

Yamatji Marlpa Barna Baba Maaja Aboriginal Corporation

Federal Funding to Fast-Track Pilbara Native Title Claims

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A \$5.5 million dollar funding boost from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), will fast-track native title work in the resource-rich Pilbara region of Western Australia. The increased resources will allow claim representatives, Pilbara Native Title Service (PNTS), to progress the 'Pilbara Connection Project' at a much faster rate than previous funding allowed.

In order to negotiate a native title determination, native title claimants or their representatives must provide the WA State Government with a 'connection report', containing anthropological and/or historical research to prove the basis of their claim. In general terms, they must show a connection to the land and waters claimed and continuity in their traditional system of law and custom, since sovereignty.

The 'Pilbara Connection Project', coordinated by PNTS, will provide connection reports for eight native title claims over the central and western Pilbara. Traditional owners' connection to country will be recorded in the form of regional and individual claim group reports and these reports will then be submitted to the State Government to determine if each group's claim is strong enough for a native title determination.

Native title groups represented by PNTS and involved in the project include; Gobawarra Minduarra Yinhawanga; Innawonga; Innawonga Bunjima; Kuruma Marthudunera; Ngarlawangga; Nyiyaparli; and Puutu Kunti Kurrama Pinikura.

The 'Pilbara Connection Project' aims to create certainty for claim groups and the outcomes will be vitally important in their future negotiations with mining companies and developers in the region.

Peter Jeffries, Regional Manager, Pilbara Native Title Service, said, "Until now, we only received funding to produce approximately one connection report per year, and many of these groups have waited more than a decade for their claims to be resolved.

The 'Pilbara Connection Project' funding means faster progress, allowing traditional owners to gain rightful recognition of their country much sooner than previously anticipated."

Since confirmation of the funding was received in late 2007, Pilbara Native Title Service has collected documentary material on the native title groups from universities and libraries around Australia for research into connection and native title rights and interests.

The collected material included previous field work notes from anthropologists who worked in the area, station records and any other evidence indicating which groups and families were associated with the lands since sovereignty. This material has been distributed to the project's anthropologists to commence research and reviews.

New field research is also underway for a number of the groups in the project, with more consultants to come on board in mid-2008. The 'Pilbara Connection Project' is expected to reach completion in 2009.

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