at the recent signing ceremony.

- significant royalties to be paid to the WA community from the sale of developed pharmaceutical products;
- the establishment — at no cost to taxpayers — of the full range of facilities needed to initiate a pharmaceutical infrastructure for WA.



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