

GM cotton for Kimberleys?

The Kimberley region, in north-west Western Australia, is known for its beautiful scenery, wildlife and minerals. The region is dry, but farms grow crops which are irrigated from huge rivers such as the Ord River. A company called Western Agricultural Industries (WAI) planned to research and develop a major genetically modified (GM) cotton industry

there. Many local people, however, did not want this in their area.

Who controls the GM cotton industry?

The State Government of Western Australia controls irrigation from rivers, as well as the development of land for farms.

Arguments for and against the cotton scheme

For

- ✓ It would be worth millions of dollars per year.
- ✓ There will be jobs for local people.
- ✓ **Monsoon rains**, otherwise unused, could be used for irrigation.
- ✓ GM crops need 80 per cent less pesticides than non-GM cotton.

Against

- ✗ Too much water would be diverted from river systems and underground basins, which could cause waterholes and wetlands to dry up.
- ✗ Huge areas of land would be cleared, destroying the **habitat** of native animals like the bilby.
- ✗ Local residents, including Indigenous people living off the land, would suffer ill effects.
- ✗ The future effects of GM crops on the environment are not understood.

Large cotton farms can cause concern to citizens.



Environs Kimberley set up information stalls for local citizens.

How people found out about the issue

WAI was keen to convince the local people that the cotton industry would be good for their area. The State Government of Western Australia supported them by allowing investigations into how it would work, and beginning a trial of GM cotton near Broome.

WAI and the State Government

The Western Australian Government and WAI both sent out press releases to tell people that the scheme would bring in benefits such as one billion dollars per year and 5000 jobs. Representatives attended public meetings to answer questions. People read about the scheme on websites and in

public newsletters. Some thought it was worth a try.

Community groups

Many Kimberley residents, though, were very unhappy. They did not like what they had heard about the plans. They began to give out information on the problems the GM cotton scheme might cause. They also held public meetings and information stalls at Broome Markets. Groups worked with broadcasters and film-makers to inform people, and wrote letters to newspapers. They also designed and produced bumper stickers, T-shirts and a postcard to keep the ideas in everyone's minds. The issue began to get a lot of attention in the media.

How people joined in the debate

Environs Kimberley, a civic action group, was formed to take action against the WAI proposal. They later joined with other major conservation groups, such as the Australian

Conservation Foundation and the Kimberley Land Council (representing Aboriginal people), and signed agreements to work together. This made a powerful opposition movement to the cotton growing plan.

What did people say?

A businessman

'This project will bring money and jobs to the Kimberley.'

A conservationist

'Does the Premier want to be remembered by Australian children every Easter as the man who made the Bilby extinct?'

T-shirt

'Keep your cotton-pickin' hands off the Kimberley.'

A local resident

'Maybe we should just do some trials and see how it goes.'

Environs Kimberley and the Kimberley Land Council worked together against cotton farming.



T-shirts and calendars can publicise an issue.

How people communicated their opinions

The issue of cotton farming was talked about a lot. A program on the ABC allowed all sides of the dispute to have their say in the debate. WAI and the Government continued their publicity, releasing statements about their plans. Ordinary citizens, conservation groups and community groups kept pressure on the Government by requesting information and making their feelings known.

Individual citizens:

- ▶ sent letters and emails to Members of Parliament
- ▶ wrote letters to the paper.

Environs Kimberley:

- ▶ joined local **advisory committee** groups

- ▶ lobbied and held meetings with politicians, putting their views as forcefully as they could
- ▶ presented a **petition** to Parliament.

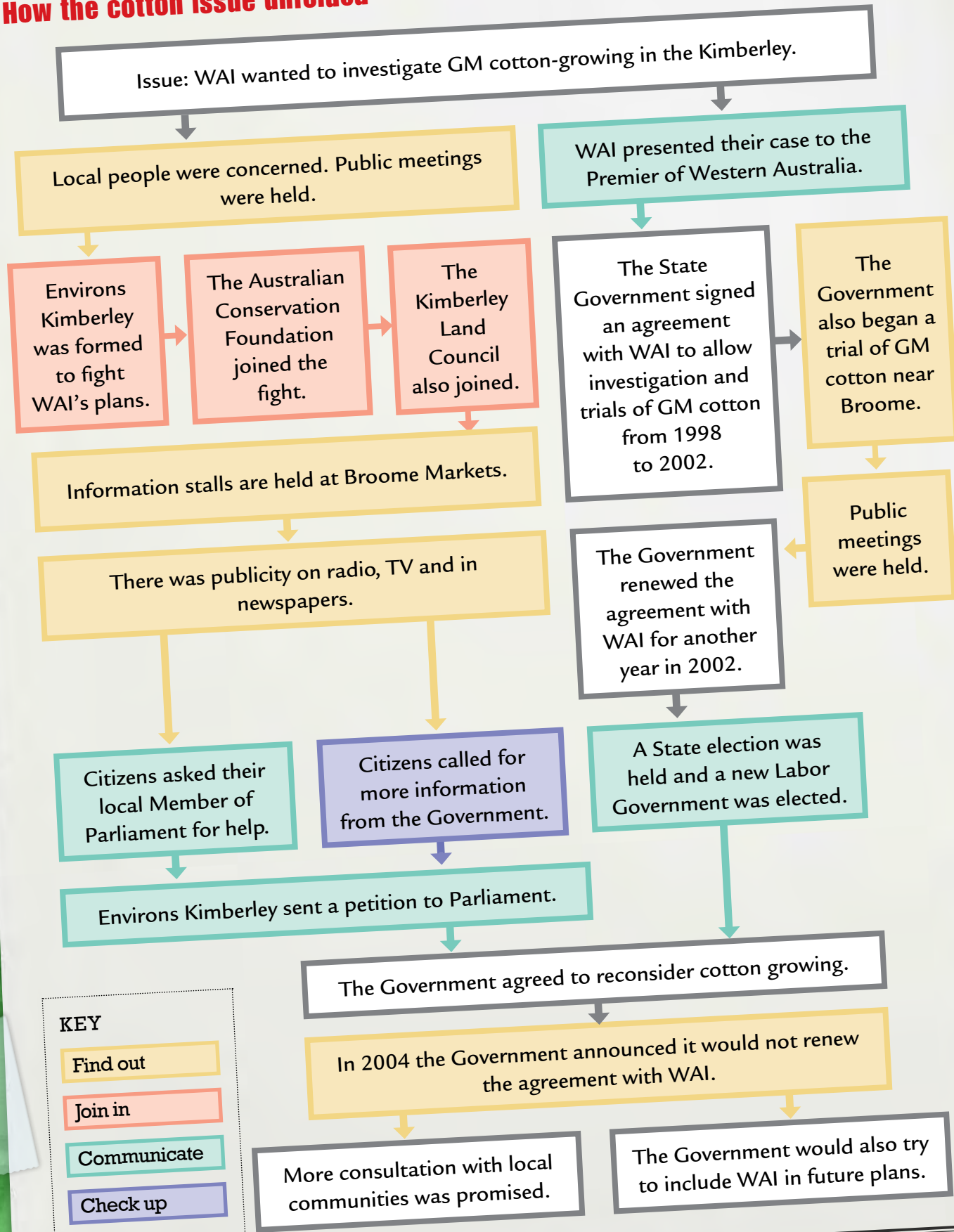
The Kimberley Land Council:

- ▶ asked their local Member of Parliament for help, including more **consultation** on land use
- ▶ took legal action to have the land returned to Aboriginal people and protected from cotton farming.

The Australian Conservation Foundation:

- ▶ made public announcements on World Environment Day opposing cotton farming
- ▶ generated lots of publicity in the media to put pressure on the Government.

How the cotton issue unfolded



KEY

Find out

Join in

Communicate

Check up

What happened in the end?

All the participants in the GM cotton debate (citizens, politicians, businesses and conservation groups) tried to convince the public that their view was the only acceptable one.

Civic actions against GM cotton

Citizens opposed to cotton farming generated a lot of publicity through the media. They also asked Members of Parliament and the courts for help. These actions:

- told people about the issue
- possibly influenced the State election results
- possibly persuaded the Government not to renew the agreement with WAI
- encouraged the Government to discuss future plans with local people.

Actions for GM cotton

WAI spent a lot of time and money investigating cotton production. It also made media statements to explain their views and promote the benefits of GM cotton growing. The Government held public meetings and collected opinions. It trialled GM cotton near Broome to assess its good and bad effects and also signed agreements to allow research.

What was achieved

WAI did not entirely lose the debate. Trial cotton growing is still taking place in some areas and WAI will be included in future plans for farming. The cotton debate, however, has made people think more about the effects of growing large-scale irrigated crops.

WAI has held trials of cotton growing in Western Australia.

