



Ord-East Kimberley Expansion Project

15 December 2009

Farming in the Ord

The Ord River Irrigation Area (ORIA) is a well-established and productive agricultural precinct comprising approximately 14,000 hectares of prime irrigated agricultural land in Western Australia's far north.

More than 30,000 hectares of land is currently undeveloped and suitable for irrigated agriculture in the area. With its close proximity to international markets, abundant water resources and excellent growing conditions the area has underutilised development potential.

The Western Australian Government recognises this potential and has started a program of works, through the Royalties for Regions program, to provide the necessary infrastructure to support an irrigation development of about 8,000 hectares on the Weaber Plains. This will be released in 2011.

This fact sheet outlines some of the key agricultural elements of the area. More detailed information on soil, crop research and emerging trends is available from the Department of Agriculture and Food.



Competitive advantages

Agriculture in the area has some distinct seasonal advantages. The region has a sub-tropical climate with an average annual maximum temperature of 35 degrees Celsius and an annual average rainfall of 830 millimetres. Most of this rainfall is between

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October and April. May to September has an average rainfall of only 4 millimeters.

This presents a distinct market advantage:

- The region is counter-seasonal for many of the tropical crops (citrus and fruits) grown in the northern hemisphere and the temperate summer crops of southern Australia.
- Growing months that are mostly rain-free reduce the risk of rain damage and lower disease pressures.
- The region is relatively free of major pests and diseases encountered in other parts of Australia and the world, in particular Mediterranean and Queensland fruit fly. A regional biosecurity plan is in place to reduce the risk of incursions.

Soil types

The soils of the Weaber Plains area are 30 per cent Cununurra clays and 70 per cent Aquitaine clays. Both soil types are also common in the existing irrigation area (commonly known as the M1 area).

The Cununurra clay soils are mostly neutral to mildly alkaline.

The Aquitaine clays have higher clay content and while they can be very productive, require careful management and irrigation practices. Aquitaines in the northern part of the Weaber Plains are known to have high salt content at depth and irrigation must be carefully planned to prevent water seepage and subsequent water table elevation.

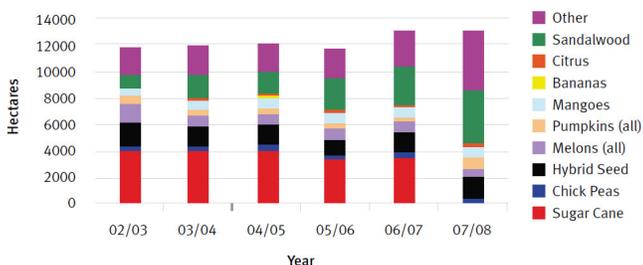
A detailed soil map of the Weaber Plains can be found on the project website www.royaltiesforregions.wa.gov.au/ord

Agricultural practices

The M1 area is about 14,000 hectares of mostly black Cununurra clays under furrow irrigation. There are small areas of lighter soils and also some drip and sprinkler irrigation.

In the past a number of agricultural crops have been grown, including rice, cotton and sugar cane. For a number of reasons, including low prices and insecticide resistance, these crops do not dominate the landscape now.

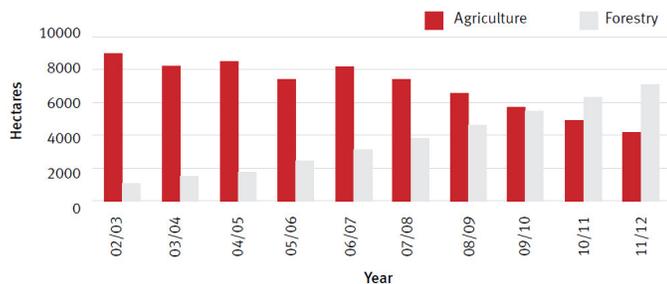
The graph below shows changes in crops grown between 2002/03 and 2007/08.



*Other crops include: culinary beans, hay, maize, small seeds, sunflower, sweet corn, millet, vegetables, papaya, bananas, tropical fruit and nursery plants.

Emerging trends

There has been a recent increase in land demand that has been driven mainly by the introduction of forestry, particularly sandalwood. The first commercial harvest of sandalwood is expected to be in 2013 from initial plantings in 2000. The graph below shows the historical and predicted level of land use change from agriculture to forestry since 2002/03.



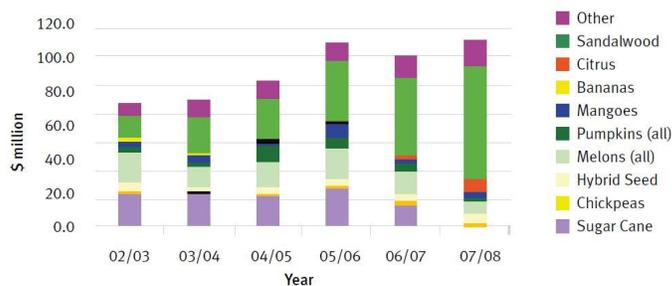
Another new emerging crop is chia (*Salvia hispanica*). About 1,500 hectares of chia was planted in 2009, 50 per cent more than in 2008.

Horticultural opportunities have also bolstered the demand for land over the past five years including a growing national demand for fresh fruit and vegetables. The ORIA is also well placed to supply some of the more densely populated Asian countries, as well as other world markets, with quality produce.

In free-trading global markets, economy of scale is required for agricultural production to remain competitive. The release of the Weaber Plains agricultural lots will provide additional land to meet current demand. The types of crops grown will depend on the market signals at the time.

Value of irrigated farm activity

The value of irrigated farm activity has increased over the past decade. The graph below shows the relative value of different crops in the ORIA between 2002/03 and 2007/08.



More information

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