



# Goldfields lead way

**I**NDIGENOUS claimants from the North West Goldfields of Western Australia have shown how preparation and dedication can lead to the resolution of overlapping native title issues.

The claimants came together for a land summit, held in October last year, which could now be used as a model for resolving multiple overlap issues around Australia.

Less than a year ago, the 11 native title claims making up the North West Goldfields cluster were headed for a Federal Court trial which was scheduled to start last month.

Overlaps affected 95 per cent of the trial area, with as many as five applications in a single location. Two native title representative bodies would have been involved in the trial, with the Goldfields Land and Sea Council (GLSC) representing the majority of claimants.

GLSC lawyers and other staff

were confident many of the overlap issues could be resolved out of court – a move which had the potential to kick-start mediation with other parties and renew hope for an agreed outcome.

Intensive work was undertaken by the National Native Title Tribunal and the GLSC in the months leading up to the land summit, which took place in the mining town of Leonora. Claimants were given detailed information about the native title environment and they looked at ways they might resolve their competing claims.

Up to 120 claimants attended the summit over each of the three days and they entered the spirit of the meetings with dedication and persistence. The exhaustive planning and preparation reaped results when 29 discrete overlap issues were worked out and the area remaining affected by overlaps was reduced to 56 per

cent.

Subsequent meetings held after the summit ensured the work progressed and when the applications were listed for a directions hearing in February, Justice Ronald Sackville vacated the trial dates.

Other parties, including the West Australian Government, have now agreed to a rigorous mediation program and protocol which has significantly altered the landscape for native title negotiations throughout this region.

The summit would not have achieved the results without significant work on the part of the GLSC, the Tribunal and later support from other parties.

But the claimants were the most important element to the summit's success.

They now stand to benefit further if mediation with the native title parties leads to a settlement of their claims.



**Goldfields Land and Sea Council executive director Brian Wyatt addresses native title claimants during last year's land summit at Leonora, Western Australia.**

## Native Title and You



This column has been prepared by National Native Title Tribunal Member **JOHN CATLIN**