



## Water rights, access and allocations discussed at 2026 Native Title Forums

**MEDIA RELEASE: Thursday, 30 April 2026**



**Photo: WA Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Water, and Climate Resilience Hon Don Punch MLA presenting to the 2026 YMAC Native Title Forum (Perth) (image: Tash Gillespie).**

Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) held its annual Native Title Forums throughout April, exploring the theme of freshwater rights, access, and allocations – a highly complex and important issue for YMAC’s representative regions.

Forums were held in Geraldton and Perth. The planned forum in Port Hedland did not proceed.

The Perth forum was attended by the WA Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Water and Climate Resilience Hon Don Punch MLA, who shared an update on water rights across the state, acknowledging the importance of water for communities, ecosystems and Country, as well as economic factors.

The forums also included presentations from the National Native Title Council; Environmental Defenders Office; Department of Water and Environmental Regulation; Department of the Premier and Cabinet; Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage; and Department of Mines, Petroleum and Exploration.



The forums provided opportunity for Traditional Owners as well as directors and staff from Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBCs) within YMAC's representative regions to discuss this critical issue with each other, and directly with government.

Water was highlighted by those in attendance as a foundational element for First Nations people, which holds deep spiritual and cultural significance, as well as providing connection to Country and identity, holding environmental significance, and providing economic opportunity.

In his address, Minister Punch said he understood the changing landscape in water rights cannot be ignored.

“With climate change and the way our state is growing, it cannot be business as usual. We cannot have Country dying because we've taken too much ground water. We need to secure our collective future,” he said.

Despite this, the Minister also made it clear the State Government will not be proposing any major amendments to related legislation in the short-term, but that engagement through water planning is a means to improve the way First Nations' priorities and cultural knowledge is incorporated into processes. Many attendees voiced their concerns in response, arguing the need for urgent and meaningful changes, rather than a gradual approach, to be of any genuine effect.

Additional key concerns raised throughout the forums included: the absence of a clear legal framework; the need for a lead agency model; a shift in reform from participation to shared authority; systemic exclusion resulting from the under-resourcing and capacity of PBCs, limited transparency, and legal complexities; governance and communication following the correct cultural processes; and climate change and water security pressures.

Attendees across the forums also shared their thoughts and suggestions for ways government could improve on the status quo. Such recommendations proposed included:

- Establishing clear leadership and whole-of-government accountability
- Reforming engagement approaches to enable genuine inclusion and participation
- Strengthening transparency and access to information
- Ensuring regulation delivers outcomes, not just compliance
- Preventing the transfer of environmental and legacy risks to Traditional Owners
- Investing in First Nations capacity and governance capability
- Using existing policy and planning tools to deliver immediate gains.



YMAC CEO Simon Hawkins said the forums provided an opportunity for open and constructive discussion around freshwater native title rights.

“YMAC’s Native Title Forums had a great turnout this year, generating some fantastic discussion between Traditional Owners, PBCs, and government departments. Issues raised and suggestions made at the forums will provide a basis for YMAC’s related advocacy work moving forward.

“On behalf of YMAC, thank you to everyone who came along and participated in this year’s events. Your contributions are highly valued by the organisation and made the forums a great success.”

~ Ends ~

*All quotes to be attributed to Mr Simon Hawkins, CEO, Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation.*

---

#### **About Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation**

Established in 1994, Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) is the Native Title Representative Body (NTRB), delivering native title and other services across the Pilbara, Mid West, Murchison and Gascoyne regions of Western Australia. As an Aboriginal corporation, YMAC is run by a First Nations board of directors, representing several native title groups, each of whom have their own language, culture, traditions, and protocols. YMAC services include native title claim, compensation and future act representation; heritage services; executive office, community, and economic development assistance; land administration, and natural resource management support.

---

Media contact: **Tash Gillespie**, Communications Manager, email [editor@ymac.org.au](mailto:editor@ymac.org.au) and [tgillespie@ymac.org.au](mailto:tgillespie@ymac.org.au) or, mobile **0473 247 657**.