

# RESEARCH BULLETIN

Informing Ord River water management

In many regions of Australia there can be gaps between scientific community and general public understanding of water management issues. One such region is the Ord River, where a framework for working together is being constructed.

The Ord Catchment is particularly pertinent with plans to expand irrigation in the area. This situation is unusual in Australia and the opportunities to learn how to better manage existing water use and incorporate current knowledge in planning for expansion of irrigation are unmatched anywhere in Australia.

An initiative of the UNESCO International Hydrological Program called Health Environment Life Policy (HELP) is creating a framework for water law and policy experts, water resource managers and water scientists to work together on water-

related problems. HELP is assisting catchments build networks that facilitate improvement in Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). Being a part of this program would enable the Ord community to drive research and investment

attracting expertise and funding opportunities to improve IWRM.

Through this project the National Program for Sustainable Irrigation assisted the Ord Catchment to better understand the benefits,

capacity and resource requirements of HELP so they could determine if this program would improve IWRM in the Ord Catchment.

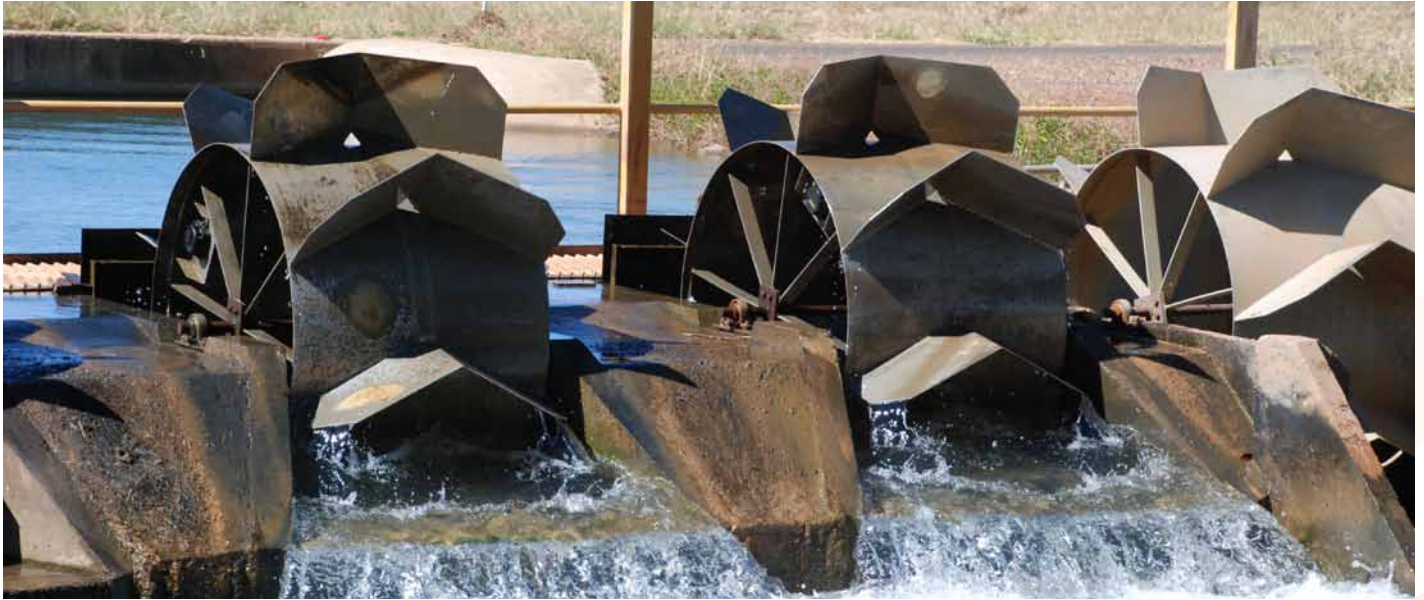
To better understand the benefits and requirements of HELP a series of interviews with personnel in other existing HELP basins was conducted. Responses indicated the following advantages:

- Policy makers can be brought together;

**The relative isolation of the Ord means research and management co-ordination is vital**



Upper catchment development needs, traditional use of land and water, and environmental protection have been among key considerations.



Ord water is not scarce and offers development opportunities governed by good information and planning.

- An increased international profile for the catchment is created;
- There can be assistance in attracting additional funding;
- Links with other regions around the world in similar situations develop; and
- Confidence is built in local direction on IWRM.

From the experiences in these basins it would appear that benefits from HELP accreditation are maximised when there is an individual committed to maintaining momentum within the region. Often this is an individual who can incorporate the extra work into their existing work plan with support from their employer, generally government workers, researchers or scientists. In a region such as the Ord, benefits are maximised when the champion has strong local contacts and relationships with stakeholders.

In addition to a champion, another strength of other HELP basins has been very strong, established, land and water management plans that have been aligned with HELP priorities. This has meant that not a lot of time is required from the champion to maximise opportunities from HELP.

The Ord Catchment community has a strong history of

cooperation and involvement in environmental planning. In 2000 the community drove the development of the Ord Land and Water Management Plan, including prioritising environmental issues, identifying gaps and developing goals and targets. Then in 2005 the Ord community was able to cement further these priorities through the development of the Strategic Investment Plan for the Natural Resource Management in the Ord Catchment.

Since these two processes there has been an investment of \$8 million of funding into the Ord to address research and develop priorities.

The Ord Catchment's application to become a HELP basin was submitted with the support of the East Kimberley Reference Group. After this submission a more comprehensive consultation

process with the East Kimberley Reference Group, and some wider strategic representation, was undertaken. This consultation was aimed at determining the Ord community's interest in pursuing HELP accreditation with the knowledge obtained from the experiences of the other basins. The consultation process included representatives from:

- Ord Irrigation Cooperative,
- Ord Land and Water,
- WA Department of Water,

**Planning is  
incorporating  
indigenous values**

- Department of Environment Conservation,
- CSIRO,
- Kimberley Development Commission,
- Miriuwung Gajerrong Aboriginal Corporation,
- Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley,
- Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia,
- East Kimberley Land Conservation District Committee,
- WA Water Corporation,
- Kimberley Primary Industries Association
- Rangelands Coordinating Group, the regional NRM body for the Kimberley,
- Cambridge Gulf Limited,
- East Kimberley Land Conservation District Committee,
- Ord Expansion Group,

Although the application to become a HELP basin had been submitted and the Ord Catchment was accepted, the critical component of the nomination, the schedule of proposed activities, had not developed. The development of this schedule was

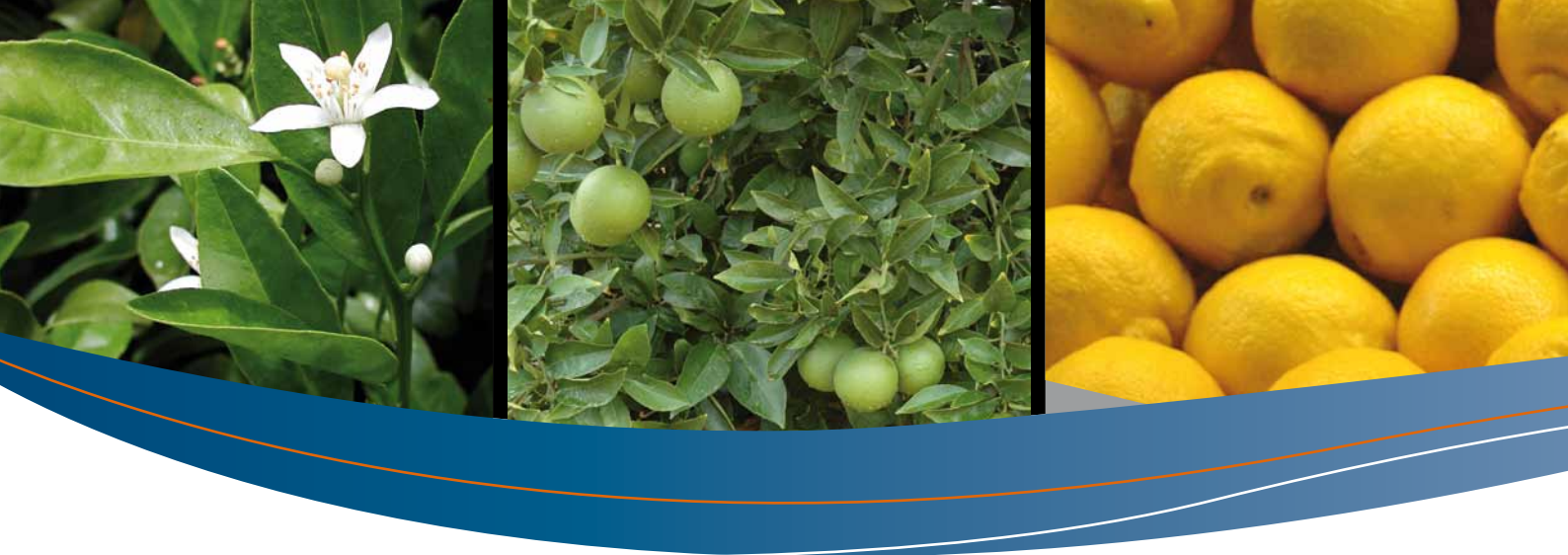
identified as the first critical step in the Ord community progressing its HELP accreditation.

Being regional, without resident research agencies, historically much of the research performed in the area is driven without the incorporation of local knowledge, interest or application considerations. The Ord community is concerned that much of this work is repetitive. Therefore the development of the HELP schedule would require documentation of regional priorities with as much stakeholder involvement to ensure community ownership and participation in the outcomes and to form a strategy to ensure strong connection between scientific research and water policy and management.

In 2000 the Ord Land and Water Management Plan (OLWMP) was developed by the community as a community document to guide future natural resource management within the Ord region. The processes captured the collective knowledge of over 100 individual community members from different backgrounds ranging from farming, tourism to conservation. From this came 42 goals and an associated 74 strategies to address the critical issues of the day. To achieve this, participants were divided into separate groups that focussed on the themes - Land, Water, Town and Conservation. A Technical Group composed of Local and State Government personnel provided information to the groups as required.



Land use is the subject of research.



On completion and endorsement of the plan a community board was elected, charged with the implementation of the plan.

The plan succeeded in gaining the commitment of the participating community members to be involved in providing the means to make a difference. This investment of time and knowledge was realised with the release of the plan where individual participants could recognise their words embedded within the document. This ensured the community willingly took ownership of the plan.

The detail of knowledge within the plan was such that it became a foundation document for a number of local and regional strategies. This assisted in creating a platform from which catchment natural resource programs were successfully developed, funded and implemented. The initial OLVMP was limited geographically within the Ord Catchment, albeit the focus area included the major population centre and agricultural production sectors.

Presently in the Ord Catchment major activities are occurring and large changes have occurred for the community since the development of the OLVMP, including the Ord Final Agreement between the Yawoorroong Miriuwung Gajerrong Yirgeb Noong Dawang people and the Western Australian State Government, and progression of the planned expansion of irrigation and social infrastructure in the Ord Catchment.

Values of the community include Indigenous values as well as aspirations for future development opportunities.

The aim of the Ord community is to ensure planning and sustainable management of water and other natural resources while addressing social, cultural, economic, ecological and institutional needs.

In broadening the plan there is the opportunity to include the entire catchment pulling in outlying communities, pastoral production and the intended expansion of the current irrigation area. Once this plan has been developed it could form the basis for the activity schedule for the HELP accreditation and would be a reference document for leveraging funding and directing research projects and policy development in the region.

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## About the Program

The National Program for Sustainable Irrigation defines and invests in research on the development and adoption of sustainable irrigation practices in Australian agriculture. The aim is to address critical emerging environmental management issues, while generating long-term economic and social benefits that ensure irrigation has a viable future.

ISBN: 1921025239 Product code: NPS1110

The National Program for Sustainable Irrigation is managed by Land and Water Australia on behalf of the partners. The partners include irrigators, water authorities, research agencies, state and Commonwealth departments.

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