

Plant could drain water supply

By **BROOKE LITTLEWOOD**



WHEATBELT farmers fear they could be left hung out to dry, as an endangered orchid threatens a crucial and historical water supply.

Pingaring Rock water tank and wall was constructed in 1931-32 by sustenance labour workers under a WA Government scheme, which created employment during the Great Depression years.

It provided railway construction workers, steam trains and settlers at Pingaring Siding on the Lake Grace to Hyden line with water and – over the past 92 years – has given local farmers security for livestock and cropping in drier conditions.

Now the future of the cement water catchment wall is up in the air and at the centre of a stand-off between the Shire of Kulin and Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA).

The saga reportedly started after DBCA flagged concerns to the Water Corporation about the endangered Pingaring spider orchid, found near the base of the wall.

According to the Shire of Kulin chief executive officer Alan Leeson, onsite discussions were had with Water Corporation and DBCA about making structural alterations to the rock catchment by drilling holes to increase surface water runoff onto the orchids.

Mr Leeson argued the structural, historical and performance elements of the wall were critical and non-negotiable.

Local farmers feared they would lose the community water supply and would be forced to cart potable water for livestock and cropping from long distances.

Evan Wyatt is a farmer at Pingaring and relies heavily on the Pingaring Rock water catchment, particularly for security in dry years.

If the wall was altered and community water

supply was lost, Mr Wyatt said some farmers would have to travel up to 80 kilometres to a pipeline to cart scheme water for agricultural purposes.

He said the Pingaring spider orchid still grew in reasonable numbers across the district, including on his farm.

“I’m all for conservation, but water supplies are also critically important,” Mr Wyatt said.

“We don’t want the spider orchid to disappear and our dispute is that it isn’t going to – it is in as good numbers as it has ever been.

“For example, in one particular area there was a population of 15 orchids growing in a group, which is good for the species longevity.

“Even onfarm in last year’s dry winter conditions, when there was 200 millimetres rainfall, and in areas of flat rock where water doesn’t run, they have still existed in good numbers.

“The fact is maybe the spider orchid is not

endangered, perhaps it has always been in low numbers or is just rare.”

As only the Pingaring township had been put on scheme water, Mr Wyatt said the Pingaring Rock catchment provided an important water supply for the entire farming community.

He said farmers could not access the town’s scheme water with their trucks and relied on the catchment for agricultural purposes, including livestock and spraying, and just as importantly emergency response to fire.

“If the wall was altered the Pingaring tank wouldn’t fill and would be at reduced capacity.

“It gets empty in dry years, like in the last drought, so the more water we can catch off the rock the better.

“The Pingaring Rock water reserve isn’t for the town anymore – the town has been put on scheme, but we can’t access the

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❑ Pingaring farmer Evan Wyatt with the Pingaring Rock water catchment wall, which he fears is at risk of being altered. Photos on this page and following pages by Jeni Wyatt.



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Wheat (ASW1)	395	395
Canola (CAN1)	671	662
Canola (CAG1)	655	640
Barley (BFED1)	342	345
Lupin (LUP1)	515	505

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WOOL (c/kg)	This Sale	Last Sale
18 m	1569	1569
19 m	1390	1400
20 m	1332	1337
21 m	1314	1326
22 m	N/A	N/A
23 m	N/A	N/A
24 m	N/A	N/A

AWEX eastern indicator c/kg: 1163
AWEX western indicator c/kg: 1291

CATTLE (c/kg liveweight)		
Vealer beef (steers) c/kg:	270	270
Yearling beef (steers) c/kg:	230	240
Cow beef c/kg:	178	180

SHEEP (c/kg dressed)		
Heavy lambs (N/S) (c/kg):	550	530
Heavy mutton (c/kg):	110	85
Wethers (c/kg):	70	80

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scheme water with our trucks.

"We already have to cart potable water from about 30-40km away and without the reserve we would have to do the same for agricultural purposes."

Mr Wyatt said if there was limited access to the Pingaring Rock water reserve, farmers would be hit particularly hard in drought years.

He said it wasn't long ago that government was spouting how areas needed to be drought-proofed.

"Even in normal years that water supply is used right up," Mr Wyatt said.

"If people needed water for stock, spraying or other agricultural purposes, they would have to cart it from the scheme which comes from Stirling Dam, east of Harvey.

"Similarly to what we already do to access potable water, we would have to drive to the scheme line on the Lake Grace-Kulin Road, which could be up to 80km for some farms.

"In the past, when we ran livestock, we didn't have to cart water for stock because we had good dams onfarm.

"But when those dams dried up in severe drought, one person was carting water for 5000-head sheep from the Kulin-Lake Grace pipeline by truck every single day."

The Shire of Kulin pursued management of the Pingaring Rock reserve, including the wall and tank, after being approached by Water Corporation in 2020.

In correspondence with the Shire, Water Corporation said there were a number of surplus small dams within the district that were available for transfer.

It said the dams were located on Crown Reserves and any transfers would be accepted in their entirety and on an as-is basis.

As part of the handover process,

Key points

- Built in 1931-32 the Pingaring Rock water catchment is a critical water supply for the district's agricultural sector.
- The Shire of Kulin pursued management of the Pingaring Rock reserve, including the wall and tank, after being approached by Water Corporation in 2020.
- Concerns were raised by Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, after the endangered Pingaring spider orchid was found at the base of the wall.
- Onsite discussions were reportedly had about making structural alterations to the rock catchment by drilling holes to increase surface water runoff.
- Should this go ahead, farmers fear their community water supply would be lost and they would have to travel up to 80km to cart water for agricultural purposes.

necessary executive approvals were needed from government agencies such as DBCA, which raised concerns about the sustainability of the Pingaring spider orchid due to water being held back by the catchment wall.

According to Mr Leeson, the Shire of Kulin, Water Corporation and DBCA met onsite at the Pingaring Rock in October last year.

From the meeting it was the Shire's understanding that DBCA's preference was to increase the flow of water from the rock catchment down onto the orchids.

"The only way this can be achieved is by structurally altering the rock wall, drilling holes near the base thus increasing the surface water runoff from the rock catchment onto the orchids," Mr Leeson said.

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"I can confirm this option was discussed at the onsite meeting and in reality is the only option that would appease DBCA's concerns regarding the Pingaring spider orchids.

"Discussions are continuing in this space between DBCA, Water Corporation and the Shire."

Given the catchment's historical significance, and the fact it provides farmers with a vital water supply, Mr Leeson rejected the recommendation and said the structural, performance and historical elements of the manmade cement wall were critical and non-negotiable.

Mr Leeson said DBCA was of the view that it was crucial the orchids received as much water as possible in a drying climate.

He contended that it was even more important the community had access to a reliable water supply for domestic and emergency purposes.

"Hypothetically, if there was a fire in the Pingaring Rock Reserve the community or first responders would go to the tank to fill their fire units," Mr Leeson said.

"Thus they are far better positioned to protect both physical and natural assets such as the orchids.

"The position in wanting to protect the orchids through altering the wall may have the opposite effect.

"That is because the water source, which would protect them in the event of an emergency response, may otherwise be compromised



□ Built over about 12 hectares of rock, Pingaring's cement catchment wall guides water into the two-million gallon concrete storage tank, through troughs, open drains and a main pipe.



□ The endangered Pingaring spider orchid, which has been found near the base of the Pingaring Rock water catchment wall.

because of alterations to the structural and performance elements of the wall.

"The Shire and indeed the community are opposed to any structural alterations to the wall, which will adversely affect the performance of the catchment (rock wall) and ultimately the water supply to the community."

A DBCA spokesperson said it was invited by the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage to comment on the proposed transfer of Reserve 18926 from the Water Corporation to the Shire of Kulin last year.

The spokesperson said DBCA provided advice regarding the presence of

Pingaring spider orchids (*Caladenia graniticola*) at this location.

"This species is only found in the Wheatbelt and is threatened by climate change and reduced rainfall," DBCA said.

"Management of this species at this location is a responsibility of the land manager.

"DBCA will continue to liaise closely with the land manager regarding this particular population of important flora and has not provided any advice in relation to altering existing infrastructure."

In a statement to *Farm Weekly*, a Water Corporation spokesperson said the Pingaring Rock tank and catchment was located on Crown Reserve controlled by Water Corporation.

The spokesperson confirmed Water Corporation was in

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discussions with the Shire of Kulin about taking over management of the Crown Reserve (and hence, the tank and catchment).

"The area will remain Crown Reserve regardless of whether the Shire or Water Corporation is managing the area," the Water Corporation said.

"The DBCA have advised the Shire and Water Corporation that a cluster of critically endangered orchids is located at the base of the rock catchment area.

"DBCA subsequently asked if the Water Corporation could investigate modifying the rock wall to increase run-off, to increase the orchids' chance of survival."

The Water Corporation spokesperson said it was aware that the Pingaring Tank, and by extension the rock wall, was also recognised as having local heritage significance.

The spokesperson said the Water Corporation was working closely with all involved to see if run-off to the orchids could be increased, while ensuring adequate tank run-off was maintained.

"Any solution will be agreed between the parties, and will carefully consider the integrity and local heritage significance of the wall," they said.

"No work has been conducted at this time and discussions are continuing to find a solution that balances the relevant heritage, environmental and water supply value."



Pingaring Rock water tank and wall was constructed in 1931-32 by sustenance labour workers under a WA government scheme, which created employment during the Great Depression years.

BUILT over 12 hectares of rock, Pingaring's cement catchment wall guides water into the two-million gallon concrete storage tank, through troughs, open drains and a main pipe.

From the storage tank, the water was piped by gravity feed over two kilometres to the overhead railway water tank at Pingaring siding, to supply the steam trains, which began running in 1932.

While the water catchment was initially built for railway construction workers, trains and settlers, it was also made available to local farmers for household and stock water use.

A standpipe was located at the main tank, west

and on the town side of Pingaring Rock.

After diesel trains began running in the early 1960s, and steam trains were discontinued, water supply was no longer required for railways, and the pipes and tanks fell into disrepair.

Eventually, after pressure from the local Farmers Union branch, the Water Supply now known as Water Corporation, took over the tank, cleaned it and replaced the roof.

It also connected a direct water service to the school house, school, sports ground and homes in the Pingaring townsite, and provided a standpipe at the Pingaring Hall.

In 1993, government funding was available to Pingaring farmers for a

"self help" water service, the project involved 27 kilometres of connection pipeline and 33 days of community voluntary labour.

As a result of this 14 farms and the main Pingaring Rock water tank supply were serviced along the pipeline.

Four years later, the tank was heritage listed by the WA Government's Heritage Council, which said the place represented the beginnings of settlement and the railway line in Pingaring, as well as ongoing sustainability of the town and district.

Despite being built at the same time and being connected to the tank, the wall was not part of the heritage listing.

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