



THE GOLDEN PIPELINE
A NATIONAL TRUST PROJECT

THE POLITICS OF THE GOLDFIELDS WATER SUPPLY SCHEME



Sir John Forrest officially opens the Scheme by turning on the water at Coolgardie on 24 January 1903.

BL 001000D

The Goldfields Water Supply Scheme, built between 1898 and 1903 to deliver water 560 km from Mundaring to Kalgoorlie, has been a lifeline to the arid interior of Western Australia for 100 years and was central to the development of the State. The scheme's inception and construction were controversial and full of drama and intrigue.

A CHANGING COLONY

Western Australia in the early 1890s was entering a period of great change. The sparsely populated and isolated colony had recently achieved self-government and Premier Sir John Forrest, a dominating influence on the political scene, was determined to expand the colony. In 1891 he employed CY O'Connor, an Irish born engineer working in New Zealand, as Engineer-in-Chief and told him the colony required 'Railways, harbours, everything'. O'Connor immediately began work on Fremantle Harbour and improving the colony's rail system.

GOLD AND WATER

When gold was discovered at Fly Flat near Coolgardie in 1892, then at Hannan's (later Kalgoorlie) in 1893, thousands flocked to the arid Goldfields. The lack of fresh water was a huge problem and resulted in poor sanitation, diseases such as typhoid and many deaths. Alternatives such as carting water, condensation plants and drilling bores failed to provide an adequate supply. Premier Forrest visited in 1895 and saw for himself the enormity of the problem and, as more than half the colony's population now resided in the Goldfields, he was under considerable pressure to find a solution to the water crisis.

Following this visit, Forrest formally requested O'Connor to investigate the problem. Earlier proposals had included pumping water from the Avon River near Northam to the Goldfields. After exhaustive enquiry O'Connor and his team recommended a scheme to pump water from a dam east of Perth through a pipeline to Coolgardie.

COST OF THE SCHEME

The cost was enormous but Premier Forrest was determined the scheme should go ahead and in July 1896 put the proposition to Parliament. There was criticism from several politicians and after long debate Parliament approved the raising of a loan from England of £2 500 000, (5 million dollars), more than WA's entire annual budget. However, there was a lengthy delay as the funds proved difficult to raise and approval from a British engineering advisory committee took months. Criticism of the scheme began to mount.

REGIONAL ANTAGONISM

There was ill-feeling about the size of the scheme. Perth did not have its own water supply and many felt that Forrest was putting a huge financial stake into the Goldfields. In the eastern states and in other countries it had already been seen that gold could run out as quickly as it had appeared. The Goldfields were populated with 't'othersiders' (people from Australia's Eastern colonies) who, aware of the importance of gold to the colony, considered that the wealth they



The Goldfields strongly supported Federation, 31 July 1900

BL 54425P

were generating should be used to improve conditions in the Goldfields - starting with a reliable supply of water.

CRITICS OF THE SCHEME

Critics in the press and Parliament attacked the scheme from the beginning because of the amount of public money being spent. O'Connor was also accused of giving jobs to former colleagues from New Zealand. Sunday Times editor FC Vosper, who was also a politician, ran a personal attack on O'Connor's integrity and ability through the paper.

Parliamentary debate over a contract for caulking the pipes and controversy over land dealings along the pipeline route prompted a formal Government enquiry into the entire scheme in February 1902. O'Connor was in South Australia at the time of the enquiry and returned to face more press accusations of corruption and incompetence. With Forrest's move into Federal politics, O'Connor now lacked political support. The new Premier, George Leake, had long been an opponent of the Goldfields Water Supply Scheme.

O'Connor came under increasing strain from the attacks on his personal and professional integrity and, tragically, took his own life on 10 March 1902, just a month before pumping began.

In May, the Government enquiry into the scheme found no basis for press accusations of corruption against O'Connor. The enquiry was critical of the land dealings of his deputy, TC Hodgson. Although no charges were laid, Hodgson was suspended and later resigned from his position.

Lord and Lady Forrest officially opened the scheme ten months after O'Connor's death, in three separate ceremonies at Mundaring, Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie on 22 and 24 January 1903. The scheme cost £2 655 220, only slightly more than O'Connor's estimate made seven years earlier (which did not include the extension to Kalgoorlie). Water has flowed to the Goldfields ever since.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION GO TO

GOLDEN PIPELINE WEBSITE:
www.goldenpipeline.com.au
 WATER CORPORATION WEBSITE:
www.watercorporation.com.au

READ

Cyril Ayris,
CY O'Connor: the man for the time,
 Cyril Ayris Freelance, 1996

Anthony Evans,
CY O'Connor: his life and legacy
 UWA Press, 2001

Frank Crowley, *Big John Forrest 1847-1918*, UWA Press, 2000

National Trust, *The Golden Pipeline Heritage Trail Guide*, 2002

J Lefroy, D Frylinck and M Duke,
The Pipeline CY O'Connor Built.
 Fremantle Arts Centre Press,
 Western Australia, 2003

VISIT

No 1 Pump Station,
 Mundaring Weir
 The Golden Pipeline Heritage Trail

The National Trust promotes the value of heritage and uses its heritage assets to build a better future for Western Australia. The National Trust seeks to encourage and educate the community about the appreciation, enjoyment and use of its unique cultural and natural heritage, and to provide long-term social, economic and environmental benefit to all Western Australians.

FOR MORE INFORMATION REGARDING MEMBERSHIP AND VOLUNTEERING CONTACT:

The National Trust of Australia (Western Australia)
 PO Box 1162
 West Perth
 Western Australia 6872
 Telephone 08 9321 6088
 Facsimile 08 9324 1571
 Email trust@ntwa.com.au
 Website www.ntwa.com.au