

Werribee vegetable growers saved from drought

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After facing financial ruin this summer, Werribee vegetable growers will from next year have their farms drought-proofed under Melbourne's largest commercial water recycling project.

The farmers will also be given immediate access to emergency irrigation water to save what remains of this season's crops.

The area's 150 vegetable growers - major suppliers to the Australian market - have faced ruin since pushing their groundwater supplies dangerously close to salinity late last year.

The project will deliver 5500 megalitres - the equivalent of 5500 Olympic-sized swimming pools - of recycled water to the area each year.

Recycled water that would otherwise be pumped into Port Phillip Bay, will be piped from the Western Treatment Plant to Werribee along a \$9.8 million pipeline to be built by Melbourne Water.

Yesterday, acting Premier and Water Minister John Thwaites heralded the announcement as a guarantee for farmers.

"This will provide security for farmers in the drought," he said. "There will be a secure supply of this recycled water to top up the river water even in the drought periods."

He said Victorian consumers would also benefit from an expected reduction in the price of vegetables.

Mr Thwaites said the challenge would be reducing the salinity of the recycled water. Initially it will be mixed with river water, but expected technological developments could reduce that need.

About 89 Werribee farmers have signed up to the irrigation scheme, which also grants them access from next week to emergency water from the Thomson Dam, until the pipeline is built.

Other growers are resisting, in the belief of a consumer backlash against vegetables grown using recycled water. The recycled water has been supported as safe for human use by the Department of Human Services and the Environment Protection Authority.

Mr Thwaites said the recycled water was environmentally friendly as it reduced demands on groundwater and the level of harmful nutrients being discharged into Port Phillip Bay.

But Environment Victoria rivers spokeswoman Natalie Jamieson questioned the Government's priorities in approving additional water from the Thomson Dam for irrigators, when the Thomson River and Gippsland Lakes were at dangerously low levels.

"The extent to which the environment will benefit is not entirely clear," Ms Jamieson said.

Werribee vegetable grower Con Ballan, who lost half his crop this year, said the area's farmers had reached a point of desperation before the announcement. "It's a great thing that's happened for us farmers in Werribee," he said. "If we face a drought then we're going to have a more sustained business running."

The emergency irrigation plan was first suggested by Werribee farmers last November when they depleted their aquifer to dangerously low levels.

The Government yesterday also announced the go-ahead for the \$20 million Eastern Irrigation Scheme, which will supply recycled water to farmers in Cranbourne and Five Ways from next summer. About 43 farmers have signed up to the irrigation scheme, with more expected in the coming months.

Mr Thwaites said the two water projects would lead the world in water recycling.

He said talks between the State Government and businessmen Richard Pratt and Frank Costa to create a high-tech waste water treatment plant at Werribee were moving positively.