As part of the Government of Western Australia’s commitment to sustainable economic development in the Fitzroy River catchment, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation will develop a Fitzroy water allocation plan by 2020.

This water allocation plan will provide for the long-term and sustainable use of the region’s water resources, while making sure the unique National Heritage listed environmental and cultural values of the Fitzroy River are protected.

This brochure outlines the proposed timeframe and process for developing the water allocation plan. It also includes information on what a water allocation plan is and how it will be used to manage water resources and support water licensing.
Fitzroy River commitments

The McGowan Government is committed to protecting and managing the Fitzroy River and its broader catchment in a way that recognises the cultural, environmental and economic importance of the river to the people of the Kimberley.

To deliver this commitment, the Government will:

- create the Fitzroy River National Park which will extend the Geike Gorge National Park along the Fitzroy River to the north and along the Margaret River to the east
- support the protection and development of a management plan for the Fitzroy River to ensure the health of the river and provide a basis for sustainable economic development
- not allow the Fitzroy River or its tributaries to be dammed.

Organisations, landowners and the community will have a role in shaping how the Fitzroy River will be managed.

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions will be creating the Fitzroy River National Park. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development will lead the development of the management plan.
A water allocation plan for the Fitzroy River

A key part of the management plan will be a water allocation plan, to be developed in consultation with stakeholders by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation by the end of 2020. This will set out how water from the Fitzroy River and aquifers will be managed and used, and how we will implement the ‘no dams’ policy.

During 2018, we have been researching, investigating and assessing all available technical and scientific information about the water resources.

Building on the long history of water studies and planning work using new scientific information, we will work with stakeholders throughout 2019 to:

- set water resource and management objectives
- decide how much ground and surface water is available for use, and how much needs to be left in the system to ensure its long-term sustainability
- develop a regulatory framework to manage the resources that includes licensing rules, policies to maintain social and cultural values, performance indicators and a monitoring program.

In early 2020, we will release the draft plan for public comment. After the public comment period, we will finalise the plan and publish it. The final plan will draw on the feedback we receive during the comment period.

Plan area

The Fitzroy water allocation plan will cover the Fitzroy River catchment, which extends from near Halls Creek in the east, downstream to the coast near Derby in the west. The plan area may also extend beyond the catchment to cover local groundwater resources.

The area is proclaimed for groundwater use as part of the Canning–Kimberley groundwater area and for surface water use as the Fitzroy River catchment area. This means water users require a water licence to lawfully take groundwater or surface water in these areas, except for small-scale stock and domestic users.
A water allocation plan does not determine ‘who gets the water’. In Western Australia, we regulate how water is taken from rivers and aquifers using water licences. In areas where there is a growing or high demand for water, we develop a water allocation plan to set limits on the total amount of water that should be licensed and to guide how licensing is carried out. This means our water allocation plans are the framework for managing water resources for each part of the system at a regional scale and for guiding local water licensing decisions.

In addition to guiding our water licensing decisions, water allocation plans are also a useful source of information for people interested in protecting and using water resources.

The Fitzroy water allocation plan will:

- describe the groundwater and surface water resources and how they interact
- define what type of water infrastructure will be acceptable on the Fitzroy River and its tributaries (‘no dams’ policy)
- state how water will be shared, including how much water can be used for commercial and other uses that involve taking water from rivers and aquifers
- establish how much water should be set aside and reserved for specific future uses such as drinking water and water by Aboriginal people for commercial use
- set out how much wet season and dry season water must be left in the rivers and aquifers to maintain the health of the Fitzroy River and the environment, and support its unique social and cultural values
- include the licensing rules and policies that will uniquely apply to the water resources in the Fitzroy River catchment
- describe how we will monitor the resources to evaluate management success.

We have well-established methods for developing water allocation plans, as set out in Water allocation planning in Western Australia: A guide to our process (DoW 2011). Stakeholders are involved at every stage of developing the plan.
Can I still apply for a water licence?

The department will continue to receive and assess all eligible applications for water licences while we develop the Fitzroy water allocation plan.

There has been a recent increase in the level of interest in using water from the Fitzroy River and local groundwater resources for agricultural development and other uses.

At this time, there are several development proposals for the Fitzroy River catchment and we are assessing their related licence applications (both surface water and groundwater). These projects include supplying drinking water to local communities and an irrigated agriculture development on Gogo Station. The Gogo proposal has significant surface water demands (50 gigalitres per year) and is currently being assessed by the Environmental Protection Authority.

Proponents are encouraged to contact the department in the early stages of new projects to discuss their water requirements. Please contact our Kununurra office on 08 9166 4100 or kununurra@dwer.wa.gov.au for more information.

What is a licence and how is an application for a water licence assessed?

A water licence authorises the holder to take water from a specific watercourse, well or underground source for particular purposes. Unless a person holds a licence, any unauthorised taking of water is prohibited except where a person has another right to do so, or is exempt from licensing. To be eligible to hold a licence, a person must have legal access to the property where the water is proposed to be taken. The department assesses applications for a water licence under requirements listed in water legislation and in accordance with our licensing policies and procedures, including the relevant water allocation plan (where one is in place).

When we assess an application we use all available information, including any new science. We assess whether the proposed take and use of water will be sustainable and the potential impacts on water-dependent values (cultural, environmental, social) and other exempt and licensed water users.

If a licence is granted it may include conditions for metering, vegetation, water quality and/or water level monitoring. Licences are typically issued for a 10-year period.
Shaping the vision of the water allocation plan

The Fitzroy River and surrounding catchment is important to many people who live, work and visit the area.

We will be listening and talking to a range of stakeholders to help us shape the water allocation plan. This will include the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, other Aboriginal groups and native title holders, pastoralists and environmental groups. Everyone will have the opportunity to give their feedback on the plan when it is released for public comment.

Each voice in the Fitzroy River area will be part of shaping the vision for how we allocate water.

Building on community planning and new science

Our water allocation planning is science-based; building on and guided by the discussions we have with our stakeholders.

We recognise that many organisations, landowners, community members and researchers have a long history of working on water matters in the Fitzroy River catchment. The water allocation plan will build on previous research, planning and statements.

Over the last four years, there has been a significant investment into new science investigations by the state and federal governments, universities, research institutions and non-government organisations. Some of this work was recently completed, with several projects continuing over the next few years. The results and findings will be released as they become available. This new work will extend our understanding of groundwater and surface water systems, and further define the environmental, social and cultural values of the Fitzroy River system.

Projects and investigations in the Fitzroy River catchment

- CSIRO Northern Australia Water Resource Assessment: Fitzroy Catchment
- Healthy country management plans
- National Environmental Science Program (due 2019/20)
- WA State groundwater investigation project (ongoing)
- Water for Food Fitzroy groundwater investigation project
- 2036 and beyond: A Regional investment blueprint for the Kimberley (2015)
- Fitzroy River catchment management plan (2010)
Next steps

We will begin consultation on the Fitzroy water allocation plan in 2019 and stakeholders will be notified of how they can be involved.

We will publish findings from new technical work and investigations on our website as it becomes available.

Snapshot of the Fitzroy River catchment area

- The Fitzroy River catchment spans almost 94 000 km² which covers more than 20 per cent of the Kimberley region.

- The Fitzroy River is on the Commonwealth National Heritage list as part of the West Kimberley National Heritage Place. It supports an array of aquatic ecosystems of high conservation value and more than 50 state, federal and internationally listed fauna and flora species. These include the freshwater and dwarf sawfish, Prince Regent hardyhead (fish), Gouldian finch and purple-crowned fairy wren.

- Annual river discharge measured at Fitzroy Crossing varies from 300 gigalitres (in 1992) to 25 000 gigalitres (in 2000). The average flow is 8000 gigalitres, which is the largest of any river in Western Australia.

- As of March 2018, around 3.3 gigalitres of groundwater and 6.1 gigalitres of surface water is allocated under water licences for commercial and public purposes.

- Water is used for irrigated agriculture, mining, infrastructure developments, public drinking water and stock watering.

- The department's water monitoring network includes 13 river gauging stations measuring river flow and 42 groundwater monitoring bores measuring groundwater levels and/or quality.

- There are several different aquifers in the Fitzroy River area. The Grant Group and Poole Sandstone are large, regional aquifers, while the Liveringa Group is a minor aquifer in some areas and an aquitard in other areas. There are also ancient limestone aquifers that are exposed in the eastern part of the catchment (Devonian reef complex) and shallow, alluvial aquifers that border major rivers.

- The age of groundwater in the Grant Group and Poole Sandstone aquifers ranges from just a few years in the shallow outcrop areas to 40 000 years in the deeper, confined parts of the aquifer.

- The Fitzroy River alluvial aquifer is made up of variable, interbedded layers of sand and clay. The department's 2017 drilling program found this aquifer ranged from 10–30 m thick, with water held in the sand lenses of the aquifer ranging from 1–12 m thick. Groundwater salinity in the alluvial aquifer was measured and ranges from fresh (less than 500 milligrams per litre of total dissolved solids) to saline (greater than 10 000 milligrams per litre of total dissolved solids).
Further information

If you would like more information about water licensing or water allocation planning, please contact us at our Kununurra district office on 08 9166 4100 or kununurra@dwer.wa.gov.au.