

## Salinity solution saluted

By SONYA KIMBAR

The realisation of a long-held plan to desalinate Merredin groundwater to use in road construction was celebrated on December 19.

Agriculture and Food Minister Kim Chance made the trip to the Wheatbelt to officially open the desalination plant that has been established as part of the Merredin Water Initiative.

The plant is not only helping to address the salinity problem by reducing groundwater levels in Merredin but it is also providing ALine East with a reliable supply of fresh water for its roadworks.

Located on Gabo Road behind CBH, the plant is just part of an elaborate set up to turn what is usually regarded as a problem into a resource – groundwater.

Six bores pump water from underneath Merredin to tanks at the site. Some saline water is stored for use by ALine East for dust suppression and road embankment construction, the rest is desalinated and stored in tanks on site and used by ALine East for those areas of roadwork that require fresh water. If not for the opportunity to purchase groundwater from the Shire of Merredin, ALine East would have had to rely on valuable scheme water.

Mr Chance said the initiative, which was part of the Department of Agriculture and Food's Rural Towns Liquid Assets program which was supported in the region by the Avon Catchment Council, was an excellent example of an integrated water management approach developed through the combined efforts of community, business and government.

"The initiative was developed due to the high volume of fresh water needed by construction company ALine East for the upgrade of Great Eastern Highway," Mr Chance said.

"Working together, the shire, ALine East and the Department of Agriculture and Food have expanded the current Merredin bore field, equipped the wells with pumps, power and pipelines, and installed and now commissioned a desalination plant."

The minister said the Shire of Merredin had also employed a number of other strategies to address the salinity problem, such as the construction of surface water control banks and tree planting, that were proving successful.

"Merredin's integrated water management project will certainly set a benchmark for other rural towns in WA," he said.

The desalination plant was purpose-built by Coates Hire and is on lease until the roadworks are completed in June. When ALine East moves on, it will leave behind the tanks and the Shire of Merredin will be able to continue to use them if it can secure a long-term customer for desalinated water.

Shire president Ken Hooper said the shire was investigating options for desalinated water uses and would be watching the results of the Merredin Water Initiative closely to see what effect it had on the town's water levels and if it was viable to continue the project.

"This has been a long time coming and it's exciting to consider the prospects of where this could take us in the future," Mr Hooper said.

ALine East alliance manager Mark Sutton said he believed the project, which was producing water for cheaper than ALine East could get it from the Water Corporation, was the first of its kind in road construction.

"The benefits are two fold. We are not only achieving a water supply for road construction but we are removing salt water from under the town and giving the shire an idea of the costs associated with operating a desalination plant should they want to continue it in the future," Mr Sutton said.

He said he would definitely consider the desalination option for future roadwork projects throughout the State.

